

SUBLIME SOCIALITY

An (Auto)Ethnographic Theory of Chinese Christianity

Gareth Breen

LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology

LSE Press

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Contents

List of figures v
Foreword vii
About the series ix
About the author xi
Acknowledgements xiii
Ethical approval xv
Glossary xvii

Introduction. God without gaps: the organic oneness of Chinese Christianity 1

1. Vital differences: diversity versus differentiation 33

Interlude I. Why Chinese Christianity? 69

2. Finding the flow: everyday churchlife in Old Taipei 71

3. Flow as revelation: the truth of the spirit 107

4. From value to vitality: Chinese Christianity as repaired responsiveness 133

Interlude II. Limited response 163

5. Brothers as bridesmaids: gender dilemmas 167

6. The cult in culture, or why Chinese Christianity is not in China 185

Interlude III. Becoming (not quite) anthropological 197

Conclusion. Organic oneness: or life as a conundrum of coherence 201

References 205

Index 235

List of figures

I.1 The podium at Nanggang Arena. 3

I.2 A set of diagrams on the wall of hall 19, Taipei, demonstrating the 'mystery of human life': that humans have 'divine form', or the 'image of God', and that they are the 'vessels of God'. 11

I.3 Li demonstrating the body–soul–spirit distinction at the heart of his ministry in the early years of the church in Taiwan. 11

I.4 Apartment doors with church signs. 14

I.5 Seating disorder. 20

1.1 The eZoe player. 41

1.2 A church hall. 43

1.3 Diagrams of church expansion between 1990 and 2003 in a 212-page 'best of' photograph album (*zhaopian jijin*), produced by hall 13, entitled *A Summary of Blessings* (*mengen jianjie*). 44

1.4 Gospelising in Jingmei. 46

1.5 Breaking the bread. 51

2.1 Watching elder Li swim. 73

2.2 The implicit hierarchy. 91

3.1 The 13th floor of Believe Christ Building (*xinji dalou*), owned by Taiwan Gospel Bookroom, part leased out to Citibank, on the same road as Taipei 101. 113

Foreword

In *Sublime Sociality*, Gareth Breen takes us into the world of the Local Church in Taiwan, showing how its members join in worship, evangelisation, and leisure. The church's origins lie in early twentieth-century eastern China, when Watchman Ni and later Witness Li envisioned a new form of Christianity that centred on the idea of 'organic oneness'. Soon banned from mainland China, the church's centre of gravity shifted to Taiwan and later extended into North America and Europe. The author himself was raised in the church as the son of British followers of Ni and Li, but he left the faith as a teenager, to return years later as an anthropologist, determined to gain a new perspective on the church and its teachings. As Breen points out, the book is an (auto)ethnographic theory, informed by his childhood familiarity and a product of his personal quest to understand anew. The '(auto)' is expressly placed in parentheses, as the book focuses not on the author's own experiences, but rather on the distinctiveness of what he calls Chinese Christianity.

Breen offers not just a secular account or explanation of Chinese Christianity, but instead takes to heart Fenella Cannell's point that a key question for the anthropology of Christianity ought to be: what difference does Christianity make (2006, p. 1)? Breen answers the question compellingly, and in more than one way. As he shows, the church makes a difference in the lives of the followers of Ni and Li each day, starting at the very moment they emerge from sleep. Followers may participate in communal morning revival meetings or alternatively pair up on the phone to 'spend time with the Lord' through prayer and reading. This vital start of the day is designed to be spiritually renewed by Christ, and to be rejuvenated as part of the church. The intensity of living a divine life is meant to enable members to get 'out of their soul' and to prevent them from withdrawing into their minds. Or as followers emphasise, instead of eating from the 'tree of knowledge', one should eat from the 'tree of life', which would allow for joining the flow of spirit.

This brings us to the question of what characterises this form of Christianity, and the distinctive forms of sociality it generates. The book locates its distinctiveness in believers' pursuit of 'organic oneness', a mode of collective life that combines an emphasis on spontaneous, spirit-infused growth with seemingly contrary tendencies toward conformity and routine. Crucially, this oneness is not about the simple presence of the divine as something external, nor is it a matter of individual access or personal conviction. Rather, followers become part of a spiritual flow that dissolves distinctions between self and

other, between human and divine. When achieved organically, the resulting oneness produces what Breen calls 'sublime sociality'. At the same time, the book does not shy away from the darker sides of this flow. For example, the church's vision of itself as the bride of Christ directly affects how femininity and masculinity are expressed and policed. Across the chapters, and in relation to the author's own experiences, the book illuminates the tensions and contradictions that organic oneness inevitably produces.

By analysing the principle of organic oneness, the book offers an incisive view of this non-Western form of Christianity. More than this, by centring 'flow' in its analysis, it develops a thought-provoking account of sociality – here, *sublime sociality* – that resonates well beyond the study of Christianity. In dialogue with Henri Bergson, Breen encourages us to approach sociality not primarily in terms of roles, positions, or needs, but to begin instead with movement and flow. This shift allows us to grasp not only how sociality is produced, but also what animates it and gives it direction. The fluid qualities of social life resist full analytical capture; they must, at least in part, be experienced. One of the book's signal achievements is that it succeeds in conveying precisely this experience. Rather than merely describing an alternative form of Christianity, it draws readers into it. Partway through, one finds oneself thinking organically rather than organisationally – a subtle but consequential transformation that lies at the heart of the church's appeal and the gravitational force it exerts. Through close-up description and sharp analytical insight, the book sheds new light on Christian life and on how it can proliferate in novel and unexpected forms. In doing so, it makes a significant contribution to the anthropology of religion and will be essential reading for students of world Christianity, as well as for anthropologists seeking to understand – and experience – how sociality becomes manifest, in sublime and sometimes less-than-sublime ways.

Professor Mathijs Pelkmans,
Series Editor
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About the series

The LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology series was founded in 1940 and has since published over 80 volumes including classic works by Edmund Leach, Raymond Firth, Alfred Gell, Lucy Mair, Fredrik Barth, Maurice Bloch, Henrietta Moore, Peter van der Veer and Yunxiang Yan, among other well-known figures. As one of the most prestigious series in the discipline of Anthropology, the LSE Monographs on Social Anthropology series continues to build on its history with both theoretical and ethnographic studies of the contemporary world through presenting scholarly work from all branches of Social Anthropology. In 2024, the series moved to LSE Press, and all titles in the series published by them are fully open access.

About the author

Gareth Breen is an Assistant Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Sussex. He completed his PhD in Social Anthropology at the London the School of Economics (LSE) before teaching Medical Anthropology at University College London and then returning to LSE as a Fellow in the Anthropology of China. He has written for the following academic journals and outlets: *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, *Social Analysis*, *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*, *Gender, Place, and Culture*, *Cha: A Literary Journal, Transcultural Psychiatry*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, and *Allegra Lab*. His current work focuses upon 'spiritual nationalism' among Zen Buddhists in Northeast China and the role of essence and essentialism in Chinese religions more widely. He is a trainee and practitioner of transactional analysis, a form of relational psychotherapy.

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Glossary

All-inclusive spirit *baoluo wanyou de ling*, 包羅萬有的靈

Allotted portion *fen*, 分

Atmosphere *qifen*, 氣氛

Auntie *ayi*, 阿姨

Be baptised (church term) *shoujin*, 受浸

Be baptised (conventional Christian term) *shouxi*, 受洗

Bears/to bear *danfu*, 擔負

Beats me *wo ye bu zhidao*, 我也不知道

Before, nobody closed their doors, we came and went as we pleased *conglai dajiadou bu guan men, jiu guanglai guangqu*, 從來大家都不關門就逛來逛去

Be perfected/perfect one's character *shou chengquan*, 受成全

Believe Christ Building *xinji dalou*, 信基大楼

Bible schools *shengjing xuexiao*, 神經學校

Blended brothers, the *xiangtiao dixiong*, 相調弟兄

Blending *xiangtiao*, 相調

Blendings/blending meetings *xiangtiao juhui*, 相調聚會

Block(ing) the flow *yongliu zuse*, 涌流阻塞

Boat of Dharma *fachuan*, 法船

Body, the *ti*, 體

Body (of Christ), the *(jidu de) shenti*, 基督的身體

Bread-breaking *bobing*, 博饼

Brief Account of the Churches in Taiwan, a *taiwan chong zhaohui jianjie*, 台灣眾召會簡介

Broken vessel *posui de qimin*, 破碎的器皿

Brothers *dixiong*, 弟兄

Brothers and sisters *dixiongzimei*, 弟兄姊妹

Burden(s) *(fu)dan*, （負）擔

Burning, not yet *wanre*, 晚热

Burning incense *fen xiang*, 焚香

Call on the lord *huqiu zhu*, 呼求主

Calling on the name of the Lord *huqiu zhuming*, 呼求主名

Central way, The *dao*, 道

Centre *zhong*, 中

Chanxing Paradise *changxing leyuan*, 長興樂園

Chiang Kai-shek *jiang jieshi*, 蔣介石

Christ *jidu*, 基督

Christian Assembly Hall *jidutu juhuisuo*, 基督徒聚會所

Christianity *jidujiao*, 基督教

Church, the *zhaohui*, 召會

Church friend *zhaohui pengyou*, 召會朋友

Church Ground of Oneness versus Division, the *zhaohui yi de lichang yu fenlie xiangdui*, 召會一的立場與分裂相對

Church kids *zhaohui haizi/er tong*, 召會孩子/儿童

Church running team *zhaohui paodui*, 召會跑队

Churchlife, the *zhaohui shenghuo*, 召會生活

(The) churchlife is the present-day garden of Eden *zhaohui shenghuo shi jinri de yixunyuan*, 召會生活是今日的伊甸園

Conference *tehui*, 特會

Conscience *liangxin*, 良心

Content *neirong*, 内容

Coordination *peida*, 配搭

Corporate *tuanti*, 團體

Corporate Godman *tuanti shenren*, 團體神人

Cosmic pattern, the *li*, 理

Cosmos/all under heaven *tianxia*, 天下

Co-workers, the *tonggong*, 同工

Daddy *baba*, 爸爸

Deadness *siji/si qi chenchen/si chen*, 死寂/死氣沉沉/死沉

Denial of the self *ke ji fu li*, 克己复礼

Deny/denied *jujue*, 拒絕

Dialects *tuhua*, 土話

Differential *chaxu*, 差序

Discernment *fenbian*, 分辨

Division *fenlie*, 分裂

Doctrine of the Mean, the *zhongyong*, 中庸

Effortless action *wuwei*, 無為

Elder *zhanglao*, 長老

Emotion(s) *qinggan*, 情感

Empty vessel *kongxu de qimin*, 空虚的器皿

Enjoy the Lord *xiangshou zhu*, 享受主

Enjoyable *xiangshoude*, 享受的

Evangelistic migration *fuyin yimin*, 福音移民

Exercise(s) *caolian*, 操練

Exercise one's spirit *caolian ling*, 操練靈

Express(ed) *zhangxian*, 彰顯

eZoe player *duogongneng shuwei fuyin ji*, 多功能數位福音機

Father *fuqin*, 父亲

Feed(ing) *weiyang*, 喂养

Feeling *ganjue*, 感覺

Fellowship *jiaotong*, 交通

Financial reports *caiwu baobiao*, 財務報表

Flock/crowd/society *ch'un* [*qun*], 群

Flow/overflow *liu/yongliu*, 流/涌流

Flows *liuzhe*, 流着

Freshness *xinxian*, 新鮮

Functioning *gongneng*, 功能

God *shen*, 神

God loves the world *shen ai shiren*, 神爱世人

Godman *shenren*, 神人

Godman vessel(s) *shenren qimin*, 神人器皿

God's dispensing *shen de fenci*, 神的分賜

God's economy *shen de jinglun*, 神的經綸

God's heart's desire *shenxin jihua*, 神心計劃

God's plan *shen yi*, 神意

Golden lampstand *jin dengtai*, 金灯台

Good land, the *meidi*, 美地

Gospelizing *funyinhua*, 福音化

Gospel friends *fuyin pengyou*, 福音朋友

Gospel march *fuyin youxing*, 福音游行

Govern, to *zhi*, 治

Guanxi *guanxi*, 關係

Hall(s) *huisuo*, 會所

Hand over *jiaochulai*, 交出来

Having a capacity for effective response *lingshi*, 灵势

Head, the *yuanshou*, 元首

Heart *xin*, 心

Hidden *yincang*, 隐藏

Hidden organ *yincang de qiguan*, 隐藏的器官

High-peak truth *gaofeng de zhenli*, 高峰的真理

Holy word for morning revival *chenxing shengyan*, 晨興圣言

Human feeling *ganqing/ren*, 感情/仁

I didn't know monks were allowed in the army! *jun you heshanga, buzhi-daola*!, 軍有和尚啊不知道啦

I really envied you here *wo zai ouzhou kankan nimen, wo jiu hen xianmu*, 我在欧洲看看你们我就很羡慕

Immortal Footprint Mountain *xianjishan*, 仙迹山

Incense seeing *guanxiang*, 观香

Individualism *geren zhuyi*, 個人主義

Inertia *guanxing*, 惯性

Inner operations *neili yunxing*, 内力运行

Innermost part *zuinei de bufen*, 最内的部分

Intuition *zhijue*, 直覺

Jesus Family *yesu jiating*, 耶稣家庭

Jesus is the head of this household *yesu shi zhe jia zhi zhu*, 耶稣是這家的主

Jesus loves you *yesu ai ni*, 耶稣爱你

Jingmei (a place name) *jingmei*, 景美

Join *lianjie*, 聯結

Joins in to help *bangtong danfu*, 帮同擔負

Kitchen god *kao shen*, 考神

Labouring *laoku*, 勞苦

Life *shenghuo/shengming*, 生活/生命

Life education course *shengming jiaoyu*, 生命教育

Life-giving spirit *ci shengming ling*, 賜生命靈

Life-study *shengming dujing*, 生命讀經

Like being in a 'big family' *womendou shi jiaren*, 我们都是家人

literary culture *wen*, 文

Little Flock, the *xiaoqun*, 小群

Little sister *meimei*, 妹妹

Living a good life *guo rizi*, 过日子

Living stones *huoshi*, 活石

Local(ities) *difang*, 地方

Local churches, the/Local Church, the *difang jiaohui*, 地方教會

Look at that pudgy tummy! *kana, duzi hen pang!*, 看啊肚子很胖

Lord's (sovereign) arrangement, the *zhu zhuzai de anpai*, 主主宰的安排

Lord's Day *zhuri*, 主日

Lord's recovery, the *zhu de huifu*, 主的恢復

Lord's Table *zhu de zhuozi*, 主的桌子

Love cheer *ai de guli*, 愛的鼓勵

Love feast(s) *aiyan*, 愛宴

Mainland saints *dalv shengtu*, 大綠聖徒

Mainlanders *waishengren*, 外省人

Make offerings to temple gods *qu baibai*, 去拜拜

Martial culture *wu*, 武

Master of the household *yi jia zhi zhu*, 一家之主

Meaninglessness *mei you shenme yisi*, 没有什么意思

Mechanical *jixie*, 機械

Message *xinxi*, 信息

Metabolise *xiaohua*, 消化

Middle Kingdom, the *zhongguo*, 中国

Mind, the *xinsi*, 心思

Ministry, the *zhishi*, 職事

Modes of association *geju*, 格局

Mood *fengqi*, 風氣

Moral action *de*, 德

Mother of No-Birth, the *Wusheng Laomu*, 无生老母

Movement *dongzuo*, 動作

Myriad things, the *wanwu*, 万物

Nature *ziran*, 自然

New way, the *xin lu*, 新路

Newcomers *xinren/xinlaide*, 新人/新来的

Normal Christian Life, the *zhengchang de jidutu shenghuo*, 正常的基督徒生活

Nourish(ing) *yingyang*, 营养

Nurturing the good life *yangsheng*, 养生

O Lord Jesus *o zhu yesu*, 哦主耶稣

Objective *keguan*, 客观

One New Man, the *yi ge xinren*, 一个新人

One that pervades the All, The *da yitong*, 大一同

Oneness *yi*, 一

Oneness ('without gaps') *heyiwujian*, 合一無間

Organ *qiguan*, 器官

Organic, the *shengjide*, 生機的

Organic oneness *shengji de heyi(wujian)*, 生機的合一(無間)

Organisation(al) *zuzhi*, 組織

Outlines *dagang/tigang*, 大綱/提綱

Outward work *waimian gongzuo*, 外面工作

Overcomers *deshengzhe*, 得勝者

Peace *an*, 安

People depend on gods, and gods depend on people *ren ping shen, shen ping ren*, 人凭神神凭人

Poetry *shiyi*, 詩意

Pray-reading *daodu*, 導讀

Priesthood, the *jisi de tixi*, 祭司的體系

Propriety *li*, 礼

Psychological *xinlide*, 心理的

Raised up *xing qi*, 興起

Receptivity *bao*, 包

Recovery *huifu*, 恢复

Recovery Version, the *huifu ban*, 恢复版

Refining *hanyang*, 涵养

Registration *baoming*, 报名

Release(d) *shifang*, 释放

Religion *zongjiao*, 宗教

Renew(ed) *xinyouhuo*, 新有活

Requested the gods to attach themselves to our bodies *qiushen futi*, 求神附体

Resonance *ganying*, 感应

Responsible brothers *fuze dixong*, 負責弟兄

Rich(er) *fengman*, 丰满

Richness *fengfu*, 丰富

Ritual *yishi*, 儀式

Saints, the *shengtu*, 聖徒

Saturated *jintou*, 浸透

Secrets of increased blessing *zengzhi fu de mijue*, 增之福的秘訣

Seeker *xuqiuzhe*, 需求者

Self, the *ziji*, 自己

Self-centred desires *si yu*, 私欲

Self-centred ideas *si yi*, 私意

Self-centred mind *si xin*, 私心

Self-centred thoughts *si nian*, 私念

Seminaries *shenxueyuan*, 神學院

Serve your function *jin yonggong*, 盡用功

Serving *shifeng*, 侍奉

Serving one(s) *fushizhe*, 服侍者

Sharing/share *fenxiang*, 分享

Short truth talk *zhenli duanjiang*, 真理短講

Shouters, the *huhan pai*, 呼喊派

Simple *danchun*, 單純

Sincerity *cheng*, 诚

Sister(s) *zimei*, 姊妹

Soul, the *hun*, 魂

Spirit, the/magical power *ling*, 靈

Spiritual *shuling*, 属靈

Spiritual Man, the *shuling de ren*, 属靈的人

Spontaneous(ly) *zifa(de)*, 自發（的）

Steps of God's predestined way *shen mingding zhi lu de shixing*, 神命定之路的實行

Still very simple *hai man danchun*, 還满單純

Strange *qiguai*, 奇怪

Stumbling blocks *banjiao shi*, 絆腳石

Subjective(ly) *zhuguan(de)*, 主觀（的）

Sublime substance *rongyao benzhi*, 荣耀本質

Substance *cailiao/benzhi*, 材料/本质

Summary of blessings *Mengen jianjie*, 蒙恩簡介

Supply(ing) *gongying*, 供應

Supreme oneness *taiyi*, 太一

Swearing *maren*, 骂人

Sweet fragrance *xinxiang*, 馨香

Taiwan Gospel Bookroom *taiwan fuyin shufang*, 台灣福音書房

Taiwan students' lives are very bitter *Taiwan xuesheng de shenghuo hen ku*, 台灣學生的生活很苦

Testimony/ies *jianzheng*, 見證

The church as the Body of Christ is absolutely organic, absolutely of life, with nothing organisational *zuo jidu shenti de zhaohui wanquan shi shengjide, juedui she shengming de, mei you yi yang shi zuzhide*, 做基督身體的召會完全是生機的，絕對是生命的，沒有一樣是組織的

The gentleman is not a tool *junzi bu qi*, 君子不器

The life-giving Spirit is the Lord Spirit, the pneumatic Christ, for the metabolic transformation of the believers and for the growth and building up of the Body of Christ *ci shengming de ling jiu shi zhuling, na shi ling de ji, weizhe xintu xinchendaixie de bianhua, yiji jidushenti de zhangda yu jianzao*, 賜生命的靈就是主靈, 那是靈的基, 爲著信徒新陳代謝的變化, 以及基督身體的長大與建造

Three religions, The *san jiao*, 三教

Today, everybody is out to con you *xianzai, dajiadou yao pian ni*, 現在大家都要骗你

To even mention the word organisation concerning the church and the church life is wrong *shenzhi yong 'zuzhi' zhe ci lai shuo dao zhaohui he zhaohui shenghuoye shi cuode*, 甚至用"組織"這詞來說到召會和召會生活也是錯的

Training, the *xunlian*, 訓練

Transfused *jiaoguan/guanshu,* 浇灌/交灌

True Jesus Church *zhen yesu jiaohui*, 真耶稣教会

Truth *zhenli*, 真理

Truthizing *zhenlihua*, 真理化

Uncle *shushu*, 叔叔

Undergo(ne) a process *jingguo guocheng*, 經過過程

Unification between the human and Heaven *tianren heyi*, 天人合一

Uniqueness *dute*, 独特

Vessel *qimin*, 器皿

Vision, the *yixiang*, 異象

Visit *tanfang/kanwang*, 探訪/看望

Vital(ity) *huoli/shengming liliang*, 活力/生命力量

Vital groups *huoli pai*, 活力派

Watchman Ni *Ni Tuosheng*, 倪柝聲

We are Christians! *women shi jidutu!*, 我们是基督徒

We are one *women shi yi*, 我们是一

Work *gongzuo*, 工作

World, the *shijie*, 世界

Will, the *yizhi*, 意志

Witness Lee *Li Changshou*, 李常受

You don't know how good you have it in Taiwan *ni dou bu zhidao zai taiwan duo mengfu*, 你都不知道在台灣多蒙福

Younger classmate *xuedi*, 學弟

Introduction. God without gaps: the organic oneness of Chinese Christianity

It is Chinese New Year 2015, and we have just spent three days at Taipei's Nanggang Arena with 30,000 other followers of the ministry of Witness Li (*Li Changshou*, 1905–97), son of a Shandong farmer, and the most prolific author in Christian history.[1] Li was a protégé of an itinerant preacher from the port city of Fuzhou, Watchman Ni[2] (*Ni Tuosheng*, 1903–72), who in turn is likely the most influential Chinese Christian since Hong Xiuquan (1814–64), king of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (1851–64). Seven of us are driving around Taiwan in an old brown Toyota people carrier: three sets of middle-aged men and women – an unmarried Taiwanese pair in the front, a Chinese couple in the rear, and a North American couple (one Taiwan-born) split across rear and middle seats – plus a British anthropologist in his mid-twenties.

To keep us occupied, brother Huang, a fresh-faced man from Fujian, China, home province of Watchman Ni, recalls Ni's life from birth to death in great detail from the back row, interrupted occasionally by our arriving at some sight on an itinerary that only our Taiwanese driver, brother Jin, seems fully privy to: tomato farm, cake factory, shrimp fishing barn, orangery, tiger-shaped cliff, hospital, and the homes and meeting halls of other adherents to Li's ministry. At each of our recurrent group photo opportunities, we repeat the same phrase: *women shi yiiii!*[3] In English, 'we are one!'

The phrase has a similar effect on the mouth to the English word 'cheeeese', making it work well for smiley photo taking. Whilst grinningly affirming that we are one, we each hold one finger up, as opposed to the customary East Asian two-fingered pose. Besides being a handy means of shaping faces and fingers into desired social forms, our audible pose also expresses the central principle of Ni's cum Li's ministry: oneness.

Oneness: the core conundrum of Chinese Christianity

Anthropologists, historians, theologians, and philosophers have long pointed out the centrality of *presence* to Christianity in all its forms, be it Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern or Oriental Orthodoxy. Presence is by varying degrees problematic to Christians, they have written, because God, the ultimate figure

of presence, is considered *a priori* withdrawn from the world. The presence of God is thus something magnanimous, supramundane, its (im)possibility definitive of Christian life. According to Jon Henrik Ziegler Remme, 'most forms of Christianity emphasise both the importance of presence and the difficulty of bringing it about' (2022, p. 699). Living in anticipation of God's presence, Christians themselves are undoubtedly in, but not necessarily 'of', the world, being of a God, at least theoretically, outside of it, thus making their relations with(in) this world always potentially problematic.

For Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, Tom Boylston (2018) writes, presence is dangerous. It must be contained, ritually, architecturally, socially. For many North American Catholics, Robert Orsi (2016) tells us, presence is less directly difficult, being channelled through liturgy, iconography, devotional sensuality. All Catholicism today, he reminds us, however, is Counter Reformational. The possibility of presence – when, where, how, and for whom – is deeply, sometimes violently, political. Presence is most intensely problematic for Protestants, anthropologists have productively pointed out (Engelke 2007). God's presence for them is necessarily *immaterial*. Presencing an immaterial God in an inherently material world produces, at best, 'anxious transcendence' (Keane 2006). Though there are significant exceptions (Eisenlohr 2022; Hovland 2018; Reinhardt 2020), the study of Christianity, following the gaze of Christians themselves, has thus centralised this problematic verticality of the human–divine relation.

Whatever the denomination or Christian tradition, problems of presence are about the *gap* between individual Christians or the congregations they compose and God himself (Handelman 2016). Different Christianities have different understandings of how big or small this gap is and about the best means of mediating it – architecturally, iconically, anti-iconically, with words, images, certain clothing, gestures, and so on. Questions of how individual Christians relate to one another or one congregation to the next are secondary (at most) to these primary problems of presence (Dumont 1983, p. 24). Sociality has thus taken a back seat in the anthropology of Christianity.

Despite the sociocultural being their domain of study, then, anthropologists have only recently begun to ask how different Christianities might produce different social forms. Courtney Handman (2014), for example, writes of denominationalism in Papua New Guinea as emergent from the Protestant tendency towards 'critique' (see also Dumont 1983; Neibuhr 1929; Troeltsch 1960; cf. Barker 2014; Eriksen 2009), while Valentina Napolitano (2017) describes how Catholicism can inhibit as much as produce migratory flows. Again, the belatedness of this focus on church forms seems to be because the Christians whom anthropologists write about do not take questions of church (dis)unity to be of 'ultimate concern' (in the manner of Tillich 2001).[4] These questions are picked up by the observing anthropologist more often than the observed Christian. For those I sat with in the old brown people carrier, in contrast, it was clear that the unity, or 'oneness', of 'the church' was a central and explicit focus.

From the podium at Nanggang Arena (Figure I.1), oneness was mentioned many times. The gathering, which was referred to as both a 'conference' (*tehui*) and one of the 'seven annual feasts' (*yan*) adherents to Li's ministry partake in, was intended as an introduction to the 'main contents' of that ministry. Message one was entitled 'The Church Ground of Oneness versus Division' (*zhaohui yi de lichang yu fenlie xiangdui*). Of the 20 roman numeral points throughout the conference outline, half had the word 'oneness' (*heyiwujian*) or 'One' (*yi*) in them. Oneness, it was emphasised, is not a secondary concern, something apart from one's primary relationship with God. Moreover, literally translated this was a 'oneness without gaps'.

This was, in other words, not a oneness achieved through closing gaps between human beings or between human beings and God. Rather, this was a oneness already nascent within the 'innermost part' (*zuinei de bufen*) of human beings, waiting to be 'released' (*jiefang*) and to 'flow' (*liu*) though the 30,000 brothers and sisters gathered at Nanggang Arena. Through His 'incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection', God, it was emphasised, had 'undergone a process' (*jingguo guocheng*), and was no longer 'out there' waiting to be mediated. He was 'in here' as the sociospiritual substance, the 'edible', 'drinkable', shareable 'Christ', flowing through us all. The next stage of the process was for us to become Him, as 'Godmen' (*shenren*), the 'corporate Godman' (*tuanti shenren*), the one true church, the apogee of God's becoming-human.

As in all public events, there are degrees of confluence between the understandings of those who spoke from the Nanggang podium and those who sat in the congregation. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that it makes little sense to be followers of Ni and Li's ministry without seeing God-infused human oneness

Figure I.1: The podium at Nanggang Arena



Source: Author.

as in some way central to one's Christian life. The key ethnographic question of this book is how does that oneness work out in life, across all those lines of difference – gender, status, generation, culture, language, politics, and history – that would appear to obstruct it?

The chapters ahead, however, go beyond an ethnological interpretation of this particular group, to posit oneness as a generative, dynamic conundrum at the heart of Chinese-speaking Christianity writ large. Given the momentous rise in Chinese-speaking Christian converts over the past few decades, they further demarcate the productivity of recentring the anthropology of Christianity around this conundrum, as opposed to the 'problems' of Christianity that have dominated the subdiscipline so far (see Bialecki 2012). The book thus carves out a distinctive place for what I call Chinese Christianity by arguing that presence is not primary for this Christian form. Problems of presence are certainly there, as we will see. But they are secondary to and shaped by what we might call, in contrast, 'conundrums of coherence' (Herbert 2004). In other words, oneness, not presence, is the essential conundrum of Chinese Christianity.

The global following of Ni and Li as exemplary of Chinese Christianity

The argument of this book rests not just on the *distinctiveness* of oneness as an ultimate Christian concern, then, but on its wider *representativeness*. Put otherwise, it assumes that my descriptions of Ni and Li's followers are relevant to Chinese Christianity as a whole. And indeed, this assumption does have an empirical basis. The following of Ni and Li was China's 'first native Christian movement' (Song 2022), and Ni's 'popularity outside of China' today, writes Paul Chang, 'is exceeded only by Confucius, Laozi, and Mao Zedong' (2017, p. 2). *Christianity Today* and US Congress recognise Ni as 'one of the 100 most influential Christians of the twentieth century' (Smith 2009), while in his *New History of Christianity in China* Daniel Bays (2012; cf. Li and Huang 2024) traces almost every indigenous Chinese Christian movement back in some way to Ni. The following of Ni this book describes – 'a rare example of an Asian Christianity assuming global significance' (Yi 2016, p. 96) – has spread to every continent under Witness Li, an 'amazing' fact that 'exemplifies', for Liu Yi of Shanghai University, 'a Chinese church becoming globalized' (2016, p. 110). Rubinstein (1991) and Madsen and Siegler (2011) each hold the following of Ni and Li to be exemplary of the triple tension of being Chinese, Christian, and global.

It is not only the case that the following of Ni and Li has been hugely influential, however, playing an unparalleled part in shaping the indigenisation of Christianity among Chinese-speaking people from the early twentieth century on. In the pages ahead, I unfurl the details of the oneness I have so far introduced to show that it is representative of very long-standing concerns

in Chinese history and Chinese-speaking society. It is this shared, overlapping concern with (a particular kind of) oneness, I argue, that *defines* the 'Chineseness' of Chinese Christianity. Throughout the book, I touch on the conceptual overlaps and influences between oneness as an ideal within Chinese history and society generally and within Chinese Christianity specifically. But in everyday life, I ultimately show, this oneness is less conceptual than social. This oneness in action is the *sublime sociality* of the title.

In the pages ahead, I elaborate the specifics of the oneness so central to followers of Ni and Li. Returning to the trip around Taiwan, we see how the contrast between presence and oneness is not only external to the group, with presence over there and oneness over here, as it were. This contrast plays havoc, too, with the group from within. Conflicts and differences that characterised key moments of the trip prompt me to draw out a set of vocabularies that will inform the rest of the book. These vocabularies suggest a new kind of anthropology which centres (sublime) sociality rather than divine presence (as anthropologists have known it) as the beating heart of Chinese Christianity. But first, I must tackle the potential elephant in the room of my subtitle. Namely, how can a book based in Taiwan be about *Chinese* Christianity? A brief history of the following of Ni and Li will help us to do that.

A brief history of the church with no name

In the early 1920s on an island in the river Min, just outside the bustling port city of Fuzhou on the Southeast China coast, the young Christian enthusiast Ni Shuzu, later to become 'Watchman Nee' (*Ni Tuosheng,* 1903–72),[5] and the elderly rebel British missionary Margaret E. Barber (1866–1929) formed a life-changing bond amidst the social, political, and psychological chaos of the time. Under Barber's tutelage, Ni was deeply affected by the eschatological writings of the intransigent Irish aristocrat John Nelson Darby (1800–82), by the tripartite Biblical anthropology of the uncompromising Welsh holiness preacher Jesse Penn-Lewis (1861–1927), and by the mystical musings of the excommunicated French Catholic nun, Madame Guyon (1648–1717). These teachings would form the foundations of his own Christian ministry, which would in turn make Ni the most influential Chinese Christian in recent history.

Barber was more than a teacher though. She also became Ni's 'spiritual mother', credited by his followers as the 'foundation and perfecting of his spiritual life' (Lee 1991a, p. 127; Reetzke 2005, p. 115). The motherly bond between Barber and Ni laid the foundations for the growth and worldwide expansion of a highly integrated, cosmologically focused, transnational group, which understands itself today to be in possession of the 'high-peak truth' (*gaofeng de zhenli*) lost to 'Christianity' for millennia. Namely, 'oneness' as the one, true basis for proper Christian living.

Within two decades of his time with Barber, Ni had a nationwide following of over 70,000 (Lian 2010). The group owned property in Shanghai,

Fuzhou, and elsewhere and ran a successful publishing house, *Shanghai Gospel Bookroom*, for distributing Ni's message. Over its turbulent hundred-year history, the group would spread from Fuzhou to Shanghai to Shandong province, to Hong Kong and from there to the Philippines, Indonesia, and the Solomon Islands. Perhaps the most significant migration of Ni and Li followers, however, came in the late 1940s, to Taiwan, when a handful of them escaped China's new Communist regime, alongside two million other refugees associated with the defeated Nationalist government. Li would make it to Taiwan, but not Ni, who would spend the rest of his life in a labour camp – punishment for his alleged counter-revolutionary activities (Kinnear 1973). Today Taiwan, where I conducted fieldwork with the group in 2015, 2016, and 2023, has the highest known concentration of followers of Ni and Li in the world.

From the early 1950s on, membership there increased rapidly amongst the newly settled 'mainlanders' (*waishengren*). Local Taiwanese were understandably hostile to these incomers who, under Chiang Kai-shek (*Jiang Jieshi*, 1887–1975), leader of the Nationalist government, would take control of the island and bring decades of violence to both Han Taiwanese and aboriginal groups, known as 'White Terror' (1947–87). 'So the church had some issues, right, being from the mainland', as Watchman Ni's nephew put it to me in an interview.

The church evidently became a comfort for those who had been recently severed from their ancestral homeland and who were confronted with an unfamiliar place, which Ni's nephew described to me as 'a real backwater back then', a 'no-man's land'. He remembers the open sewers, the children without shoes at the school he attended when he moved there in 1949, the 'Japanese style' house in which they lived, the straw mats on which they slept. 'If you can take the hardship, go to Taiwan', he remembers Ni saying, 'if you can't, go to Hong Kong'. His other uncle, Ni's brother, 'took one look at Taiwan and turned back around'. Ni's sister and family would do the same a few years later, following her brother to Hong Kong, where I spoke to Ni's now middle-aged nephew.

The sense of togetherness within 'the church' (*zhaohui*), as the group is endogenously termed, is perceived at times as being very close to that of 'traditional Chinese culture'. When I asked a church elder in Taipei, another 'brother Li', one night what he thought the latter was, he stretched out his palms over the long, food-filled table on the pavement outside a restaurant at which Ni and Li's followers all sat and conversed over, and said '*This* is, eating together, drinking tea, enjoying each other's company.' Elder Li's words still make it easy to imagine why the church spread like wildfire among migrating 'mainlanders' when it first came to Taiwan (see also Zimmerman-Liu 2017).

A newspaper report from the time gives a yet more vivid sense of how this group spread so rapidly across Taiwan. Squeezed alongside a two-page advert for Macy's in the 8 October 1950 issue of *The New York Times* was an article entitled *Evangelist Drive Sweeps Formosa*,[6] written before Witness Li had

arrived in Taiwan by Burton Crane, the newspaper's Japan correspondent – also a singer apparently nicknamed 'Japan's Bing Crosby':

> Taipei, Formosa, Sept. 24 – A rapidly growing group of Christian workers, all natives [i.e. not Westerners], has launched a vital evangelistic movement. It has no name. It has no creed. It has only the Bible – and each new believer is allowed to interpret that in his own way.
>
> Two weeks of revival meetings ended tonight. For the first eight nights they were held in an open-air theatre in New Park. At each meeting between 400 and 500 persons signed questionnaires, indicating a wish to join the movement. Leaders said between 50 and 60 per cent of these will become active workers in the new crusade. For the past week meetings have been held in the Church Assembling Hall.
>
> Chang Yu-lan, an arsenal engineer who has become an exceedingly effective lay preacher and spends all his evenings working at Christianity, said the group has three great strengths. First, it is all-Chinese. Second, its freedom from creeds and theological hair-splitting appeals to many who have known something of Christianity in the past but have never become true converts. Third, everybody must work…

Crane seems quite oblivious to the tensions between being Taiwanese and Chinese at this time, tensions that were obvious to Ni's nephew, but he does help give inadvertent weight to the legitimacy of describing this group as a form of 'Chinese' Christianity. He also depicts aspects of Ni's following that this book will describe in greater detail: the resistance to 'doctrine', the insistence that everyone contribute, church as 'the work', and (elsewhere in the article) the lively rhythms of staged simultaneous translation. He goes on to describe the group's key method of expansion, the 'gospel march', with its drums and distinctive red-on-white bibs, that I would witness in Taipei 65 years later. Ni's nephew said that the first of these group-defining bibs used a church sister's torn up red wedding dress for the lettering.[7] From the original 30 or so followers in 1945, by 1955 there were 40,000 church members and by the 2000s there were 200,000, almost one per cent of Taiwan's population (Yi 2016, pp. 102, 110).

Having risen to become de facto leader of the group in Taiwan throughout the 1950s, in 1962 Witness Li moved to Anaheim, California.[8] Many North Americans were inspired by the perceived originality of Ni-cum-Li's ministry at a time of great dissatisfaction with mainstream, denominational Christianity (Rutledge n.d.). In the face of strong resistance from the conventional Christian establishment (Zimmerman-Liu and Wright 2018), which persists today, a nationwide infrastructure of church elders, meeting halls, training and conference centres, a publishing house, *Living Stream Ministry*, and many home-based church 'localities' gradually emerged.

When Ni first developed his critique of what he called 'Christianity', its 'degradation' through denominational fragmentation and neglect of the deep centrality of oneness to Christian life, he attacked the 'imperialist' missionary Christian institutions which denominated coastal China at that time, from the 1920s to the 1940s (Breen 2022). His critique found resonance, however, through the mouth of Li, in 1960s West Coast North America with a young generation of 'hippies' and 'Jesus People' disillusioned with 'organized religion' (Williamson 2021). Li's talk of an 'innermost organ', the 'human spirit' 'organically flowing' with the spontaneous exuberance of the Spirit of God but hidden to an ignorant Christianity founded on the calculative logic of 'the mind', we will see, first chimed with a Chinese population still used to similar Daoist and Neo-Confucian rhetoric. It would then enthral segments of a population besotted with the wisdom of 'the East'.

With the development of the movement, degrees of institutionalisation set in. Inspired by his time in the US, Li periodically returned to Taiwan from 1984 onwards to implement the 'new way' (*xin lu*), which involved a strong, practical emphasis on institutionalised church 'training' (*xunlian*), exclusive adherence to 'the ministry' (*zhishi*), and a commitment to the 'uniqueness' (*dute*) and, above all, 'oneness' (*heyiwujian*) of 'the church' (*zhaohui*). While some resisted it, many fervently embraced the new way. One church auntie told me, as we walked around Taipei one evening with bubble tea in hand, that life in the church was incomparably 'richer' (*fengman*) since the new way had been implemented. With greater levels of institutionalised conformity, however, others, we will see, would find that 'oneness' could feel as mandated by the group as it could feel liberatory to the individual.

From this point on, 'the church', as followers call the movement, became truly transnational. Church localities and evangelical efforts were built up around the world, backed in part by the new-found wealth of East and Southeast Asian economies (see also Yi 2016, p. 102). From Taiwan, the church had expanded, via the US, worldwide, returning to Taiwan, as well as to China and Southeast Asia, with renewed vigour and confidence. Today it has 17 national 'full-time training centres' where members with at least a university degree and who are 'recommended' by their local elders are trained for two years in church theory and practice. The opening anecdote of this book described one of the 'seven annual feasts' in the church's global calendar. These are international conferences dedicated to the ministry of Ni and Li with up to 30,000 attendees each.

Returning to China following the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), in the form of tracts, literature, and proselytising followers, Ni and/or Li's ministry has affected in some way the development of every known indigenous Chinese Christian group in China today (Bays 2012). Today, this group is, according to some, the largest so-called 'house church' in the world (Cheung 1970, p. 5; McCallum 2011) and, according to others, the only form of indigenised Chinese Christianity to be truly globalised (Yi 2016, p. 110). Commentators (e.g. Madsen and Seigler 2011, p. 239; Rubinstein 1991, p. 97)

uphold 'the Local Church' (*difang jiaohui*), one of the group's many aliases, as exemplary of a fourfold tension between Chineseness and Christianity, locality and globality.

Most importantly, the contents of Ni and Li's ministry evidently speaks to deeply held Chinese Christian concerns. That its central principle, oneness, is shared at some level by Chinese Christianity as a whole is clear from a well-known statement given by Cheng Jingyi (1881–1939), co-translator of the Chinese Union Bible, at the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference (Ng 2012, p. 14). There, he said:

> As a representative of the Chinese Church, I speak entirely from the Chinese standpoint ... Speaking plainly we hope to see, in the near future, a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions. This may seem somewhat peculiar to you, but, friends, do not forget to view us from our standpoint, and if you fail to do that, the Chinese will remain always as a mysterious people to you.

What was unique to Ni was his articulation of why 'a united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions' was so important. He transformed this long-standing concern with unity, which I trace through Chinese history in Chapter 4, into a defiant critique of Western, 'imperial', missionary Christianity, as I show in the same chapter. Over several decades Li then oversaw the further synthesis with this critique of an equally long-standing concern with 'the organic', as we see throughout the book. *Sublime Sociality* thus makes the case that this is a form of Christianity as 'Chinese' as it is based in Taiwan.

Not just oneness: introducing 'the organic'

The oneness adherents to Li's ministry pursue, then, is, more specifically, 'organic'. Roman numeral one of message two, of the conference outline we held on our laps at Nanggang Arena, for example, reminds attendees that, 'The church as the Body of Christ is absolutely organic, absolutely of life, with nothing organizational.'[9] Subpoint B goes on to stress that, '[t]o even mention the word organization concerning the church and the church life is wrong ….'

What is wrong with organization (*zuzhi*)? Answering this question gets us to the heart of the specificity of that 'organic oneness' followers take to be the true ideal of Christian life. For followers of Ni and Li, organization is not only a social form. It is a form of being. More specifically, a form of 'being in the soul' (*zai hun li*).

To be in the soul (*hun*) is to be limited to the capacity, Ni held, for 'false oneness' (Nee 1948), defined by Li as 'oneness in the realm of division' (Lee 1969, p. 253). That is, a oneness *with* gaps, an extrinsically *inter*related rather than intrinsically *intra*related oneness (Handelman 2016). This is the oneness that

defines 'Christianity' for Ni and Li and which, we might add, leads to the problems of presence outlined above. Problems, that is, that assume *a priori* gaps between human and human, human and divine. The 'organ' (*qiguan*) of these attempts to bridge *a priori* gaps, according to Ni and Li, is the soul. The soul, for them, is the operative organ of (dualistic, body–soul) 'Christianity' (*jidujiao*) and accounts for its 'degradation', 'fragmentation', and ultimate distance from the divine. God does not reside in the soul, Ni and Li held, such that, for the most part, God's presence in Christianity is merely 'psychological' (*xinlide*).

But the soul is also something that followers of Ni and Li struggle with. They too admit to repeated 'being in the soul'. Being in the soul has three main characteristics: thinking (including but not limited to forming opinions and theorising), emotionality, and wilfulness. These three characteristics relate to the three components of the soul, as first taught by Ni: the mind (*xinsi*), emotion (*qinggan*), and the will (*yizhi*).[10] Organisation arises from the soul because it involves a two-step process. First thinking with the mind, or willing with the will, or emoting with emotion and *then* putting this into action with the body (*ti*). This is conceived as a 'mechanical' (*jixie*) process characteristic of both 'Christianity' and 'the world' and symptomatic of the soulish life of the individual self (*ziji*). 'The self', in contrast, is 'denied' (*jujue*) by followers of Ni and Li in favour of the 'organic life of the Body', which 'flows' (*liuzhe*) through their spirits animating them in spontaneous intuitive accordance with the 'burdens' (*dan*) of that 'corporate Godman', the church.

True oneness, or 'organic oneness' (*shengji de heyiwujian*), arises, then, from, or rather through, 'the spirit' (*ling*), the 'innermost organ' (*zuinei de qiguan*) hidden to Christianity for millennia. The spirit flows with 'Christ' (*jidu*), the sublime substance (*rongyao benzhi*) of the Body of God, of which followers of Ni and Li are the 'godman vessels' (*shenren qimin*). The three parts of the spirit begin not in mental, emotional or wilful isolation but in connection with others. They are 'conscience' (*liangxin*), 'fellowship' (*jiaotong*), and 'intuition' (*zhijue*). The revelation of the spirit is the foundation of Ni and Li's ministry, and what, for followers, differentiates it, as 'the one true church', from 'Christianity'. A diagram of three concentric circles – body, soul, and spirit – adorns church halls in Taiwan (Figure I.2) and features at the core of Li's teachings (Figure I.3).

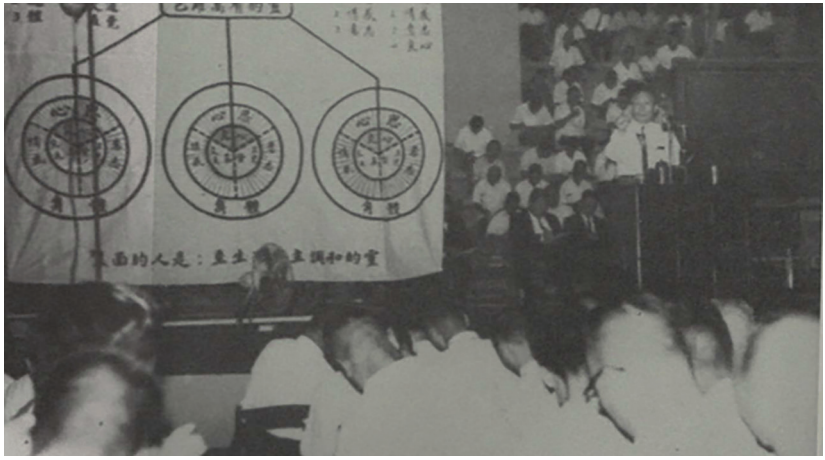
Nonetheless, if 'Christianity' is defined for followers by the problems of presence resultant from soulish commitment to (false) oneness in a world of division, the following of Ni and Li is not without its conundrums. Not least of which is the issue of how one creates the conformity, the sameness, the oneness that seems a necessary foundation for 'organic' (*shengjide*) – that is, mutually responsive, fluid, spontaneous, intuitive – interaction to occur. Indeed, this is the core tension at the heart of the whole notion of organic oneness, the pursuit of which defines, for this book, 'Chinese Christianity'. Notwithstanding many moments of undeniable flow and harmony on our trip around Taiwan (despite, or perhaps at times because of, language barriers), it became apparent that organic oneness, like presence for Protestants, could be elusive for this group.

Figure I.2: A set of diagrams on the wall of hall 19, Taipei, demonstrating the 'mystery of human life': that humans have 'divine form', or the 'image of God', and that they are the 'vessels of God'



Source: Author.

Figure I.3: Li demonstrating the body–soul–spirit distinction at the heart of his ministry in the early years of the church in Taiwan



Source: From the booklet *60 Years of the Taiwan Gospel Bookroom (taiwan fuyin shufang 60 nian)*, published by the Taiwan Gospel Bookroom, 2010, image undated, c.1962. Photograph of source by author.

Conundrum of coherence I: oneness versus the organic

Soon out of Taipei, we headed southwest, passing through the thickly forested mountains that surround the city, creating its wet-air climate at this time of year. There are rich red temples nestled in the precipitous green slopes, festooned in primary colours with dragons, pearls, warriors, and geometric flourishes. The view is blocked occasionally by thick concrete overpasses. Focus is shortly drawn away from the surrounding landscape, which, as we leave the mountains behind, entering the flat plains of the western half of the island, is greened only by budding rice shoots poking out of mud-brown paddies. The view becomes more concrete as we enter the suburbs of Taizhong, Taiwan's second biggest city.

> 'Oh Lord Jesus!', 'amen!', 'we want to use this trip!', 'amen!', 'to enjoy you together!', 'amen!', 'to eat you together!', 'amen!', 'so that we can be blended together!', 'amen!', 'as one!', 'amen!!!'

Starting with the driver, prayers are said to bless the trip. I quickly learn that not contributing is not an option. 'Gairui?' (my Chinese name) says brother Jin, a vigorous looking, grey-haired ex-military officer, when there is a pause after the last prayer bar mine. When I suggest later in the trip, to brother Jin, that I feel a little insincere praying, given that I am not a believer, but here as a researcher, he responds: 'You are not praying for yourself, brother, but for everyone else.' When brother Jin said this, I think he was equally speaking about the form of prayer as its content. My prayer, ideally well timed to fit in with the unconducted flow of everyone else's, would provide the opportunity for everyone to linger on in its 'spontaneous order' in which each phrase (whether it is in understandable Mandarin or incomprehensible English) is met with a resounding, rhythmic 'Amen!'

Indeed, there is a sense in which the collective *amen*ing sets the pace for prayer, rather than the other way around. (I often failed to keep pace with the amen rhythm, which anticipated smoother praying than I was able to give.) The more time I spent with them, the more evident it became that, for many followers of Ni and Li's ministry described in this book, the words of 'the ministry' (*zhishi*), like those of the Bible, often find their primary significance not as expressions of a prior feeling or intention, but as media for 'spontaneous', mutual responsiveness. That is, as the sonic matter through which organic oneness is attained. The degree to which this is not true for everyone is a significant conundrum.

It is true that, in the words of Paul Chang, biographer of Watchman Ni, '[a]ll of [the] individuals and congregations' that compose this following 'speak of familiar Christian doctrines with a similar accent'. 'From Nigeria to the Philippines, from Canada to Chile,' Chang writes,

> visitors will hear talk of releasing the spirit, denying the self, building up the Body of Christ, and loving Christ as the bridegroom.

> Furthermore, all of these Christians will also share complex or indirect explanations for who they are and what they represent. If pressed in the right direction, however, most members will readily acknowledge their indebtedness to and respect for the ministry of 'Brother Ni' (Chang 2017, p. 2).

Despite these similarities, however, when we pay attention to the sometimes subtle variances between Christian lives that make organic oneness versus presence their primary concern, we also have hope of understanding *differences* within the group that are perhaps not immediately apparent to outsiders. These differences that persist, despite trenchant adherence to a common cosmology and calendar of church events, are the micro-foci of this book that lead towards its grandest conclusions concerning the nature of Chinese Christianity, and the distinctive dilemmas and restricted potentials that define it.

The nature of these distinctive dilemmas and restricted potentials will be the ethnographic focus of most of this book. They arise, I will argue, from two distinct, though often overlapping, sources of tension. The first tension, I believe, is, as already noted, summarised in the very term 'organic oneness' that is used so often by the 'brothers and sisters' (*dixiongzimei*) to describe what this group is ultimately about. In brief, 'the church' as 'recovered' by Ni and Li is about being organic. On the other hand, it is about oneness. The first aspect is characterised by spontaneous, uncalculated, social flow. The second aspect is characterised by conformity, unity, 'all speaking the same thing', as church members often say. This tension defines Chinese Christianity, I will argue, historically. It is the root conundrum of Chinese Christianity, a tension stretching back through Chinese history and which, I argue, has been definitive of 'Chineseness'. The second tension is the main focus of this Introduction. It is that between oneness and presence as the ultimate structuring concerns of Christian life. This tension, I argue, defines Chinese Christianity comparatively. It was a tension I not infrequently observed on our trip around Taiwan.

Conundrum of coherence II: oneness versus presence

The first, mild, conflict in the trip around Taiwan arose on the evening of the first day. There were many of us gathered around in the living room of a middle-aged couple living in a second-floor apartment in Taizhong, a sprawling city in central Taiwan. On their metal grated door was the church symbol, a set of encircled Greek symbols in a cross shape that no one knew the meanings of (Figure I.4). The atmosphere in the apartment was intimate and intense. We were going around a squeezed circle each giving our 'testimonies' (*jianzheng*). When it came to my turn, I explained that I did not have a testimony as such, that I was very much enjoying spending time in the 'churchlife' (*zhaohui shenghuo*), but that I was there as a researcher, not as a believer. Once

Figure I.4: Apartment doors with church signs



Source: Author.

I had finished, there was some confusion, and the gushing atmosphere that preceded me came to an abrupt halt. A middle-aged sister asked feebly, 'So, brother Gairui, do you believe or not?'

'Erm, no ...', I responded, pathetically. The silence came again before brother Jin proclaimed, 'So we baptise you!!' He was met with a chorus of excited *amen*s, while some suggested preparing a bath. Perhaps ill-advisedly, I was resistant to this. 'No, no,' I cried. Referring to my upbringing within this very group, in the UK, I tried to reassure them: 'I've been baptised already!' Again, there was confusion, while one brother Chu impatiently concluded, 'Then you are a Christian!'

At this point, brother Jin sought to heal the flow I had blocked and broken. 'You must call on the Lord, Gairui,' he said in English, 'brother Jim, help Gairui call on the Lord.' 'Calling on the Lord' is the most common way to 'exercise the spirit', involving saying 'the Lord's name' repeatedly with enthusiasm. However, brother Jim, the North American man on our trip, refused. 'No,' he responded, 'he will call when he gets the feeling.' The meeting moved on awkwardly to the next in line to give their testimony.

Brothers Jin and Jim both loved the ministry of Ni and Li. 'He just gives you the black and white of it y'know?!' Brother Jim, a burly man with thick

black hair whispering grey, whose initial conversion experience consisted of a vision of Jesus bathed in orange light he had had while awaiting trial in a county jail, responded when I asked what he found so appealing about Li's ministry. When it was brother Jin's turn to give his testimony on that first night, he shed tears of appreciation for how 'the church' and its project of organic oneness had enriched his life. However, they seemed to come at this project from fundamentally different angles.

Brother Jim had entered 'the church' a few years prior, after marrying Elsie, a Taiwanese American woman sitting on the back row of the Toyota with brother Huang and his wife, sister Xie. For Jim, Li's words were a means of access to the Truth, crystal clear on the black and white pages of his *Recovery Version Bible* – the version all followers use, heavy with Li's footnotes. Brother Jim's own words, and mine, were likewise, for him, significant to the degree that they expressed *our* truths, the truth of our feelings or prior belief. Put otherwise, he approached words like the Christians I rapidly described above approached their varying practices, as means to presence. Not the presence of God directly in this case, but the presence of His Truth, or the presence of our truths as human beings.

Despite his commitment to oneness, then, brother Jim approached his Christian life implicitly as a problem of presence. Brother Jin, on the other hand, seemed to approach the Word and words differently. Like many others, during the conference we attended together, for example, he often wandered around in the arena's aisles 'fellowshipping' with other 'saints' (*shengtu*) (as church members refer to one another) whilst the 'speaking brothers' reformulated the words of Ni and Li in various emphatic and engaging ways from the stage. He did not sit there as brother Jim did with pen in hand, making notes on every word. The conference to him, it seemed, was not an information-gathering exercise. 'He gives you the black and white of what?' I could imagine him asking brother Jim.

Likewise, brother Jin did not expect my words, in prayer, in calling on the Lord, or in my 'testimony', to necessarily reflect some prior (non)belief or intention. He was not expecting my words to presence some inner truth, or, to use Webb Keane's (2007) term, to be 'sincere', as did the Dutch Calvinists attempting to evangelise the Indonesian island of Sumba that Keane writes about. It is not that brother Jin was 'insincere', it is just that he did not seem to think sincerity was vitally important when it came the ultimate concern of his Christian life, organic oneness.

So much for the word. What of the world? Minus the concrete overpasses, Taiwan is certainly a beautiful part of it. However, the significance of the landscapes around us could not necessarily be taken for granted. Soon, sister Elsie and Brother Jim were expressing discomfort at the fact that brother Jin was not giving us a clear itinerary for the trip. Brother Jin, on the other hand, found their concern to be evidence that they were approaching the trip all wrong.

'This is not a tourist trip!' he exclaimed to me in frustration, as we were left standing by Sun Moon Lake while the rest of the group took a cable car up to

the overlooking Aboriginal Culture Park. 'Do you think I really want to visit these places?' he continued. 'I've been here a thousand times! I don't come here for my own sake,' he said, flopping his hands to his sides. 'The purpose is not to visit all these places. The reason we are doing this is for blending [*xiangtiao*].'[11] 'Blending' was Witness Li's term for oneness in action. And this, the trip around Taiwan in the old brown people carrier, is supposed to be a blending trip.

It seems to me that for brother Jin, Taiwan, its landscapes and places, like Li's ministry, in church contexts, was significant as a medium of organic oneness, of lateral interchange between the members of Christ's Body, 'the saints' of 'the church'. The world, like the word, is not something to be presenced, as it is for tourists. It is a medium for organic flow. Although he did not put it this way, we could translate brother Jin's critique into the language of 'the ministry': Elsie and Jim's desire for an itinerary was a desire for organization, for programmatic information that they could grasp with their minds and implement with their bodies. Not to mention the fact that their frustration was evidence of the emotionality and wilfulness of 'the soul'.

Some in our party at one point held me up as a counter-example to brother Jim. Despite my professions of disbelief, sister Xie from Fujian, China, and sister Bu from Taipei, insisted that I was evidently a member of the Body of Christ. The issue was that I just did not realise it yet, they added with only mild frustration. 'Why do you think that?' I asked. 'Because you just say "okay" [*hao*] to whatever plans and occurrences arise during the trip,' sister Bu replied, with sister Xie nodding. 'Being in the spirit' is to act in organic oneness with others, meaning not to impose one's thinking, feelings, and intentions upon them. A state on the surface strangely similar to the stance of a rookie anthropologist, struggling to understand everyone's quick-fire Mandarin and doing his best to participate in and observe the group without influencing the interactions that compose it too much.

The true transnationality of conundrums of coherence

Not all conundrums of coherence lie across an East–West divide. Brother Jin, for instance, was not so keen to background Taiwan as a mere medium of oneness in his interactions with the couple from China. His parents were from Guangdong. His father was an officer in the Nationalist party army who fought and eventually lost against Mao's communists in 1949. They were both part of Chiang Kai-Shek's fleeing entourage in the weeks that followed. As a high-ranking army officer himself, brother Jin's entire career has been focused around preparing for a mainland attack, which is strongly related to Taiwan's majoritarian dream of being recognised as a national entity in its own right. He is rather incensed when, as we walk along a pebbly beach, overlooked by a 'tiger'-shaped cliff, during a break in our trip, he picks up a large flat stone to show mainlanders brother Huang and sister Xie.

'What is it?' he asks. 'I don't know, a stone?' replies brother Huang, looking to his wife in perplexity. 'Look! At the shape,' brother Jin says, getting exasperated, 'what does it remind you of?' 'Err, I can't think … a leaf?' sister Xie offers hopefully. We have stopped walking now and brother Jin looks around for support. There is a group of young girls sitting by a basketball court, watching their male friends play. 'Little sister!' (*meimei*) brother Jin calls to one of them, limping over on his bad leg, determined. She walks towards him, and he offers her the stone. 'What does the shape of this stone remind you of?' he asks. She cocks her head and swiftly replies 'Taiwan!' He throws up his hands in combined relief and annoyance, sister Xie and her husband looking sheepish.

When I first arrived in Taipei for fieldwork with this group, life within it was especially cacophonous because of the excitement and concern over the upcoming Nanggang conference. In the meetings I attended – 'coordination' rather than 'organisation' meetings – much discussion went into the logistics of hosting foreign church members in Taipei homes during the conference. Trips around Taiwan were being planned, as well as a huge 'gospel march' through Taipei, complete with a squadron of drummers and bibs, hats, and banners for everyone.

Many were to perform in choirs during the conference, in the intervals between the 'messages' given by the 'speaking brothers'. They practise regularly. Others were to be ushers and tour directors. Restaurants needed booking, airport pickups needed to be arranged, accommodation needed to be organised (I mean, 'coordinated'!), name tags needed to be printed, schedules needed to be written. How 'churchlife' activity such as this is done and framed 'organically' is the topic of the first three chapters of this book.

Here, I want to emphasise that throughout these preparations, the 'mainland saints' (*dalv shengtu*) – again, 'saints' is a common term for the church brothers and sisters – seemed to be the biggest worry. There were strong complaints from certain quarters that they were intending to stay longer than expected, which meant that hosts' plans for New Year celebrations with extended families and for returning to work would be impacted. One church 'auntie' (*ayi*) read to me with quiet glee from an article listing all the ways in which Chinese were less civilised than Taiwanese. Her nephew chimed in with, 'You can always tell who the mainlanders in Taiwan are, they're always hacking up phlegm and spitting!'

The unknown numbers of just how many followers of Ni and Li there were in China seemed to unsettle some even while the scale and diversity of the conference was revelled in and awed at: the very number 'thirty thousand' seemed to taste good on participants' lips as they milled about chatting in-between and during the messages booming out from the stage. There were rumours too of just how many mainland Chinese had been denied access to come here. Despite shared language and histories, the 'brothers and sisters' (*dixiongzimei*) from China were a more unsettling unknown than those from elsewhere.

When they arrive, there is a strong sense that the saints from China are different. Somehow less 'organic', less fluidly responsive, spontaneous. These differences, however, were more 'political' than 'cultural'. Brother Huang, for instance, seemed nervous for much of the trip. Taking smiley photographs is a part of the churchlife in Taipei. It seems to be part of the 'sublime sociality' that characterises acting organically with 'oneness' (the relatively static, complete photograph) arising from 'the organic' (spontaneity, dynamic, flowing) gathering of bodies. When I pull out my camera to take a picture within one church gathering on the trip, however, brother Huang shouts 'No!' and then checks to see that I have deleted the picture. 'We could get into a lot of trouble for being here,' he says.

There was a sense from brother Jin that brother Huang's long, interrupted vehicular narration of Ni's life was exotic, not a manner of speaking indigenous to the church. Uncle Yang, whose home I lived in in Taipei, once leaned over to me whilst a Chinese church visitor was speaking in a meeting. 'She is not from the church,' he whispered, 'you can tell from the way she is speaking.' My seemingly paradoxical observation that 'Chinese Christianity is (for the most part) not in China' is a topic of Chapter 6.

Conundrum of coherence III: exercise and practice

These disconnects across the Taiwan Strait demonstrate that the differences oneness must overcome are as politicised as they are defined by language, culture, gender, generation, and history. As with the Taiwan-shaped stone, most threats to oneness pass quietly. Not so with brothers Jin and Jim, however. Their stubbornness brings to light the central themes of this book. Although they adhered with equal strength to the same ministry and were committed with equal passion to the same following, brother Jin and brother Jim's very reasons for being on the trip were significantly different.

Brother Jim aimed to put what the speaking brothers said at the podium into practice. This blending trip was an enactment of a prior set of beliefs. Longer term, his very purpose in coming to Taiwan was to practise the black and white truth of Li's words. Brother Jin, on the other hand, had arranged the trip to reciprocate the hospitality he had been shown by brother Huang and sister Xie when he had visited Fujian province, China, the year before. Indeed, Brother Jin had invited me on the trip in the first place expressly to sit next to the American and keep him happy, not so that I could enact my prior understandings.

This difference between enacting prior understandings and extending relations of mutual reciprocity over space and time is encapsulated in the subtle distinction between 'practice' and 'exercise'. According to followers, one '*exercises* one's spirit' (*caolian ling*), that 'hidden organ' (*yincang de qiguan*) revealed through Ni's ministry and of which 'Christianity' is ignorant. By exercising one's spirit as an organ one 'releases' the 'mingled S/spirit of humanity and

divinity', in Li's terminology, which then 'flows' through the spirits of others, 'supplying' (*gongying*), 'nourishing' (*yingyang*), and 'feeding' (*weiyang*) them. This was why my 'blocking the flow' (*yongliu zuse*) in that Taizhong apartment was especially significant. I used words to express my feelings rather than as a medium through which my spirit could exercise its releasing powers. This is a very different concept to 'practising' a theological truth or doctrine. Exercising, in this context, suggests a 'latent power' (Nee 1972) within the environment. Practice suggests an imposition of something external onto it.

Watching followers of Ni and Li's ministry at their energetic meetings, one gets the impression from their actions and interactions that they are pushing their 'spirits' outward, joining a horizontal flow, rather than receiving an upwards Spirit from the outside inwards. They pump their fists, swing their arms, wide-eyed, vividly attuned to those around them. Which contrasts markedly, in my mind, with the typical charismatic-evangelical pose of outstretched, receptive palms and closed eyes (Bialecki 2017; Csordas 1997).[12] While charismatic evangelicals seek an encounter with God as a presence, Chinese Christian followers of Ni and Li seek to release God as a sociospiritual substance, pushing Him outwards, towards others.

The underlying logics that inform these embodied differences can manifest themselves within the following of Ni and Li in much more mundane scenarios. Midway through the trip an argument broke out over the seating order (Figure I.5). There was much shouting and waving of hands as everyone but me stood outside the car disputing. Behind them I could see the meeting hall we had just come from. An attached sign proclaimed, 'God loves the world' (*shen ai shiren*).

Brother Jim then gets into the front passenger seat and slams the door, arms folded. Given that brother Jim spoke no Chinese, and, besides sister Elsie, the others spoke little English, brother Jin was aiming, in inviting me, and in designating fixed seats, to facilitate maximum smoothness of communication, characteristic of organic oneness. Brother Jim thought differently. He found it tyrannical that no one else was getting a go in the front seat but sister Bu, a Taiwanese primary school teacher with a welcoming face, perhaps 10 years younger than brother Jin. For brother Jin, fixed seating order was a means of maintaining the flow; for brother *Jim* it was blocking his opportunity to enact the practice of blending. This is just one of many conundrums of coherence this book describes, historicises, and theorises.

Conundrum of coherence IV: problems and conundrums

If there are differences between organic oneness and presence as ultimate concerns of Christian communities – a difference to be explored in much greater detail in the chapters ahead – there are also subtle but important differences between a problem and a conundrum. Problems, it seems, must be

Figure I.5: Seating disorder



Source: Author.

'solved'. They must be solved through deliberative thought enacted 'in practice'. Problems of presence, for instance, are theological problems arising from the principle that God and creation aboriginally are fundamentally distinct. Problems of presence are theological problems with solutions of practice. In practice, Christians attempt to mediate the gap posited in theory. Anthropologists of Christianity have traced ways in which practice overcomes this problem (in many cases of Orthodoxy and Catholicism) or fails to (in many cases of Protestantism). Conundrums, however, are not quite so clearly stated. One can be in a conundrum without quite knowing what the 'problem' is.

Organic oneness is a conundrum because it is about intuiting the 'flow of the spirit', which is intimately linked to the 'atmosphere' (*qifen*) of a room, the 'poetry' (*shiyi*) of speech, and the 'mood' (*fengqi*) of others, terms often used in Li's ministry.[13,14] Oneness is not primarily a theological problem (folk or otherwise) to be solved in practice, although it can always be approached in this way, as we will see and have already seen. Rather it is, as Witness Li puts it, the 'intrinsic essence of the church' (Lee 1989, p. 268). This oneness is not brought about by enacting a set of beliefs. Rather, it is intuited, through 'fellowship' (*xiaotong*) and 'discernment' (*fenbian*). It emerges 'spontaneously' (*zifade*), not as a plan or intention of the individual human 'mind' (*xinsi*). When it is attained, the sociality that arises is sublime.

What is more, as both Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant thought of the sublime, if in more dramatic, less ethnographic terms, there is ambivalent excitement to the felt organicism of this (always temporary) social unity. The spontaneity, the contingent mutuality of the organic, expands but is also constrained, even threatens to undo, the conformity, the sameness, of the oneness

that is itself both ground and emergent reality. The feelings of being constrained by and expanding oneness, constraining and unleashing the organic, are returned to again and again in different contexts, modes, and moments throughout the book. The notion of sublime sociality is meant to stitch together these moments, modes, and contexts to offer an expansive paradigm that both includes but likely exceeds organic oneness, as one form among many of the sublime socialities humans, at the very least, are capable of.

Contrary to problems of presence, organic oneness necessitates 'getting out of one's (calculating, deliberating, theorising) mind'; 'out of' one's (individual) 'emotions' (*qinggan*) and 'will' (*yizhi*) too. In other words, this oneness can only arise 'organically', in spontaneously ordered attunements with others. Organic oneness, ideally, is thus always already *in* practice. The question is one of subtle modes of attunement, attention, articulation.

One could of course frame this as a problem of 'co-presence' and I return to this in the book's closing pages. But I think this framing subtly goes against the principle of organic oneness under study here. Presence, even co-presence, at this point, suggests a relatively static encounter with another as *an other*. Organic oneness never involves taking others as particularly other. Rather, it involves a joining, becoming a flow, in which one's 'self' (and so others' selves as distinct from one's own) becomes irrelevant, and so the 'gap' between self and other (divine or human) becomes irrelevant as such too. Oneness here is not an ecstatic collapse of the self into the Other as in William James' (2003 [1902]) classic account of Christian mystical experience. It is a flow in which the difference being otherwise collapsed fades from view. A subtle but important distinction.

This is not only evident in the ministry of Ni and Li, with its language of organic spontaneity, which emerges and remerges throughout this book as a key component of 'the church'. It is evident, in moments of ritual realisation, in 'the churchlife'. We attained it even on our trip around Taiwan, despite, perhaps even because of, the language barriers.

Another alias this group has received over the years, firstly from the Chinese government, is 'the Shouters' (*huhan pai*). This term no doubt arose in response to what they term 'calling on the name of the Lord' (*huqiu zhuming*), which involves repeating the phrase *O zhu ye su* ('Oh Lord Jesus') over and over as loudly and emphatically as possible. Almost all meetings begin in this way – Sunday meetings, young people's meetings, daily morning revival meetings, brothers' meetings, sisters' meetings, prayer meetings, love feasts. We did it often on our trip.

'Calling' is usually a precursor to prayer. Once enough calling has been done to (in church parlance) 'enter the spirit', prayers begin. The first prayer line is shouted into the chanting *O zhu ye su* mix from someone in the room – be it living room, church hall, hired restaurant, or old brown people carrier. The person is led by an intuitive sense of timeliness and their first line might be a single word – *zhu a-*, 'Lord!' The voiced room switches its cadence and tone immediately in response, from the hypnotic oneness of *O zhu ye su* to

the affirmatory anticipation of the *amen!* Each subsequent line of the prayer is met with a resounding, rhythmic *amen!* until someone else in the room almost seamlessly picks up the praying role and continues the praying one line at a time, subtly pausing for the *amen!* each time. These *amen*s are booming, cacophonous, unhinged but extremely rhythmic.

These rituals intertwine sameness and difference, conformity and responsiveness, oneness and the organic. An experiential sense of the fragile containment of each of these terms by the other, to iterate again, is one form of the 'sublime sociality' this book explores. Generating this experience takes skill and know-how. Jiayin Hu, a church member and researcher living in the US, describes a central church ritual, 'pray-reading' (*daodu*), in this way:

> Group pray-reading features spontaneity and order at the same time. A certain phrase or word is like a ball being freely passed in a circle: believers voluntarily pick up, play with, and pass the ball in order. Anyone may initiate the reading of a particular word or phrase, reiterate the pervious [*sic*] reading, or utter a short prayer or praise in the midst of the pray-reading session. Believers usually share a tacit agreement on when the process should conclude (Hu 2017, pp. 175–76).

The chapters ahead describe this and other church 'exercises' in greater detail. My aim here is to introduce the difference that presence and organic oneness as spiritual ideals make to the kinds of analysis, we, anthropologists and other scholars of religion, might engage in.

Conundrum of coherence V: mediation and flow

The problem of presence is a question of how a god 'out there' gets 'in here', 'in' the experiencing human mind or soul. As such, it is a question with elective affinities with certain analytical framings, especially those that emphasise mediation. Matthew Engelke, author of the term 'problem of presence' (2007), has also been a key architect of the so-called 'media turn' in the study of religion. From within this turn, he writes, 'religion is understood *as* mediation – a set of practices and ideas that cannot be understood without the middle grounds that substantiate them' (2010, p. 371). Reorienting the question of mediation to one of human–human as well as human–divine communication, Webb Keane (2007) employs the notion of 'semiotic ideology' to frame Protestant commitments to 'sincerity'. As noted, this sincerity refers to the principle that words are only significant to the extent that they are isomorphic with interior, intentional states of thought. This is a semiotic ideology because it expresses an assumption about how words, as signs, work. Here the only way that one can understand how sounds, matter, energy go from 'out there' in the world, or as God, to 'in here' within human minds and communities, is

via understanding the semiotic, mediatory processes that occupy the middle ground between the two.

Focus on mediation works very well for framing problems of presence for a secular audience. But they are not the best framings for understanding organic oneness. Spontaneity, for example, when described from a mediation or semiotic ideology perspective, is fundamentally about providing 'evidence to the senses' (Keane 2008) of the presence of God's, or the soul's, non-determined presence. But the emphasis on spontaneity in 'the church' – as followers of Ni and Li refer to themselves – does not appear to be about this at all. It is not 'evidence' of God's presence; it is not a 'sign' pointing elsewhere; it is the very feel of the spirit as the flowing rhythm of God's Body. Nonetheless, there is crossover between analytical framings of presence and those I propose for studying organic oneness.

Most recently, it has been proposed that anthropologists (of Protestantism, in particular) go beyond asserting presence's theological impossibility and the practices of failure oriented towards it, to describing how it might be an ever-present possibility (Eisenlohr 2022; Hovland 2018; Reinhardt 2020). Some of these newer approaches rely on cognitive studies of perception. Their aim is to construct a 'building block' theory of presence with its foundations in the actual experience of it, rather than the theological (im)possibility of it. Likewise, I suggest beginning by understanding the experiential bases of organic oneness.[15] I am less focused on perception, however, which again seems to have less affinity with the study of 'flow' than with problems of presence in asking '[h]ow does the experience of "out there" (the world) get "in here" (one's mind)?' (Corwin and Erickson-Davis 2020, p. 173). My aim here is not only to make room for organic oneness as an orienting ideal of a non-Western form of Christianity, it is also to introduce a new analytical set of framings that would enable us to describe this ideal as arising from, rather than just aiming towards, certain kinds of 'optimal experience' (Csikszentmihalyi 2008 [1990]).

Organic oneness as a 'religious experience', it should be noted, sets the bar much lower than 'presence'. From the beginning, Watchman Ni articulated his 'recovery' of the 'degraded' church of 'Christianity' in terms of sobriety and normality. This was not the same 'plainness' (Coleman and Collins 2000) that characterised the Protestant ethic before the charismatic evangelical revivals of the twentieth century. Rather, Ni's emphasis arises, I argue, from a fundamentally different ideal of religious experience, one that has been articulated, though rarely in religious terms, using modifications of the psychological concept of 'flow' (cf. Neitz and Spickard 1990).

Not characterised by the encounter of presence, 'flow' consists of well-timed conscious coordinations of many moving parts, a disciplined containment of difference. Organic oneness is an idealisation of flow. But it is an ideal with a different form as well as content to problems of presence. Presence is practice in the face of theory, an encounter with the unencounterable; organic oneness is attunement to an intuitively known texture of being (a 'feeling'), 'normal' and 'sober'. 'It is like ordinary, everyday experience,' one might say with D.T. Suzuki, 'except about two inches off the ground.'[16]

'Getting into one's spirit,' I argue, is to get into a 'flow state' (Csikszentmihalyi 2008 [1990]). Indeed, in church vocabulary, getting into one's spirit is also to 'enter the flow'. Those who are not participating fully in a meeting, it has been seen, are said to 'block the flow'. ' "Flow" ', psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, 'is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered' (2008 [1990], p. 6). Flow is a state of active absorption in an activity, which is made possible when 'skills match the opportunities for action' (Csikszentmihalyi 2008 [1990]). To quote Csikszentmihalyi at length:

> Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement … . It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future (1975, p. 43).

Achieving flow, then, is not unique to Chinese Christianity. However, as an – indeed *the* – optimal experience upon which its exercises, institutions, ministries, and critiques of 'Western Christianity' are based, flow occupies a unique place within it. In the chapters ahead, I considerably nuance Csikszentmihalyi's concept and historicise the argument that the optimal experiential ideal of Chinese Christianity is something like a flow state. Specifically, what I suggest is a state of '*social* flow'. That is, one in which the focus of activity is 'the social'. The conscious pursuit of social flow for its own sake, I argue, leads to a form of 'sublime sociality'. Organic oneness, as well as being one instance of it, raises sublime sociality to a level of conceptualised spiritual and cosmological significance.

Through the cosmological prism of organic oneness, we will see, sublime sociality is framed by followers of Ni and Li not only as social activity but as revelation. Anthropologists are wont to present social life as constructed, out of so many habits of thought and interactivity. In contrast, the rituals of responsivity that characterise the sublime sociality of the churchlife are claimed by followers to be revelatory of God himself, as a 'corporate' (*tuanti*) reality. The exercises by which church members enter their spirit, in this sense, open the curtain of the world, revealing divine realities within. God is hidden (*yincang*), followers say, a hidden god. Ultimately, my analysis lies somewhere in-between this claim and the anthropological constructivist approach.

I must emphasise that presence and flow analytics and experiences are not mutually exclusive. However, they are distinct. This distinction maps, in 'emic' terms, onto that between the practices of the soul and the exercises of the spirit. The question, then, is how to present organic oneness as an ideal but not a theological ideal, not an ideal of 'the soul' and its 'mind', like presence, but one of the subtle intuition, fellowship, discernment of the spirit.

Concomitantly, how do we understand social flow as an exercise rather than practice of that ideal? The descriptions ahead try to use vocabularies and styles that emphasise this embodied, pre-conceptual framing of organic oneness. At the same time, I must reiterate, this is an ideal, however embodied. Indeed, this is an ideal that some of Ni and Li's followers, for instance, are less attuned to, beyond an unwittingly nominal adherence, than others. This frustrates the prospect for exercising sublime sociality for all involved. This much was clear from our trip around Taiwan, which ended disastrously.

…

'You're either with us or against us, Gareth,' brother Jim said, cutting through my deliberations. He and Elsie were going to wander the town, the rest of the party heading to the night market. This, the final evening of the trip, was spent sitting on opposite hotel beds, in Yilan township; brother Jim and sister Elsie on one side of the room, the rest of us on the other. Elsie and Jim had accused brother Jin of embezzling the money we had given him to fund the trip. We were going meticulously through the journey's expenditures to judge whether this was true. Though they revealed brother Jin's innocence, our calculative confrontation was the epitome of organisational being. It could not be further from the organic oneness the blending trip was supposed be about. One possible interpretation of their accusation is that sister Elsie and brother Jim had projected their own approach to the trip, negatively, onto brother Jin. They had mistaken his refusal to provide an itinerary as evidence that he had attempted to put into practice his own, nefarious, project. Not one of oneness, but of manipulation.

A disaster perhaps. But such conundrums of coherence – like the failures in mediation which lead anthropologists of Christianity to understand the importance of presence (e.g. Engelke 2005; Meyer 2011) – point us towards organic oneness as definitive of Chinese Christianity. It is the aim of the chapters ahead to describe the unfolding contours of this idea in life as they emerge in three contexts: historic China and Taiwan, contemporary transnational Taiwan, and contemporary Western Europe and North America. Throughout, I continue to address that aforementioned elephant in the room. Namely, how can this Taiwan-focused book, describing a group which includes significant Western contingents, be a description, and theorisation, of *Chinese* Christianity? But there is another, more invisible elephant, that needs addressing too. That is, my own relation to the group I describe.

(Auto)ethnography: me, Ni, and Li

My parents joined what their Christian friends at the time called a 'Chinese church' when I was 12. Before I was born, my father, a Catholic-born, Liverpudlian quantity surveyor and football enthusiast, read a book by

Watchman Ni called *The Normal Christian Life*. The book inspired him to leave what Ni, and now he, called 'Christianity' for good (Nee 1977). In accordance with Ni's ministry, my parents met several times a week in our living room with a few other Christians who, after reading Ni, were also disillusioned by their experiences of 'Christianity'. They wrote their own hymns, baked their own Eucharist bread and communed over their mutual love for Ni's teachings and Biblical exegeses.

Only after 15 years of periodically being dissolved and resurrected, of losing members and gaining them, of combining with other groups and detaching from them, did our small collective change irreversibly, on discovering that Ni had in fact produced a spiritual heir. His name was Witness Li. Moreover, we learned that there were thousands of other 'Christianity'-rejecting groups like ours, putting Ni's and Li's 'vision' (*yixiang*) into practice. We had found, what we would learn to know as, 'the church'.

After making contact with this globally interconnected group, innumerable changes occurred: people from all over the world visiting our house, sleeping on our sofa, and coming to live in our city, regular trips to church 'conferences', 'trainings', and 'meetings' across the UK, Europe and the US, new songs and ways of speaking, acting, and thinking, new friends from far off places, and the prospect of one day entering one of the 17 church 'full-time training' centres for university graduates. Life had shifted from an insular but intimate, home-based rejection of institutional Christianity to a world-facing embrace of a global group with too many faces and names to remember.

It is to an ethnographic theory of that group as a form of Chinese Christianity as it is lived and encountered in *Taiwan*, that this book is mostly devoted. Of the estimated 23.5 million people living in Taiwan, approximately 900,000 identify as Christian.[17] Of those, around 128,000 are regular participants in the life of 'the church'.[18] In its hundred-year history, beginning in China and spreading out across 65 countries today, this group has been variously referred to by outsiders as 'the Local Church' (*difang jiaohui*), 'the Shouters' (*huhan pai*), 'the Lord's Recovery' (*zhu de huifu*), 'Christian Assembly Hall' (*jidutu juhuisuo*), and 'the Little Flock' (*xiaoqun*).

In the interest of remaining 'organic' and resisting 'organisation', the group itself, however, resists being named as such. Globally, it is referred to from within, as noted, as 'the church', but regionally it is 'the church in [the name of a nation, city, or neighbourhood]'. Even their term for 'church', *zhaohui*, is a neologism. It is more a verb than noun, meaning literally 'to call a gathering'. This attempt to distance themselves from the term for 'church', *jiaohui*, associated with Christianity is part of their pursuit of 'organic oneness' (*shengji de heyiwujian*) as their processual, flowing ground, rather than the organisational ground of Christianity.

The highest concentration of participants in the church in Taipei, and as far as the records show, in the church as a whole, live in the Old Taipei neighbourhood of Jingmei (literally: 'beautiful scenery'). It is there, living with a church elder and his family, that I conducted fieldwork for this book.

I attended almost daily church meetings, as well as joining many church outings, and spent almost every day 'hanging out' with church members, going shopping, playing basketball, badminton, and table tennis, swimming, jogging, hiking, going to restaurants, hot springs, shrimp fishing barns, and tea houses. I made hundreds of hours of audio and visual recordings of interviews, social occasions, and church rituals. With a team of church academics, I conducted a survey of a large sample of the 30,000 who attended the Nanggang conference. I carried out shorter stints of fieldwork in the UK, Hong Kong, and the US, and spent many hours researching the history and extent of the group online, via the church historical archive in Taipei, and through the friendly and critical, academic and apologetic, digital and printed literatures I have come across.

Despite conducting long-term anthropological research with the group, I nonetheless do not come to it as an outsider, despite losing my faith as a teenager. After years of downplaying the intimacy of my connections to the church, with family and childhood friends still very much part of it, I have finally learned that I cannot escape them. I have even learned that there may be virtues to my strange positionality. Or at least opportunities to challenge the meta-methodological assumptions that anthropology often brings to its objects of study.

It seems to me that problems of presence are not only endemic to the Protestant Christianities that anthropologists have studied, but may even be the genealogical ground from which the project of anthropology writ large, as it is often imagined, can be understood. Along with much of Western epistemology, anthropology assumes analysis to be a process of 'getting at' the realities it studies 'as they are' (e.g. Jackson 1996). This involves framings, part of the wider 'metaphysics of presence running through the prose [and practice] of anthropology' (Klima 2019, p. 25), which 'close' the gap between 'subject' (anthropologist) and 'object' (ethnographic interlocutors).

My own experience of researching the following of Ni and Li, not entirely dissimilar to the experiences of some so-called 'native anthropologists', has been as much about opening as about closing such a gap.[19] It has been as much about resisting collapse back into my object of study and about resonating with it at a frequency different from that of both my believing childhood and my atheist adolescent selves. What I wrote of my undergraduate attempts to write about this group, more than a decade ago, was still true, to a gradually lesser extent, for the writing of this book. 'My early written drafts', I explained then, 'were cathartic out-flowings of tacit knowledge of [Ni and Li's] "ethno-theology"' (Scott 2005, p. 101). In them, I un-reflexively enunciated the ecclesiology of the group using the linguistic repertoire of a native' (Breen 2014, p. 11).

Writing this book has thus been a gradual, painstaking process of reflexivity, a hallmark, I suggest later, of 'becoming anthropological'. The result this time, at least, I hope, is neither a 'native' account of 'the church', nor one that assumes a process of intellectual penetration from the outside. Rather, I aim

at first for an almost entirely celebratory account of the intimately 'organic' encounters at the historical, sociological, and often personal heart of the group, tracing its beginnings in China and subsequent development in Taiwan to its global positionality today. Chapters 1–4 thus focus upon the origins, idioms, and exercises of 'the organic', its rituals of responsiveness, and their deep rooting in Chinese-speaking life and society.

The next two chapters (5 and 6) focus on oneness, as conformity, discipline, and intolerance of uncontained difference. Here my writing takes a more critical, distanced edge. Oneness, I show, has shadowed and shaped the pursuit of the organic in China and elsewhere, among and beyond followers of Ni and Li. Such tensions have only been intensified the more thoroughly transnational the group has become. In the process of drawing out these tensions at the heart of organic oneness, the chapters ahead also aim to rethink an anthropology, so far shaped by 'problems of presence' (Bialecki 2012; Engelke 2007), through the 'conundrums of coherence' I describe, between Ni and Li's followers, and between them and myself. The conclusion suggests inroads for an anthropology of organic oneness beyond Chinese Christianity.

The book thus follows the sometimes-turbulent currents of organic oneness as they emerge in church members' lives, in Taiwan, in China, and later in the US. It traces an arc from the organic, first as I encountered it in Taipei, then as it emerges in Chinese life and history, and finally as it is somewhat threatened in church localities beyond these heartlands. Oneness appears, ethnographically and historiographically, as emergent from the organic and then as a potential threat to it. Organic oneness, as a set of tensions and potentials arising nonetheless in every chapter, is first explored in Taipei church lives, before being traced back through Chinese church and pre-church history, and then expanded into descriptions of the church in North America. Finally, I suggest a future for the concept of organic oneness in anthropology that goes beyond the story told here.

Deciding to trace these arcs has meant emphasising some aspects of Chinese Christianity – gender, power, vitality, totalisation – to a greater degree than others – evangelism, ethnicity, economics, for instance. These aspects of Chinese Christianity are being and should be explored further. I chose topics here that enabled me to distil most vividly what appears to me to be most definitive of Chinese Christianity. Namely, the sublime sociality of organic oneness.

As a final note, there are three Interludes in this book. While core chapters build an ethnographic theory of Chinese Christianity, as defined by the sublime sociality of organic oneness, these Interludes supplement my more third-person descriptions with first-person depictions and musings of my own evolving relationship with 'the church' as a child of followers of Ni and Li. These chapters are not integral to *Sublime Sociality*'s ethnographic theory, but they do reconsider the positionality of anthropologists who compose these theories. The arc of this book from celebration to critique, from the organic to potentially stifling forms of oneness, parallels my own very gradual

exteriorisation of and from 'the church'. The bracketed (auto) in the subtitle thus refers to this parallel, intertwined, personal trajectory.

Notes

[1] According to the following video, Li is the most prolific Christian author in Christian history: Testimony for Healthy Words (2017) 'Circulating Testimonies through Websites and Social Media', YouTube video. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEpBBvrpJig. It is claimed that Li is the most prolific author in Christian history, despite him only having written one book, a biography of Ni, the rest of his vast *oeuvre* consisting of transcribed recordings and notes taken by followers.

[2] I somewhat de-anglicise the terms Nee and Lee (as they are often referred to in the Anglosphere) throughout the book, using their pinyin names Ni and Li to emphasise the positionalities of these men as Chinese but forever in translation.

[3] 'We are one' (*women shi yi*) is pronounced 'warmen shih eeeee'.

[4] On my reading, the relative unimportance of social unity in the conscious lives of Christians is inflected in many anthropological theories of religion that are applied to them. According to said theories, mostly stemming from Emile Durkheim's (1912) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the conscious concern with God's presence as an otherwise external figure is an unconscious projection, reflection, or introjection of what religion is really about: the strange oneness, the collective effervescence, the social form, of the unified collective. The analytical power of these statements lies precisely in suggesting a subterranean concern with social unity where there apparently is not one.

[5] Watchman Ni and Witness Li are known in the English-speaking world as Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, however I retain the pinyin terms 'Ni' and 'Li' throughout only to highlight that these are figures that have always straddled English- and Chinese-speaking worlds with all the (rarely acknowledged) tensions that this entails and which this book explores throughout.

[6] Formosa was a term used for Taiwan by foreigners following its supposed sighting by Portuguese sailors in the sixteenth century (*Ilha Formosa* being Portuguese for 'Beautiful Island').

[7] As I have written elsewhere (Breen 2019), the bibs used on 'gospel marches' are uncannily similar to the big character posters that were used for political propaganda in first Nationalist and then Communist China.

[8] The official reasoning for his migration to the US is that Li was 'burdened to spread the ministry' beyond Taiwan. One website populated with the

research of ex-members of the group suggests that Li was in fact escaping angry followers whose money he had invested badly. Certainly today, the investments of Li and his co-workers during this time have paid off. Church property in Taiwan today is worth tens of millions of dollars.

[9] See Glossary for the Chinese characters for this and other key church phrases and vocabulary throughout the book.

[10] In practice distinctions between being in the mind and in the emotions are gendered. Brothers are generally guilty, it is said, of 'being in the mind'. 'Get out of your mind brother!' is a very common refrain (Breen 2026a). Sisters, on the other hand, are more inclined towards, and make others suffer from, their emotionality (Breen 2026b). 'Will' is the most gender-neutral and perhaps most powerful and complex facet of the soul. Wilfulness is a general human characteristic and is most guilty of fragmenting oneness into so many individual and collective inclinations. But it is also recognised, at times, that without 'will' no one would turn up to church gatherings in the first place.

[11] Note that all translations within this book use the standard English translations used within Ni and Li's following.

[12] Often children's songs, with their associated dance moves, are sung in adult meetings: they are a particularly effective means of 'getting into the spirit'. Despite their reputation for exuberant loudness (Rubinstein 1991, pp. 97–100), however, church members in fact explicitly value 'soberness' and are proud of the fact that they refrain from using any amplified music (as in 'Christianity') which could induce over-emotivity, and thus confuse the spirit with the soul.

[13] One can find examples of Li referring to the poetry, atmosphere, and mood of church meetings here: *Crucial Words of Leading in the Lord's Recovery, Book 4: The Increase and Spread of the Church,* Chapter 11, Section 1, accessed 17 September 2019, via https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=17FFCC5ADF43; *Lessons for New Believers,* Chapter 9, Section 4, accessed 28 July 2019, via www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=3EB6D9E40F; *Collected Works of Witness Lee,* 1986, vol. 3, Fellowship Concerning the New Way, pp. 15–16.

[14] Ni spoke of Christian life as having a distinct quality: 'From the podium, Ni begins to speak about the "sound" of a Christian life. He argues that the Christian life should have a certain musical tone, or pitch. That tone is triumphant, like a shout of victory' (Chang 2017, p. 19).

[15] There is a neuropsychological set of literatures focused upon 'altered states of consciousness' and more specifically 'absorption' (e.g. Bronkhorst 2017), sufficiently expansive to incorporate arguments relevant to

experiences of both presence and organic oneness. However, my aim in this book is to pitch my descriptions and analysis so as to *differentiate* the optimal experiences of Chinese and other forms of Christianity. Once that is done, I think questions of what they share can be reintroduced. I begin this reintroduction in the concluding chapter.

[16] See D.T. Suzuki's notion that enlightenment is 'like ordinary, everyday experience, except about two inches off the ground' (cited by Watts 1967).

[17] Taiwanese demographics are calculated from the figures given here: World Population Review (2026) *Taiwan Population*. Available at: http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/taiwan-population (last accessed 1 April 2026).

[18] Church demographics are given according to a 2015 church booklet entitled *A Brief Account of the Churches in Taiwan, 2012–2014* (*Taiwan chong zhaohui jianjie*).

[19] Previous analyses of the church in Taiwan have, in retrospect, unwittingly reproduced logics internal to the group itself. Logics, however, that are not necessarily shared by all its members. Originally (Breen 2014), for example, I assumed a 'presence'-oriented picture of oneness. My PhD thesis (Breen 2019) subsequently refined this into an 'essentialist' picture of oneness. The chapters ahead attempt to put these orientations in their proper historical context.

1. Vital differences: diversity versus differentiation

Old Taipei is pastel grey. It is never silent as the hum of human and non-human noises constantly echo off the walls of its narrow streets and alleyways. Birds tweet, funerallers gong and clash, advertisers drone through their mobile microphones, scooters buzz by, taxis honk at each other, marketeers hustle and shout as others bustle by. When I first arrived there, I planned to use my contacts within 'the church in Taipei' to biographise the city itself. My PhD proposal stated an ambition to craft a loving depiction of the city as a strange and wondrous living thing. I sought to 'yield new insight into what "Taipei" *is*'. Thus, I came preloaded with a sense of the city's *a priori* oneness: it is 'a' city. Strolling around its streets, alone and with church members, or listening to it through my headphones as I sit up on my host family's roof recording its sounds, I found great pleasure in my first weeks there witnessing the city's constant self-differentiations, writing for instance that,

> There are squeals and cheers from the school yard, the clink of a baseball hit hard in the riverside courts. There are quieter sounds such as the wind whizzing through a thousand bike spokes adding to the living city din, the murmur of cafe chatter too, and the endless shuffle of feet up and down the metro steps. Behind the grey walls are sounds inaudible to the street, but some of us know or imagine that they are there, which adds to the presence of the city. Sounds of karaoke fun for instance, of thonged girls lapped by suited men, of invalids groaning in their hospital beds, of bowing worshippers mouthing their prayers in smoky temples, the tap and glare of linear-lighted offices, the clatter and chat of motor bike shops, the oily run of massage parlours, the background news of TV sets, the scuffle and slide of rubbish collectors.
>
> Walking around the old town neighbourhood of Jingmei, these sounds flow into and out of one another, burst through and past each other as commuters, flaneurs and urban dwellers like me move through, ignore, and attune to their dissonant compositions. These Jingmei sounds carry images as well as visceral sensations. They are the aural extensions of the myriad, multi-form entities which compose the neighbourhood. Through the image it evokes, Beethoven's

> 'Für Elise' played through tinny, moving speakers, brings me, my host ('uncle Yang'), and our neighbours onto the evening street clutching our little blue bags ready to throw into the yellow garbage truck. From cluttered scooter repair shops, one hears the clatter and clang of tools, as mechanics work to the flashes of TV screens blaring out government-controlled repeats on the latest island disasters and events (Breen 2019, pp. 16–17).

However, the more time I spend with followers of Ni and Li there, the more I experience the city beyond the church as a bombardment of seemingly disconnected events. Not as the self-differentiation of urban oneness but as difference, disorientating, alienating difference, writing later on, for example, that,

> Visual images stoke and feed desires, but they also bore and annoy, breaking bonds as much as they inaugurate them. Little lighted billboards line the streets showcasing unnaturally white teeth, crispy fried chicken, silky hair, expensive glasses, watches, and handbags designed by local and foreign advertisers to induce a lack we did not know we had. Soaring up from this urban immanence, which in every direction points beyond itself, are red neon crosses in the shadows of skyscrapers, overlooking dragon-adorned temples, marking myriad Christian denominations. Nestled within the endless rows of shop names and advertisements, I see perhaps the embodiment of 'Christianity's' perceived participation in this disorienting, never-ending play of difference. In big, bold, white neon letters flash the letters G-O-D (Breen 2019, p. 17).

In this chapter, I suggest that the oneness followers of Ni and Li pursue is not, in the first place, equivalent to sameness, conformity, the denial of difference. The most accurate depiction of the contrast between what church members feel that church living gives them and what (urban) life outside of it lacks is not that of oneness versus difference per se. Rather, I suggest, we should juxtapose the perceived difference composing 'the world', for church members, which I propose to call *diversity*, with the *differentiation* which church living allows followers to witness and experience. This makes sense, I argue, of the church refrain that the church is ultimately a 'recovery' (*huifu*) of 'life' (*shenghuo*, *shengming*), 'vitality' (*huoli*, *shengming liliang*), and 'the organic' (*shengji*) from 'ritual' (*yishi*), 'religion' (*zongjiao*), and the mind-based 'knowledge' of Christianity.

Life, I suggest, is a process of differentiation in the simultaneous sense of difference arising from the midst of oneness and of the discernment of this emergent difference by that which is becoming differentiated. A living, differentiating, organic oneness is thus paradoxically grounded in its own figuration: given that there can be no conception of the 'one' without 'the many', we can say that differentiation retroactively instantiates oneness as the ground of

its multiplicity. This is a vital sense in which church sociality is (potentially) sublime: through it, one might experience a oneness grounded in its putative opposite, differentiation. 'Diversity', on the other hand, alludes to differences whose emergence cannot be felt. This is the 'division' (*fenlie*) that many church members experience as characteristic of 'the world' (*shijie*), 'Christianity', and urban life beyond the church.

Conundrum of coherence VI: differentiation and diversity

It is from amongst Jingmei's dissonant compositions, its allures and intrusions, that on Sunday mornings, from between the bars of a window high up in one of the mustard-yellow apartment buildings near my home (which at this time is emanating a similar sound) one can hear the repetitive chant of a familiar crowd: *Ohhh Zhu Yesuuuu, amen, Ohhh Zhu Yesuuuuu, amen, Ohhh Zhu Yesuuuuu, amen* ... ('Ohh Lord Jessuuuus, amen …'). Above the window, at the top of the building there is another huge sign, too high for any passer-by to see, Taipei's Nazca lines. On faded white it reads, in red: 景美召會 (*jingmei zhaohui*, 'the church in Jingmei'). Buzzing into the building, climbing the concrete stairs, and pushing open the door next to the overflowing shoe rack and the bucket of umbrellas, we meet the eclectic group of Christians who are the ethnographic focus of this book.

Inside the chanting apartment Jingmei's cacophony does not end but shifts into a more intimate key, and a more coherent aesthetic. There are between 20 and 40 people here, from newborns to ninety-somethings. Children play in a backroom, or they perform songs to a strummed guitar, with accompanying actions, clapped on by smiling adults. On fold-out chairs, 'brothers' (*dixiong*) sit on one side of the room, 'sisters' (*zimei*) on the other. Some wear formal attire, and speak in a loud, peculiar rhythm, using words unfamiliar to many outside – 'the all-inclusive spirit' (*baoluo wanyou de ling*), 'the priesthood' (*jisi de tixi*), 'God's dispensing' (*shen de fenci*). Others are more relaxed, preparing food in the kitchen area, whispering to their neighbour, playing with a grumbling child.

On bookshelves around the room there are multiple works by the same two authors, Watchman Ni and Witness Li. There are songbooks and hymnals, and *Recovery Version Bibles* (*huifu ban*), some in black, some in plum-purple faux-leather. In the middle of the room on a little wooden table there is a Eucharist wafer on a silver tray, next to a glass jug of red grape juice, covered with a crisp white cloth. On this occasion, a young church sister has brought her fiancé to his first Sunday meeting and she keeps arranging and rearranging the cloth and the jug, trying to make it look neater, until an older sister scolds her gruffly, telling her to leave it alone. This is 'group 5' of 'hall 34' of 'the church in Taipei', a local manifestation of the island-wide 'church in Taiwan'.

The vital difference between diversity and differentiation is the reason people join 'the church' and the reason they stick with it. It is one key in which organic oneness can be described, a difference of, perceived, experienced, hoped-for, vitality, contrasted with the oft-reported 'meaninglessness' (*mei-you shenme yisi*), the 'deadness' (*siji*, *siqi chenchen*, *si chen*), the 'division' (*fen-lie*) of (what I am calling) diversity in church testimonies (*jianzheng*). Vital difference infused with a primary oneness is not (just) a conceptual principle, moreover. It is an embodied, felt orientation rooted in the daily, sometimes hourly, 'exercises' (*caolian*) which compose 'the churchlife' (*zhaohui sheng-huo*). This chapter gives an overview of this life, focusing on the events, exercises, and infrastructures that delineate it. Throughout, my aim is to show how these events, infrastructures, and exercises are oriented towards an 'organic oneness' as the source of life-like differentiation. This vitalised difference, unlike problems of presence and calculating gaps of 'organisation', unlike the otherwise alienating difference of urban living, is secondary, an emergent property of a primary oneness nonetheless defined by its capacity to be differentiated. How these differentiations are framed and experienced is the focus of this chapter.

Diverse city, differentiating churchlife

Jingmei is the most famously Christian of the old town neighbourhoods of Taipei. Part of Wenshan district, it lies close to the northwestern edge of the urban sprawl which wraps its way around the eastern side of the island, from tip to tip, hugging the edges of the relatively indomesticable mountain spine which dominates the centre and west of Taiwan, making it look all the more like a floating leaf. *Xianji* – 'immortal footprint' – mountain to the east, sky-scrapers to the north, and Jingmei river, banked by dreary New Taipei build-ings, to the south and west, Jingmei is often in shadow. Still, it vibrates with urban noise. The sounds of the neighbourhood's sentient and not-so-sentient inhabitants echo off walls and doors lining its narrow streets and alleyways. Its wide roads carry the city rush over brightly lit bridges, from central districts to the expanding New Taipei sprawl on the other side of Jingmei river.

It is there, in Jingmei, on a street veined with smaller alleyways, living with a church elder and his family, that I conducted fieldwork for this book. On the big red front door of the Yang–Xie household, where I lived between January 2015 and July 2016, is a little placard which reads 'Jesus loves you' (*Yesu ai ni*).[1] There are church meetings, social gatherings, and family meals in here several times a week. Above a door leading to the kitchen, a small television room, and the bedrooms upstairs is a sign which reads, 'Jesus is the head of this household' (*yesu shi zhe jia zhi zhu*).[2] I was introduced to this household through a Taiwanese member of the church in the UK, Aiguo, who we meet again in Chapter 2. I pay a very low rent and am free to enter the guest living room downstairs whenever I please.[3] There, I am exposed to a constant flow

of 'brothers and sisters' (*dixiongzimeimen*) pushing open and pulling shut the big red metal front door.[4]

This constant flow of churchly bodies, coming from near and far with known or knowable faces bringing stories and voices each different from one another, is part of the process of differentiation I am theorising here. Each meeting, the singularities of each body and its life emerges and re-emerges from the established oneness of church membership, the initially homogenising rituals of 'calling' described above, the common adherence to church vocabularies, ascetics and schedules. One might be tempted to think of this as a domesticated rather than vital form of difference. After all, this seems, and indeed *is* in many respects, a relatively closed world. It is this closedness, with all church words and principles arising from Ni and Li's ministry, that paradoxically provides the conditions for a deeply valued openness at the heart of this group.

It is not only that urban sounds, sensations, faces, and bodies are rendered manageable through the idioms and structures, rhythms and relative predictabilities of the churchlife. Many are exposed to new city worlds through joining the church. To step out of Taipei momentarily, my father, a working class Liverpudlian who had never been further than France, joined 'the church' in his mid-forties. To quote from my undergraduate dissertation where I disguised him as 'John':

> Within a year [of joining 'the church'], John had taken his first aeroplane flight aged forty-four, to tour America visiting localities; and a Taiwanese and a Ghanaian family had migrated to [his home locality]. From then on, he and his family have been all over the world: Moscow, New Zealand, Poland, Holland, Turkey and elsewhere regularly visiting and going to 'conferences' to be 'blended' with [church] members. I described this as a kind of 'vista' exploding open after the prolonged isolation of his search and he thought this was very apt.

Likewise in Taipei. For many, the church is where they make their international contacts and it gives them the reason for going abroad at all, to live or visit. The perceived diversity and openness of the church is actively celebrated. The VHS series which was for decades distributed to church localities around the world telling them of the latest church events and developments was called *Open Windows*.

Open doors too are a big attraction of the churchlife in Taipei. When I ask the brothers and sisters of group 5, hall 34, of the church in Taipei, one Sunday afternoon how Taiwan has changed over their lifetimes, they agree with passion, that while all the technological innovations make life much more convenient, they all miss the open doors of their younger years. They reminisce about oyster farming in their home towns, about how much worse the typhoons were in the 1980s, about the arrival of cars and buses, price increases, and they agree that, compared to before, 'now you can go anywhere

in Taiwan'. One middle-aged seamstress complained over the background chatter of the impact on her business of increased levels of imported clothes. But there was a chorus of assent when she proclaimed, 'Before, nobody closed their doors, we came and went as we pleased' (*conglai dajiadou bu guan men, jiu guanlai guanqu*).

The closed doors of Taipei, it was suggested, are one of its most alienating aspects. This nostalgia for openness was a shared sentiment, reiterated by another in terms of trust: 'Today, everybody is out to con you' (*xianzai, dajiadou yao pian ni*). One cannot trust those whose origins are obscured. You don't know where they're coming from. While older church members felt closed off from the city that encompassed them, younger members felt closed in. They complained about the dense competitiveness of school and work, which teachers and bosses seemed to take advantage of. They complained too with strained hilarity of the repetitiveness, boredom, and meaninglessness of their jobs and classrooms, in which a foot put wrong felt like stepping off the world. They dreamed of escape, of spreading out, of 'gospelising' (*fuyinhua*), 'truthising' (*zhenlihua*), spiritually degraded Western Europe and North America, and possibly getting well-paid jobs with paid or even no overtime, in the process.

The youngest members seemed peculiarly worried with the potential to 'get lost' in Taipei. There was a general consensus that the church is better than other Christian groups because of its home-based intimacy, because of its interwovenness with everyday life, because it was like being in a 'big family' (*womendou shi jiaren*). Because it gave an intimate ground from which difference could be experienced as differentiation, emergent from a common source.

The difference between the diversity of the city and the differentiations of the church is often not only conceived but experienced as a closedness versus an openness, respectively. Jingmei was once more visibly interconnected with the immediate world around it than it sometimes seems to be today. It was once called Kengbe, 梘尾, a name which alludes to the 'tail-end' of the old system of canals and irrigation ditches that stretched across the city. Today, the water lies beneath a dense web of apartment blocks, shopping outlets, and market stalls.

On the one hand, this part of the city is especially sensorially porous. We are crowded together in fumy, humid intimacy. Even the faded yellow-grey apartment blocks, built so rapidly in the 1960s and '70s, look squeezed. With multi-coloured clothes hanging out of grilled windows and stains dripping from flaky walls, they ooze the history and inhabitations that make them. I get the impression, as I gaze around from a busy pavement, that these homes have slumped down here together after exhausting journeys or grown out of each other like coral.

But while sounds and sensations move between these homes, people often do not. These sonorous, sensory penetrations are largely anonymous. Many in the church only encounter their neighbours face to face when said neighbours

come to complain about the noise of church meetings, or conversely when knocking on their doors on team gospelising missions. These encounters, in my experience, were awkward for everyone involved, with domestic altars and disapproving grandmothers often making the atmosphere seem especially hostile to 'the good news'.

The closed difference of the city is continuous in church ontology, I surmise, with the closed difference of denominational 'Christianity' that I introduced in the previous chapter. Urban difference is difference between autochthonous individuals, out to 'con' (*pian*) and reject you, a difference that admits no trust. This is the difference that Christianity attempts to overcome through interdenominational initiatives. However, from a church perspective, the denominationalism that such initiatives are premised upon makes them futile. Names, it is felt, induce and assume a fundamental difference, on both collective and individual scales. Christianity's participation in Taipei's urban difference through its demarcation by neon signs and crosses is felt to be evidence of its fundamental neglect of true, organic oneness.

One summer evening in 2015, the Wang–Xu family and I sat in the Korean 'hotpot' restaurant around the corner from their Taipei apartment. When I ask the family what it is that makes the church special to them, the father, 'brother Wang', replies that life in the church is 'simple' and 'predictable'. Sister Xu, his wife, picks up the train of thought and takes it along more Biblical lines. 'Jesus washed the feet of his disciples,' she says. 'In the same way, when we come to the meetings, we wash each other. We are not here to compare, "my daughter is so beautiful etc.", we just share.' 'How do you get "dirty"?' I ask, provocatively, in response to the notion that church meetings are about washing one another. Sister Xu chuckles. 'It's not sinful,' her husband interjects. 'It's not about sin,' she continues, giving him the side-eye, 'but about contact with worldly things, like going on the metro.' To me, it seems clear she is talking about the difference between diversity (and its comparisons) and differentiation (and its emergence from oneness). Their daughter, Meirong, finally offers her answer, which I feel sums up what her parents are trying to get at very well. 'It is just this feeling [*ganjue*],' she says, 'when you see others going to make offerings to temple gods [*qu baibai*], it doesn't have this feeling.'

Brother Wang seemed to focus on the church as a mode of closure. Sister Xu seemed nonetheless to describe the kinds of openness that this apparent closure allows. An openness which allows a cleansing internal difference produced through the rituals in organicism rather than the competitive extrinsic difference so characteristic of modern, urban Taipei life. Meirong, on the other hand, seemed to point to a sense of the church's uniqueness that was more subtle. The feeling that she describes, I surmise, alludes to the sublimity of the sociality that church living can attain, which is both closed and open at once. Perhaps characterizable with Jean-Luc Nancy's (2008) term 'dis-enclosure', church ritual encloses its participants against urban, secular, disembedded diversity in order to disclose a different form of difference among them – a difference that emerges in the unfolding of their ritualised oneness.

The church architecture I describe below, like its namelessness, is also a rejection of the diversity often defined by competition that sister Xu felt sullied by. On the smaller scale, church members rarely refer to one another by names. At most it is 'brother Xi', 'sister Huang'.[5] There is a relational, intrinsic difference here that counters the non-relational, extrinsic difference which is otherwise encountered in and as the city. I turn now to give an overview of the apparently closed world of 'the church' which paradoxically admits an openness within a city felt to be closed off and closed in.

Infrastructures of differentiation

One of Ni's most foundational critiques of 'Christianity' is its adherence to names, to denominations. Denominationalism is perceived as the dismemberment of the Body of Christ. Having more than one name for the church, for 'the Body', Witness Li often said, is like having more than one moon, or like a 'monster' with more than one body.[6] The only divisions internal to 'the church', in contrast, are, ideally, geographical. As noted, the church has no name and neither do its localities. The city is officially the only ground of distinction in the church, following Paul's New Testament precedent of referring to 'the church in Athens' and 'the church in Philadelphia', etc. This concern undoubtedly led to the name by which the group is most often referred to globally, 'the Local Church(es)' (*difang jiaohui*).

In practice, the church in Taipei, as in other city localities with large populations, is further divided into different 'halls' (*huisuo*), '(Christian) Assembly Hall' (*jidutu huisuo*) being a lesser-used alias of the group. These halls are used once a month for Eucharist, or 'Lord's Table', meetings, the other Sunday meetings being held in homes. They are also used for seasonal 'trainings', as well as weddings and memorial meetings (see e.g. LSM 1998). Because there is evidently more 'organisation' involved in setting up these larger scale meetings – setting out chairs, cleaning, making sure microphones, projectors, and TV screens are working – they are arranged the night before. My sense was that this was to separate out the pragmatics of organisation from the organicism of the meeting itself. The 60 halls across Taipei are usually each fitted out with a kitchen, an office, a baptismal font, and a small shop, all accompanying the main 'hall' (*huisuo*). There is also a training and conference centre in Taipei, attached to hall 19, staffed and inhabited by several hundred church 'trainees', teachers, administrators, editors, and 'serving ones'.

In Taipei, there is the *Taiwan Gospel Bookroom* (*taiwan fuyin shufang*), a publishing house, museum, and administration centre housed in the church-owned *Xinji Building* ('Believe/Trust Christ Building'), which is also leased out to Citibank and other companies, and which sits on the same road as Taipei 101, a former 'world's tallest building' shaped like a stalk of bamboo. Over the period of the New Year conference, the church held an exhibition on the Dead Sea Scrolls there, complete with guides, special effects, and a large pop-up shop featuring a huge range of church paraphernalia from sticker versions of church-designed

emojis, through hoodies branded with the unofficial church logo, to the 'eZoe player' (*duogongneng shuwei fuyin ji*) pre-loaded with audio versions of the *Recovery Version Bible* (in English, Mandarin, and Taiwanese (*taiyu*)), 1,984 of Witness Li's spoken messages (together called the 'life-studies' (*shengming dujing*)) and a compilation of 1,142 recordings of church songs (Figure 1.1).[7]

Many of 'the saints' (*shengtu*) are so-called mainlanders (*waisheng ren*), being the children and grandchildren of those who migrated to Taiwan with the nationalist government following its defeat by Mao's communists. There are also Hoklo and Hakka Taiwanese, though, and during the trip around Taiwan described in the Introduction we stayed with aboriginal members living in the eastern mountainous region of Taiwan. There were also resident

Figure 1.1: The eZoe player



Source: Author.

church participants I met in Taiwan from Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam, as well as one or two from Mexico and Eastern Europe. The church relies upon an island-wide network through which members stay in touch, stay synchronised in their 'holy word for morning revival' (*chenxing shengyan*), and 'coordinate' the many events that go on throughout the year.

In Taiwan's second largest city, Kaohsiung, there is another publishing house, a sub-branch of the *Taiwan Gospel Bookroom*. There are also many church halls, a conference and training centre, and a number of 'full-timers' taking care of things. When I spent time with one such full-timer there, his only criticism of the church in Taipei was that they numbered their halls rather referring to them by their location, for example 'the church on Kaoshan road'. Hall number *X* he felt was unnecessarily abstract, not local (*difang*) enough. Centring the church too much around 'halls', he reasoned, moreover, was too hierarchical for a church that should be churched out from the ground up. A, perhaps *the*, key component of the vitality of church differentiation is its 'organicness'. That is, its emergence out of oneness from the 'spontaneous' (*zifade*) interactivity of the brothers and sisters.

The church in Taipei, for instance, secures government backing for a 'life education course' (*shengming jiaoyu*) each year which equips rural aboriginal youths for life in the city. As is clear from the title of the programme, however, the 'life' referred to is more than the pragmatic one of jobs and education. If it were, the word used would likely be *shenghuo* – 'life, activity, to live, livelihood' – rather than *shengming*, meaning something close to 'life-force' or 'the essence of living things', which is the word used in the church. It is used for 'life-giving spirit' (*ci shengming ling*) – the full name of the spirit of God – for example, and 'life-studies' (*shengming dujing*), the name given to Witness Li's collected biblical exegeses, which take up a whole bookcase in many church homes. One brother Wang in fact told me that the life education programme was a thinly disguised gospel outreach. On the other end of the spectrum, in the 1980s Li introduced, as part of 'the new way' (*xin lu*) I describe below, the practice of 'vital groups' (*huoli pai*). These, one might say 'elite', groups were intended to be intensified versions of the churchlife, tasked with 'revitalising' the church at a time of perceived decline.

One would not know this group was all about vitality from the generally drab buildings it operates out of. In all major towns and cities there are smaller-sized buildings comparable to the central halls of Taipei and Kaohsiung, also staffed by trained and provisioned-for 'serving ones' (*fushizhe*). Each one is unremarkable, though sometimes large, and has the same white sign with red letters on declaring 'the church in *X*' (e.g. Figure 1.2).

Church halls are by no means immediately noticeable, then, unless one is looking. They do not contribute obviously to the visual cacophony of Taiwan's urban sprawl. Indeed, as noted, I think that is the point. They are purposely bland because, in the words of the Sinologist Francois Jullien, commenting on the Confucian classics which were a staple of Watchman Ni's education, ' "blandness" and "flavorlessness" (*pingdan wuwei*) make it possible to

Figure 1.2: A church hall



Source: Author.

encompass contradictory qualities' (2004, p. 60). In other words, blandness has the capacity to contain, and thus vitalise, transform into differentiation, all difference, to make it emerge from a common source.

Dotted around the island in between urban areas and on Taiwan's outlying islands are several million dollars' worth of church-owned real estate, including wedding and conference venues, accommodation, sports fields, and a cemetery ('Chanxing Paradise' it is called (*changxing leyuan*), and is tended to by 'the saints of Pindong county' on Sunday afternoons). Li took advantage of Taiwan's rapid industrial boom from the 1970s on. He invested money he collected from the brothers and sisters, overall to capital effect.

Some disgruntled ex-members do claim, however, that Li's migration to the US in the 1960s was less about 'the Lord's move', as he claimed, and more of an escape from angry church members whose money had been badly invested. From a church perspective, the expansion of the church is not about good or bad investment decisions but about organic growth, as we will see. Differentiation, in other words, emerges out of and through and as the growth of a common source.

I take a moment here to describe one church hall in a little more detail. Unlike other Christian congregations in Taiwan, the church hall where my

host family meet does not have any cross or neon sign marking it out. To get there I only have to walk around 300 metres from the Yang–Xie home. It is next door to a Japanese-style restaurant down a narrow alleyway leading from Jingmei bridge road, which is bustling with cafés, restaurants, clothes shops, banks, offices, scooter repair shops, and mini temples. Above the church hall's double doors is a white sign with 'hall 34' (*sanshisi huisuo*) written in faded red letters. This is typical of the church in Taipei. In the entrance courtyard to the hall there is a very small bookshop and a corridor to the right that leads to a kitchen, a washroom, and the children's room.

On the walls of the main room, against which are stacked many chairs, guidelines for life are written in blue and red: 'enjoy the Lord' (*xiangshou zhu*), 'be perfected' (*shou chengquan*), 'serve your function' (*jin yonggong*). There are written the 12 'steps of God's predestined way' (*shen mingding zhi lu de shixing*), the 3 'secrets of increased blessing' (*zengzhi fu de mijue*), and the 3 ways in which 'the churchlife is the present-day garden of Eden' (*zhaohui shenghuo shi jinri de yixunyuan*), all in poetic rhythm. There is a blue chalkboard with numerical scribblings on it depicting the recent changes in the boundaries between one church locality or cluster and the next. The expansion of the church is depicted diagrammatically, in church reports, as gradually splitting off from the original church into more and more, spherically represented, daughter churches radiating out from the original, unnamed centre (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: Diagrams of church expansion between 1990 and 2003 in a 212-page 'best of' photograph album (*zhaopian jijin*), produced by hall 13, entitled *A Summary of Blessings* (*mengen jianjie*)



Source: Author.

A roll-down projector screen at the hall is used during 'video trainings' (*yingxiang xunlian*), Mandarin appearing on the screen and through the speakers, often overdubbing transmissions from the 'blended brothers' (*xiangtiao dixiong*) in the church's administrative headquarters in Anaheim, California. Fold-out chairs and tables (for 'love feasts' (*aiyan*)) are stacked at the back of the hall, and at the front there is a large cupboard containing a table-tennis table, which is often wheeled out after meetings. (The background 'clackety-clack' sound of a ping-pong game is very much associated with my memories of the hall.) Brother Sui, who introduced himself as 'Cephas', and his wife live upstairs surrounded by ministry books and computer software boxes. I regularly visit them to borrow books and discuss the church's history. I am especially interested in the famous 'rebellion' that occurred here in the 1980s (Lee 1994a),[8] so much so that Cephas starts to become suspicious, and I desist.[9]

While this hall is home to Cephas and his wife, it does not really form the centre of most of the brothers and sisters' churchlives. They are spent mostly in one another's homes but are also distributed more widely through the city. I often bump into church members in Jingmei by chance. A pair of evangelising 'trainees' usually stand outside the metro station or wander up and down the road outside the market ready to pray with anyone willing (Figure 1.4). Several members own restaurants and market stalls nearby, so I visit them from time to time.

Most church members spend more time together in local restaurants and tea houses, on walks up Taiwan's many mountains, at hotsprings and shrimp fishing farms than they do in church halls. To point out the obvious, even when they are in halls, the sounds and smells of the city still permeate their churchlives as latecomers open the door to let in the city din, carrying bento boxes exuding familiar fragrances. In many ways, life in the churchlife differs from other well-connected Sino-Taiwanese lives only in its content, as I will argue throughout this book.

Halls are further differentiated into 'groups', which are associated with elders' homes or those of 'responsible brothers' (*fuze dixong*). These differentiations themselves are framed 'organically'. Like cell division they are part of bodily growth, as we see later. Our own locality is thus hall 34, group 5, centred around the homes of elder Li and uncle Yang, my host father. In principle, 'saints' should attend the meetings of the nearest home, hall, and group. In practice, people often travel according to their social networks and preferences.

Every attendee of church meetings in Taipei sought vital difference. They sought, that is, a means to recognise their differences with others as nonetheless arising from, being differentiated out of, a common source. The classic way to do this in Chinese-speaking communities is to enquire on first meeting someone as to where they are from, where they studied, or what their surname is to discover some common connection from which the friendship can emerge (e.g. Jacobs 1979). There was some strife, in the church,

Figure 1.4: Gospelising in Jingmei



Source: Author.

however, between those in leadership positions who sought to root this prior connection in the oneness of Christ, who as the firstborn is the ancestor of all, and those who were satisfied to root such connection more pragmatically in earth-bound linkages. These latter seemed to treat the churchlife as a convenient site for making such connections, for vitalising their own difference rather than joining the church's own collective project of spirit-infused differentiations.

Sometimes leaders' attempts to root difference in oneness were felt to be a pressure to conform even by the most committed church members, such as the 'responsible one' for group 5, hall 34, of the church in Taipei, brother Jiazhi. He once asked with a smile if I had noticed that he did not pray in

exactly the same way as the 'other brothers' prayed. He was quietly proud of this small difference between himself and the group he was a part of.

Others are more concerned to limit the differences they have even with loved ones. When I asked elder Li how the churchlife had benefited his family life, he said that whereas before he and his wife were 'always swearing (*maren*) at one another', which led to terrible arguments, learning the language of the church and becoming an elder, with church members always in his home, prevents them today from using that kind of language. Elder Li's wife in turn would counsel our 'responsible brother', Jiazhi, who suffered deep domestic difficulties stemming from his wife being a 'denominational' Christian. To some extent, the church could metabolise conflict even from afar.

Once elder Li raised his hand in a mock gesture of violence towards his wife during a post-Sunday meeting hang out session at his home. 'Bad Christian!' I joked, distastefully, wagging my finger at him as if scolding a pet. His wife found this hilarious, nonetheless, and would repeat the phrase laughing in my direction whenever elder Li misbehaved, to his chagrin. The church is a stopgap in elder Li's life which prevents the worst of him and his wife from being expressed. Their differences became part of the often playful churchlife, remerging through and as the social flow felt to be (divine) 'life' itself. They were, in a word, vitalised.

A divine and mystical culture

'Culture' is often seen as the contested site in which differences between diversity and differentiation get played out. In a church friend's Taipei apartment, he had a well-known quote from Witness Li, the late leader of the group, framed and hung on his wall. Spoken at an international church conference in Anaheim, California, in October 1996, not long before he died, the quote was the following:

> We are in the divine and mystical realm seeing the divine and mystical culture, and we have to speak all these things with the divine and mystical language.
>
> Brothers, please put aside everything that you have heard in the past. From today begin anew by learning this new culture and new language.[10]

A major theme for the 2015 International Chinese-Speaking Conference was the eradication of 'culture' from within the church. The speakers smilingly chastised church members' 'Chinese' habits, often to the hilarity of the audience. Speaking of the US, one Chinese-American church leader said with comic exasperation, 'after meetings in which we proclaim, "Christ is our all in all!" Chinese saints go straight from the meeting hall to the Chinese restaurant to exchange red envelopes!' After one conference session, I sat around a table with church members from around the world, listening to a well-known British

church elder of Caribbean heritage speaking gravely of the dangers of cultural difference to the existence of the church. There was an exciting, apocalyptic sense of a dark world encroaching upon the one source of light and life in the universe from all sides, encroaching even from within one's own cultured body.

'To the Lord, we're as a garden' one church hymn sings, and it is as if the wild, unruly diversity of modern life is domesticated similarly into bite-sized chunks. A dialectic of perception and church action undoubtedly emerges as the felt contrast between the digestibility of church differentiation and the apparently opaque, ungrounded diversity of the world beyond grows ever larger. Church members drive through cities world over, shaking their heads at the confusion on the other side of the glass. A taste for the divine and mystical churchlife, in which differences flows out of oneness, as 'life', grows in proportion to these perceptions. Such was the case with 'old brother Yu' who I spent much time wandering Taipei with. We walked past a beaming golden Buddha once and he shook his head at the ground muttering 'Terrible, terrible', despite the fact that his whole family is Buddhist!

Home groups meet all together for weekly 'prayer meetings', for 'Lord's Day meetings', and for Friday 'love feasts'. There are other groupings that cut across these scaled groups of city, hall, and home, centred around meetings held each week for particular local demographics: 'sisters' meetings', 'brothers' meetings', 'young people's meetings', 'children's meetings', 'elders' meetings', 'college aged meetings', 'working saints' meetings'. There are also less regular gatherings – 'trainings', 'blendings', and conferences aimed at particular demographic, regional, national or international church contingents. There were event-oriented 'coordination meetings' for each of these. Compared to the city, the churchlife reinstates difference on its own level. Difference here is celebrated, as long as it is rooted in a common cause. For those disoriented by, distasteful of, urban diversity, this is a form of life they can live.

But what may appear at first a mere domestication of difference does give rise to opportunities for skilful attunement to deep distinctions perhaps not present in other Taipei contexts. There are differences in the atmospheres as well as demographics of each meeting. Friday evening 'love feasts' are more carefree than midweek prayer meetings. They involve each person bringing a dish to be shared alongside others. Church social messaging groups are inevitably flooded with picture after picture of the often-beautiful spreads these potlatches result in. It does not seem too far-fetched to view these pictures as visual metaphors of the vital differentiations of the church. In more multicultural church contexts – in the UK, for instance, or more white-collar areas in Taipei – love feasts are composed of incongruent culinary mashups. Pizza with noodles and curry dishes, all to be piled up on paper plates. Growing up, we referred to this, somewhat disparagingly, as 'recovery food'. In Jingmei, as in any Chinese-speaking locality, the result, in contrast, is a great variety of gustatorily coherent dishes rivalling those of any Taipei restaurant.

Children's and young people's meetings are more educational. In the latter, a passage from Li or Ni is usually read with a sharing session afterwards in

which more senior participants inject their own, slightly more didactic, sharings. Children's meetings are explicitly didactic. Their aim is not to celebrate difference but to inculcate in children a common set of church dispositions through which difference can eventually emerge. Gospel meetings, likewise, because they are not purely internal affairs, cannot assume a ground of oneness to begin with. They involve rather tedious testimonies which nonetheless testify to the vital differences between life before and after joining the church. 'Life before', many share, 'was meaningless' (*mei you shenme yisi*). It was only about competition with others, in school, work, or even play – be it through online gaming or, as with uncle Yang, for instance, golf, basketball, and badminton. Life after, many share, is infused with 'meaning': spouses are won, myriad brothers and sisters are gained, and each day is saturated with the 'spontaneous oneness of Christ'.

The different atmospheres of each meeting are lessons in how oneness and difference interdigitate in the churchlife. Once I asked the above-mentioned elder Li, 'Do you really feel that the church is the body of God?' 'Yes,' he replied, 'especially during the mid-sized meetings.' We see below that scaling the churchlife is part of a wider delicate, dynamic process of rooting it on the one hand in the intimate, organic oneness of the home, but on the other hand of not allowing it to become too familiar, too routine, too domesticated. This, we might say, is one aspect of the art of atmosphere, the art of vitalising difference. It involves both taming difference and allowing it to re-emerge through prisms of oneness.

Witness Li almost directly equated 'spirit' and 'atmosphere'. Here he is speaking at a 'training' (*xunlian*) for all church members in Taiwan in the autumn of 1959. The passage of the book in which the message is transcribed is titled *Touching the Spirit of the Meeting*. There is a passage in the chapter that follows making very similar points entitled *Touching the Atmosphere of the Meeting*. 'The spirit' (*ling*) and the 'atmosphere' (*qifen*) of a meeting are very close indeed:

> The most important thing in a meeting is to touch the feeling and the atmosphere of the meeting. What are the feeling and atmosphere of a meeting? For example, in a wedding meeting everyone is joyful, and we touch a joyful atmosphere as soon as we enter the meeting. In a funeral meeting, on the contrary, we sense an atmosphere and feeling of grief. These two examples clearly show that the atmosphere of a meeting is something concrete. As long as we have feeling, we should be able to sense the atmosphere.
>
> Every meeting has its own feeling and atmosphere, and we need to learn to touch and take care of this atmosphere. It would be insensible for us to begin weeping when we enter a wedding meeting or for us to sit in a funeral meeting looking cheerful. We should never disregard the feeling and the atmosphere of a meeting.

> Although most meetings do not have such a distinct feeling and atmosphere, there is always a feeling and atmosphere in a meeting. No meeting is without a feeling or atmosphere. Therefore, if we want to have a good meeting, we need to learn to touch the feeling and atmosphere of the meeting. …[11]

The vitality of church difference is thus not static, it is not just about the differences between individual demographics, dispositions, and stories. Its vitality also arises from the active processes of 'atmospheric attunement' (Stewart 2011), which allows the internal differences of the churchlife to emerge. For most in the church, there is not the time, space, or cooperative assent available in the naked city for such subtle vitalisations to appear.

As elder Li alluded to, there are differences not only in the demographics, aim, and atmosphere of church meetings, but interrelatedly in their size. The church calendar has several scales. If the cosmic rhythms of Imperial China were orchestrated by the emperor and his attendants (Feuchtwang 2001, pp. 1–3, 31), here they are orchestrated by the international group of 'blended brothers' who speak at all major church gatherings and oversee the publication of all church literature, which has only two official authors. There are, first of all, the 'seven annual feasts', which divide up the year, held in various locations around the world. Every two years, one of the feasts is held in Taiwan, over Chinese New Year. These typically involve thousands of attendees and preparations begin months in advance. There are then smaller regional and other translocal gatherings which tend to draw upon and reiterate the themes set during the seven annual feasts.

However, most of what church members call 'the churchlife' is spent in living rooms, in small gatherings of 10 to 30 people occurring several times a week. Songs are sung to an acoustic guitar or an electric keyboard, food is cooked or reheated in the kitchen; and everyone, from small children to elderly grandparents, is expected to contribute in some way. To share a word, to bring some food, or, for children, to give a little post-meeting performance. The frequently repeated notion of 'the church as family' is thus instantiated at a fine-grained level, through its emphasis on shared responsibility and through its homeliness.

This church group was one of the first so-called 'house churches' to arise in China. As noted, according to some estimates (Cheung 1970, p. 5; McCallum 2011, n.p.), 'the Local Church' is the largest house church in the world. With this in mind, studying the Local Church in depth might make us reconsider the claim that the 'house church' form is only an 'organizational weapon' (Koesel 2013) to counter the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) persecution of Christianity. The homeliness of the house church rather instantiates an ethic and aesthetic of organic (grassroots, intimate, not top-down) oneness. Vitality and the home – a space which both domesticates and allows deeper internal differentiations to unfold – seem virtually to be equated.

There is every attempt to have no 'gaps' between one scale of church meeting and the next. The deep house church aesthetic remains even when 30,000

house church Christians are gathered in a stadium. Conferences, like intimate Friday meetings, are called 'feasts'. Conference Eucharist meetings have a huge wafer on the stage for everyone to see, which is exactly the same as those used locally, bar the impressive size (Figure 1.5). For musical accompaniment nothing directly electrified is used, rather myriad acoustic guitars are strummed like those used in local meetings. Behind every conference speaker there is the same blue board to be found in church halls world over. To reiterate, this group aims to be a 'house church' even when there are 30,000 participants housed in an arena. The oneness it keeps is always (ideally) 'organic'. That is, it is never framed as an imposition from above, or a conceptual imposition of the mind to be practised by the body. Rather, oneness emerges, 'spontaneously', from within the never-ending life of the church.

Language reflects this ideal. As noted, of the 'speaking brothers' who 'deliver' the 'messages' at conferences, the most international and authoritative are referred to as 'the blended brothers'. They are so few and so long-standing that each of the faces and voices is intimately known. The brothers and sisters fret when one is taken ill or is becoming dangerously old. Usually only one such brother headlines each conference. As described in the Introduction, blending is a horizontal intermingling of 'the saints'

Figure 1.5: Breaking the bread



Source: Author.

which is interlocked with the more vertical 'mingling' of God's Spirit with the human spirit. The authority of the blended brothers is thus framed in non-vertical terms, absent of 'hierarchy', with the implied notion of gaps between each level of authority. Rather the authority of the blended brothers arises from their being more 'blended' than anyone else. They are, put otherwise, more centred, 'centrality' being a valued church term, in the qualitative sense that they have more nodes flowing through them than others. We will see later that the church notion of spiritual perfection amounts to being so blended with others that all one's actions and inclinations effortlessly reflect and harmonise with the 'burdens' (*fudan*) and 'movement' (*dongzuo*) of 'the Body' as a whole.

As noted at the outset, all the vitalised distinctions that structure and compose the churchlife on all its scales rest on an all-encompassing, if relative, closedness. Many brothers and sisters' lives are entirely consumed by the churchlife. 'My life is the churchlife,' my host father in Taipei, elder Yang, said to me. A Hong Kongese brother put it more vividly, saying,

> Even I would consider myself as religious freak, because I do spend lots of my time in the church. Monday, Brother's meeting, Tuesday, Prayer meeting, Wednesday and Friday Home meeting and Lord's Day. Who does that? No one I know around me does that. I think the good point about the Lord's recovery is life. To be completely transformed by Christ, we never just say we believe. We have to take action, to have a transformation of our life.

Church members reiterated to me again and again that beneath the apparent difference, the church was 'the same everywhere'. In the words of one Romanian brother,

> In every locality the church life is a bit different, but it is in essence the same. People are different, and there are other kinds of arrangements and customs in every locality, but in essence we are one and we believe and enjoy the same thing. We enjoy the Morning Revival, the Bible, and eating and drinking Jesus with the saints! You can say there are outward things we do, but actually if there's no inward reality people don't stay or remain. … Even though people are different in each locality, the essence of what we do, read, and practise is the same based on this inward reality.

Differentiation is indeed the *raison d'ètre*, for many church members, of 'God's economy' (*shen de jinglun*) as Li termed it, 'God's plan' (*shen yi*), that is, his 'heart's desire' (*shenxin jihua*) – namely, to 'become man so that man might become God'. The basic assumption here, not always voiced, is that God is incomplete, a notion that one potential convert to the group gave as her reason

for rejecting it. God, it is assumed, needs humanity. He 'wants to be expressed' (*zhangxian*). Before creation He was a lonely, self-same autonomous Spirit. He is the divinisation of the procreative impulse. The whole point of creation then is to serve as a corporate human prism through which God's oneness can become a multiplicity, a vitalised difference.

From the human side of the bargain, 'Christ becomes out content [*neirong*]', it is said. In other words, the substantial differences that might be supposed to mark a person on the outside – what they think about things, what their interests are, the contents of their unique history – are relinquished. As their differences are vitalised through church living, the brothers and sisters swap content for form. Differentiation is much more about how one speaks, when, and where, than about what one speaks. 'We all speak the same thing,' church members say.

The wall and the galaxy: different differentiations

Despite this neat ontological picture, I want to move forward by highlighting the tensions that can arise through the two distinct kinds of difference attended to in the church, differentiation and diversity. Diversity is a primary difference to be decomposed; differentiation is a secondary difference which provides meaning to the whole enterprise of the church. While one arm of the church's history is about decomposing denominational, cultural, individual diversity, the other is more attuned to celebrating differentiated difference. The sometimes subtle differences between these two orientations can give rise to fissures such as those that arose between brothers Jin and Jim. Indeed, in my observations, having several years' experience in both, it is generally in North America and Western Europe that the need to decompose, or 'blend' away, difference is emphasised. This was brought home to me in a contrasting pair of interviews.

In researching for my undergraduate dissertation, I interviewed members of the church in the UK. Lily was one of the interviewees. She is an Iranian who went to high school and university in California, and has completed the church's 'full-time Training in Anaheim' (FTTA). When I asked if she could clarify the church notion of 'blending', she referred me to Leviticus 2:1–16 where the Israelites' preparation for a sacrificial meal offering to God is described. Here, the ingredients are crushed together and then blended into a paste using oil. These ingredients are the cultural and personality differences between 'fellowshipping saints', she said. These 'natural dispositions' (in churchspeak) are not ground away, but into each other through participation, she explained, which enables the flow of the Spirit (the oil). Lily gave a real-life example of this understanding. She spoke of 'a brother' who, whilst they were reading of the Biblical Persian conquest of Babylon at a weekly meeting she attended, said something like 'Oh those blooming

Iranians.' This split Lily in two: on the one hand as an Iranian she was offended, incensed even; on the other, she felt the comment was an opportunity to 'erase her old self'.

On the back of this, I asked Lily whether she was worried about being 'blended away', of 'losing her identity' through her incorporation into the Body of God. In her answer, she used the metaphor of the wall running around the circumference of the millennial city of God. Where the members of the Body are the 'living stones' (1 Peter 2:4–5) of this wall, one is what one is by virtue of one's position within the wall. She assured me that she did not 'want God to make a bunch of Christ-robots'. She emphasised instead that only *she* could occupy her particular place in the wall, not because this was a predestined space reserved for her 'in heaven' but exactly by virtue of her spiritual growth as a member of the Body. This is a difference defined by positionality, emerging through structured integration as a 'brick' in the holy 'wall', a striking image of the perfected church self.

In Taipei, thinking of this same encounter, I asked brother Zhou, who a loosely associated church affiliate (a 'church friend' (*zhaohui pengyou*)) described to me as 'the president of the church', a very similar question. He saw blending as a great but necessary sacrifice, but for different reasons. Over the course of our conversation, I asked him whether he ever worried about being turned into a 'Christ robot'. He laughed hard while looking at me with utter confusion, 'No, I don't,' he replied as the laughter subsided. I told him about Lily, and suggested that maybe 'losing one's identity' is a 'particularly Western concern'? The sentiment of his reply was 'Have you *met* church members?! They're as different as different can be!' He was obviously right, and I started to feel silly even broaching the topic. He did give me another image to think with, however. He said, 'The glory of this star is different from the glory of that one, though we will all shine like a star.' This was not a difference defined by position but rather one illuminated, vitalised, with a common source or substance.

Still, sacrifice was certainly involved, this time in terms of a Taiwanese, not Iranian, self. 'I always need to deny myself,' brother Zhou explained:

> Nowadays we try to be blended together, for example seven feasts a year, we need to overcome the jetlag, the difference of language, of culture, of race, we need to try to be blended together, it is really the experience of the cross, I can have a much better experience of myself if I stay in Taiwan.

The problem of primary difference, for brother Zhou, arose when he left Taiwan. Unlike for Lily, it was not an everyday aspect of the churchlife. The two different emphases can result in quite radically different church experiences. In one 'short truth talk' (*zhenli duanjiang*) available on YouTube, a Taiwanese church elder describes how difficult his 30 years living overseas had been before God 'took pity' on him and 'blew' him back to Taiwan.

'I really envied you here' (*wo zai ouzhou kankan nimen, wo jiu hen xianmu*), he tells the audience. 'You don't know how good you have it in Taiwan' (*ni dou bu zhidao zai taiwan duo mengfu*). The comparative ease and richness of the churchlife in Taiwan is well known across localities around the world. Growing up it was imagined as a kind of church paradise, flowing with brothers and sisters perpetually in their spirits – a starkly contrastive image with the reality of churchlife in the UK, embattled, minuscule, and surrounded by ignorance and ill will, being known among Christians, if at all, as a 'cult'.

Conundrum of coherence VII: (non)attunement to place

While Taipei was disorienting for many, for those who had migrated away from Taiwan, coming home was often a different experience. Such is the case for my friend, brother Aiguo, who was born in Taipei and first introduced me to the family with whom I lived there. At time of writing, he lives in the UK, but when he comes to visit Taipei, we wander around and he almost weeps in longing for the city that encompasses us. Through glass walls we vicariously taste steaming hotpots, dim sum dishes, and salty bowls of noodle soup. He is reunited with elements of himself that he had half forgotten. Riding the overground together, he laments the naivety with which he migrated to the UK. He thought he would part of a great Christian revival of the West. 'I haven't even saved one person,' he says, gazing out at the city.

As we take scooter rides together he and others point to the tastiest joints – the ancient bubble tea stand on Xindian lane with its eternal queue; the shrimp cake store down a nameless alley; to where they used to work – that nondescript office block on Wenshan road or the gargantuan army barracks in Neihu district; to a scooter repair shop, with the well-known owner lounging inside it; or to the secret residence of an ex-Prime Minister; to the school ground near the Yang–Xie home, where they used to play. These sights conjure up remembered tastes, faces, and tales, crystallised in the narratives that would often follow our driving past them.

The dishes, sights, and stories that Taipei's brothers and sisters are keen for me and other visitors to experience are what in part compose 'Taiwan' for them. It is disheartening if these flavours and images are not recognised as unique to this place: faces drop when we visitors suggest we have already come across them elsewhere. We thusly deny the special contributions these edible aspects of our hosts' sense of self have made to a shared world. Because Taipei's inhabitants are not nearly as international as those in London or Anaheim, the differences that Lily and others in the Western Hemisphere struggle over – culture, language, history – are less apparent here. The cityscapes of the West are not so deeply woven into the shared, unspoken make-up of 'the saints' there. Partly this is because they

are more likely to be domestic and international migrants to the city, but also because, unlike in Taipei, Western cities are too expensive to eat out in for every meal. The churchlives of the West are less interwoven with restaurants and city parks, not to mention hot springs and shrimp fishing farms.

In some respects, the felt unicity (the Taiwaneseness) of Taiwan, only masked by urban alienations, is enhanced in the church world. In the more controlled confines of the global church, Taiwan enjoys greater recognition than it generally does on the international stage outside them. The fact that there were 30,000 'brothers and sisters' gathered together for the Chinese-speaking international conference at Taipei arena, and not at Beijing stadium, places Taiwan, not China, at the heart of the Chinese-speaking world that really matters. In the church exhibition centre, on Xinyi Road, all the key localities of the church are labelled on a huge map of the world. All have church 'training centres'. Anaheim, California; Malabon, Philippines; Moscow, Russia; Hamilton, New Zealand; Jakarta, Indonesia; Seoul, Korea; London, England; Bangkok, Thailand; Subang Jaya, Malaysia; Mexico City, Mexico; Hong Kong; Tokyo, Japan. 'Taipei, Taiwan' is labelled 'a nursery for the spread of the Lord's Recovery'. In the church-world, Taiwan is the origin-place of everywhere. It is the earthly source of all vitalised difference.

Through the church, Taiwanese members, in a sublimated way, re-centre their nation on a world stage (Feuchtwang 2014). Nonetheless, in joining the church-world, Taiwan is still not recognised by church members from outside it with the same kind of feeling as it is by fellow Taiwanese. In this sense, the original alienation from the city many feel prior to joining the church[12] is both alleviated, through participation in the churchlife, and exacerbated, through joining a world that does not recognise Taiwan apart from its being in the church, as we saw with the Taiwan-shaped stone on the beach (see Introduction). A desire for reconnection with *the* world becomes a concern for the oneness of *a* world, the church world, which further detaches one from the world one originally sought to reconnect with. Hence the persisting sense that everyone in Taipei is 'out to con' you, or the rejection felt by complaining neighbours, described earlier.

Still, my point is, the deeply shared world of Taipei, Taiwan for many brothers and sisters there makes celebrating differentiation comparatively easy and denying diversity relatively unnecessary. Aiguo's experience in the UK has been a completely different kind of difference to that of his home city, Taipei. 'I want to be so blended here with you in the UK,' he once said, 'that eventually nobody will know I am Taiwanese.' 'But they will still be able to tell from your face,' I responded carelessly. He could only rely with sad, despondent eyes. In later chats he told me in so many words of the racism he experienced in his work. Nobody seemed to want to speak to him. 'Tell me how to be more British,' he pleaded. Eventually he left his job, citing his observation that his boss was likely 'an instrument of Satan' as the cause. He has not found much luck elsewhere, though. My point again is that the difference to be

overcome in settings such as the UK is quite different, for native Taiwanese, than it is in Taiwan.

Many of the brothers and sisters in the UK, as in the US, are first- or second-generation migrants. One can see why the emphasis there is so much more upon decomposing the differences of 'culture' and 'human nature'. The experience of oneness there, despite what Ni and Li's ministry says, is often as much about uniting disparate individuals as it is about experiencing oneness as the shining of the same source through different dispositions and experiences as in Taiwan. Often 'localities' in the UK, US, Hong Kong, and elsewhere are split for many meetings between 'Chinese-speaking saints' and 'English speaking saints', effectively creating – though I am sure this would be denied on principle by many – two different 'churchlives', with two different emphases on difference: one kind of difference to be blended away, the other to be vitalised through the exercises in organic oneness.

These different emphases lead to different kinds of conundrum. For localities of the Western Hemisphere, it is often the kinds of conundrums of confrontation and conflict over differences of language, culture, and identity we saw with Lily and her Iranianness. In the case of celebration of difference in Taipei, it is the conundrum of localism, or what some scholars in other Chinese-speaking contexts have called particularism (Jacobs 1979; Jenco 2015). To understand these terms takes some stepping back to consider the anthropology of Sino-Taiwanese sociality. With a grasp on this wider set of understandings we can make sense of those conundrums of coherence which seem distinctive to Chinese-speaking Christian contexts such as contemporary Taipei.

The Chineseness of differentiation

Famously, Fei Xiaotong (1992 [1947]), in his attempts to differentiate 'Western' and 'Chinese' 'modes of association' (*geju*), depicted the former as 'organisational' (*zuzhi*), using the imagery of hay bales stacked in a barn, and the latter as 'differential' (*chaxu*), using the image of the ripples a stone makes when dropped into water. Westerners, being 'individualistic', Fei held, were like discrete entities piled up into groups and institutions like hay bales. The Chinese, he held contrastively, are 'egoistic', with families, friends, and associates forming around the 'I' like the concentric circles of the ripples of the dropped stone. While Western life consisted of organisations, in which roles and rights were pre-defined, Chinese social life was composed of extensive 'networks' not thought to pre-exist the relations they were composed of. Neither holistic nor individualistic, the Chinese person sought to extend their influence through 'particularistic ties' (see Jacobs 1979), captured most clearly in the concept of *guanxi*, which Yang (1994) glosses as 'the art of social relationships'. Fei crystallised this picture of the Chinese conception of self and others using

the image of a spider's web, expanding outwards from the spider in the middle. The larger one's web, in the 'Chinese' conception, the more successful one is as a social person.

More cautious than Fei of over-generalising, recent ethnographic descriptions nonetheless confirm, as well as enrich and diversify, his picture of particularistic relations, of *guanxi*, at the heart of much of Chinese social life. Writing about life in the village of Fengjia in (Witness Li's home province of) Shangdong, Andrew Kipnis theorises *guanxi* using Marcel Mauss' notion of a 'total social phenomenon', which, Mauss held, was 'at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic, morphological and so on' (1967, p. 76, in Kipnis 1997, p. 23). *Guanxi* in Fengjia, in the form of gift giving, everyday etiquette, and the *kou-ou*ing that takes place at weddings and funerals, 'simultaneously create[s] … human feeling and material obligation' (Kipnis 1997, p. 23). With skilful timing, apt comportment, and in appropriate quantities, Kipnis tells us, borrowing from Sun Lung-kee (e.g. Sun 1991), these acts of *guanxi* create 'magnetic fields of human feeling' (Kipnis 1997, *passim*), which simultaneously co-constitute both social groupings and individual subjectivities along hierarchical, particularistic lines.

Yunxiang Yan's influential book, *The Flow of Gifts* (1996), shows *guanxi* to be equally central to life elsewhere in rural China, while his later work (e.g. 2020) argues that the process of 'individualisation' that has arisen with China's decades of rapid modernisation nonetheless cannot be understood apart from continuing practices of *guanxi* and the hierarchical, particularistic ties they create. Correlatively, Li Zhang's (2020) ethnographic depictions of China's recent '*psy* fever' shows that it is (group) psychotherapies which focus upon the psychological effects of particularistic kinship ties that are especially popular. Mayfair Yang's (1994) classic depictions of the 'art' of *guanxi* in urban China shows it to be no less prevalent there than in the countryside. If anything, *guanxi* networks in the city are denser and the obligations to reciprocate and recognise hierarchal, particularistic ties more intense.

Susan Bregnbaek (2018) describes house church Christians in Beijing who see their conversion to Christianity as a means of escape from an intensely competitive society over-saturated with the obligations of *guanxi*. In Kipnis' terms, we might say that this is *guanxi* that has lost its *ganqing*, its 'human feeling', retaining only obligation. 'It's all about *guanxi*', Bregnbaek's Christian interlocutor complains, describing the 'stressful' sense that everyone in Beijing always wants something in return. In contrast, Bregnbaek explains, for this young man, 'Christian relationships were based on autotelic values – friendship for the sake of friendship – rather than *guanxi*' (2018, p. 181).

Others have argued that a key attraction to Christian conversion in Taiwan and China alike is as much 'social' as it is 'spiritual' (Cao 2005; Fiedler 2010; Kao 2009; Yang 1998). Networks of *guanxi* relations are perhaps more patrilineal in Taiwan than China, comparative work has shown (Remmert 2018), but no less present (e.g. Wang 2013). Like Bregnbaek, Andrew Abel argues

that converts to Protestantism in Taiwan are attracted by the prospect of favours and gifts which 'confound the traditional Chinese manner of building social networks' in being done 'anonymously, to perfect strangers, with no expectation of return, and to persons of lower status' (2006, p. 161). 'It is as if', Abel writes, 'the Chinese Christians are treating everyone in their social world (i.e. other Chinese Christians or potential converts) as members of the same clan, and, in the process, undermining balanced reciprocation of favours as the basis for most network ties' (2006, p. 171). In the terminology of the church, this is pure organicism without organisation, pure reciprocity and social flow without emotional obligation, wilful machination, or the calculative thought of 'the mind'.

In practice, however, I have found the role of *guanxi* to be less clear cut in the form of Chinese Christianity I describe than these authors suggest. *Guanxi* was certainly used in Taiwan to attract converts. One church sister held a crèche in her workplace so that she could introduce parents and workmates to the church. Another sister, who sold cloth in the market, gave certain customers better deals if they agreed to attend a church meeting. Teresa Zimmerman-Liu (2017), an ex-Taiwanese-American church member of 30 years and long-time translator of Witness Li, describes scenarios in which Li himself engaged in the art of *guanxi* to recruit new converts. She describes, for instance, Li's encounter with her own former father-in-law, Ah-tsang, 'a barely literate peasant' whose son, Ah-yi, was 'one of the Chinese maintenance workers in [Li's] California publishing company' (2017, p. 71). Ah-yi also did work on Li's sizeable home, which appears to have had an orchard and needed to be large enough to accommodate his eight children.

Zimmerman-Liu describes, with barely concealed awe, Li's 'skilful use of *guanxi* rituals' (2017, p. 72) in welcoming Ah-tsang to his home, including respectful naming practices, guest–host and greeting etiquette, and gift-giving at a time of illness. Li's high social position as a scholar lent his artful deference to Ah-tsang all the more power such that the old man, previously hostile to Christianity, 'stopped performing rites of ancestor worship … would pray to Jesus in times of distress … [and even] … encouraged his nieces and nephews to become Christians' (2017, p. 72). As with the converts described by Bregnbaek and Abel, the power of Li's *guanxi* lay in the extent to which it deviated from custom, in which social inequalities such as that between Li and Ah-tsang would be generally maintained. Referring to the previous, failed attempts of other church members to convert Ah-tsang, Zimmerman-Liu concludes that '[b]ecause [he] gave Ah-tsang much face with his skilful use of *guanxi* rituals, [Li's] few sentences carried more weight than hours of talking by others' (2017, p. 72). Thus, the traditional, hierarchical, particularistic logics of *guanxi* become the existential ground from which the proselytising power of Chinese Christianity here emerges.

The difference between church and non-church relations is often less attractive to those who occupy relatively high social positions in

Chinese-speaking society than Ah-tsang. I once discussed with uncle Yang and some 'church friends' in his living room the church habit of calling everyone 'brother'. The church friends, all men of uncle Yang's generation, found the prospect of referring to younger, less qualified church men as 'brothers' to be a strong impediment to joining the group. The conversation turned to me and what I should call my host father. There were suggestions that I call him 'father' (*fuqin*) or even 'daddy' (*baba*) Yang, not without some giggling, before 'uncle Yang' (Yang *shushu*) was settled on. Many younger 'saints' in fact refer to older saints as 'uncle' (*shushu*) or 'auntie' (*ayi*), reflecting the relational, hierarchical naming practices that Kipnis (1997, pp. 32–37) and others (e.g. Blum 1997) describe as a hallmark of Chinese social worlds constituted through *guanxi*.

Nonetheless, Zimmerman-Liu argues that traditional *guanxi* has been 'reconstituted' in 'the Local Church'. Alongside other forms of, often anonymous, church help and reciprocity today, she describes the weekly potlatch, termed 'love feast',[13] as it occurred in 1950s Taiwan when wealth disparity was much greater than now. The brothers and sisters would bring their contributions in metal lunchboxes. Though everyone would fill their lunchbox with 'the best meal they could afford', it was obvious from both the box and its contents which of them came from poor households and which from rich households. The lunchboxes would be redistributed during lunch so that the poorer church members received the richer meals. Zimmerman-Liu theorises this as an 'expanded view of *guanxi* as a group process' (2017, p. 79) rather than a set of personalised, dyadic, hierarchical processes.

Conundrum of coherence VIII: particularistic organicism

The only time I experienced rejection from group 5, hall 34, of the church in Taipei, who were otherwise refreshingly accepting of my long hair, beard, earring, and even unbelief, for a group that one observer describes elsewhere as being 'rather "square"' (Goetchius in LSM 1995, p. 126), was when I forgot to bring back gifts for the group from a trip to Thailand. I received a few cold shoulders and suffered the silent treatment for at least a few days. Nonetheless, using the terminology of Putnam and Goss (2002), Zimmerman-Liu concludes that this transformation to group *guanxi* 'makes the Local Church *guanxi* network "inward looking and bonding" as opposed to "outward looking and bridging"' (2017, p. 79). This is a shift, in my terms, from the urban alienations of extrinsic diversity to the vitalisation of intrinsic differentiation.

Again, however, this process of internalising, vitalising difference, rooting it in a common, anonymous oneness, is not as easy as some of the above scholars make it sound. Using *guanxi* to attract newcomers is one thing, the reproduction of hierarchical particularistic ties within the church is another.

While internal demographic, atmospheric, dispositional, and even linguistic and cultural differences were celebrated in the church, there were other kinds of difference within the church that evidently blocked rather than filtered any flow of oneness.

Uncle Yang was as playful as they come. I came to see our basketball, table tennis, and badminton playing, and the churchlife, as not too dissimilar: each was about keeping something inseparable from the participatory self afloat. However, during meetings which were not just a small coterie of church brothers, he took on an almost comically austere manner. Often when someone was 'sharing' (*fenxiang*) something in a meeting and they were laughing about it, they would turn to brother Yang and defer, 'But of course you know better brother Yang,' and he would simply nod unsmilingly. I got the sense that he found this role, the role of elder, rather tiring and would send his wife to take his place in certain meetings and she would participate with an air of borrowed authority.

Yet higher than elders in the denied hierarchy of the church are 'the co-workers' (*tonggong*) of Ni and Li (who are known as 'present-day apostles'). In Taiwan, those who are still alive are certainly revered. One brother Liu who I met in Southern Taiwan, came to the island before Witness Li, to begin setting up the *Taiwan Gospel Bookroom*. After I and some church members from Jingmei spent an evening with him, we dropped him off at his own residence. Those I was with stood in a line and asked for brother Liu's blessing. It seems that there is a scale of reverence for those who are closest historically to the origins of the church. There is some discrepancy in the approach of members to this implicit system. Some get frustrated with others for treating the co-workers with too much reverence ('He's just a brother!' is the typical frustrated response to perceived fawning over leaders). Others simply acknowledge a hierarchy without worry.

All this is to say that, while primary difference is not often a problem in Taiwan, the difference created and perceived through particularistic ties does become problematic for some, not least Witness Li himself.

Conundrum of coherence IX: blending

'Blending' was a term coined by Li towards the end of his life, in the mid-1990s. Until then the principle of church 'local autonomy' had been strongly promoted. In contrast to the 'Christianity' that the church defined itself against, there was supposed to be no organisational headquarters or central administration binding 'localities' (branches) together. Apostles (Ni and Li) and co-workers (their inner circle) could visit, encourage, and even admonish those in the localities, but unlike local 'elders' they had no authority there as such. However, by the end of his life, Li was worried that each locality was becoming 'its own little cosmos (*tianxia*)' as he put it in one of his characteristically rough fellowships with elders and co-workers in Taipei, in 1985.[14] Each

locality, he claimed, was developing its own organisational hierarchy in which no one questioned elder authority.

The notion of blending speaks to Li's eschatological principle that 'the church', as an infrastructure and earthly necessity for oneness, will eventually become redundant, leaving only 'the Body of Christ', composed of pure 'organic', 'spontaneous', 'flowing' oneness, without infrastructural stabilisers. Blending is the enactment of that eschatological desire in the present as a counter to the fracturing of the church into multiple independent cosmoses, each with their own 'dialects' (*tuhua*), becoming 'strange' (*qiguai*), Li says, not 'seeing the divine and mystical culture', not speaking 'the divine and mystical language' of 'the divine and mystical realm' of the Body of Christ.[15] As we see ahead, the very roots of organic oneness in Chinese particularistic, relational sociality, however, makes this an ever-present possibility.

Kerry Brown (2018) notes that within the Chinese Communist party Fei Xiatong's image of the spider's web was used directly to illustrate the 'selfish', particularistic mode of association the party wanted, and wants, to co-opt into a nation-focused collectivistic model of personhood. Stafford (1992) writes of the Taiwanese state co-opting familiar terms into its nationalist rhetoric to shift citizen's focus away from particularistic devotion to mothers to nationalistic sacrifice for Taiwan. Something structurally similar if phenomenologically very different is going on with the church in Taiwan. There, too, one is expected to reconceive of oneself as a component of a larger entity, this time not the state or the nation but God Himself. The church in Taiwan is conceived as something in-between Fei's two modes of association. On the one hand 'denial of the self', or 'the ego' (in Fei's terms), is imperative in some church circles, on the other 'organisation' is about the worst word you could utter in others.

The Chinese and Taiwanese governments are much less concerned with rooting oneness in the organic, so they are not confronted with the conundrum of conformity versus spontaneity to quite the same depth. To explain this conundrum further: in order to engage in blending, one needs to receive 'The Vision' (*yixiang*). The point of 'The Vision' is to rein in the localistic propensities of organic oneness whilst harnessing its ritual energy to a global aim. This vision, however, needs to be 'practised'. It leads to the kind of presence-oriented, organisational interaction that I explored in the Introduction, in the confrontations between brothers Jim and Jin. Brother Jim sought to enact a vision of oneness while brother Jin sought to extend the organic relations he had already cultivated. Brother Jim's approach to the churchlife, which Li implemented at the end of his life as 'the new way', is embodied in 'the full-time training'.

The Full-time Training in Taipei (known as FTTT) is one of 17 such training centres around the world for university graduates recommended by their local elder (such FTTA in Anaheim or FTTL in London). It entails being removed from one's particularistic ties for two years as a resident of

the training centre. The training schedule in Taipei seemed to be especially gruelling, involving memorising huge portions of 'the ministry', learning Greek and Hebrew, as well as a military-style daily schedule of early morning room inspections, cleaning floors, and 'serving' the church. 'I'm exhausted,' one exasperated trainee responded when I asked her how the training was going.

The aim of 'the training', which is often contrasted in promotional material with the aims of seminaries (*shenxueyuan*) and Bible schools (*shengjing xuexiao*) that educate professional ministers, is several-fold: to become 'saturated' (*jintou*) and 'transfused' (*jiaoguan*, *guanshu*) with 'the ministry' (*zhishi*) so that it effortlessly flows out of you; to 'perfect' one's character (*shou chengquan*) so that one is a clear and transparent 'empty vessel' (*kongxu de qimin*) for God; and to be trained in the workings of the church. When trainees and graduates visited us in group 5, there was a palpable change in atmosphere. Gone were the giggles and chats, and people were more reluctant to 'share' (*fenxiang*) in meetings in the presence of these super-humans, or 'overcomers' (*deshengzhe*) in church parlance.

There is a common notion in the church that, in terms of the speed of the 'perfecting' process, 2 years in the training is equal to 25 years spent in the regular churchlife. One trainee friend excitedly told me about all the 'truths' he was discovering through studying Li's writings. He was especially taken with Li's book, *Christ Versus Religion*. However, he was also worried about how his accumulation of 'knowledge' might be at the expense of his participation in 'life'. Thus, trainees themselves experience their own difficulties in navigating the difference between life and knowledge, exercise and practice, at the heart of Ni and Li's ministry. More importantly, others perceived them as being fundamentally different due to their training. This perceived difference in turn can block the organic flow, which, ideally, characterises everyday church ritual (which is never called 'ritual', of course).

The church often differentiates itself from 'Christianity' with the notion that 'everyone speaks', there is no hierarchy, only organic oneness. But this oneness often seems to be undermined by differences that arise precisely from Li's renewed efforts to implement 'blending' as a response to the re-emergence of hierarchy and particularistic relations. A conundrum indeed.

The figures that emerge through the training programme in the vision of oneness subsequently implemented tend to make people hesitate before speaking, if they speak at all. It is not difference per se that is the problem, but differences which block the flow, that change the quality of relationships from organic oneness to organisational command. 'You speak so well,' one church sister said adoringly to another into the silence that came after she had just been sermonizing about how it does not matter too much *what* we say but that we *should* speak, as speaking is the medium of God's organic circulation within the church. If the problems of cultural difference do not seem to plague the church in Taipei as they do in localities in the UK, reverence for those well-trained in the vision seems to create a different kind of conundrum

for coherence. The particularistic, hierarchical differences that emerge from the ground of organic oneness there often looks curiously like the kinds of difference that characterise Taiwanese society more generally. This, then, is another conundrum of coherence this book maps: that of different differences. Diversity outside the church, differentiation within. But there are differentiations too which are more or less conducive to the sublime sociality of organic flow.

Qualities of life

The 'life', the vitality, that church brothers and sisters so deeply value is a form of porous closure. On the one hand, it might be argued that all forms of life are this. Life began, one could say, when something differentiated between its own insides and its exterior, in whatever rudimentary, chemical-based way. This picture of life as a filtration system which metabolises extrinsic difference between itself and another into an internal differentiation within its own unified self, offers an alternative image for collective life to that of the integrated functional whole which organismic metaphors of society have assumed. Indeed, it suggests a way in which anthropologists might once again take up the body as an image of society.

Still these anthropologists would also need to concede that life is defined by boundaries in ways that various anthropologies of life, from Eduardo Kohn's (2013) semiotic anthropology of the Ecuadorian Amazon to more familiar biopolitical critiques of urban life, tend to forget. Life is intrinsically contained – death occurs when an organism's boundaries no longer hold it together, no longer differentiate. Even cosmopolitan, citizen-of-the-world, anthropological lives have their necessary boundaries that they may be less visible from within than from without.

On the other hand, the 'life' that church members hold dear is irreducibly non-universal. The feeling of it that Meirong described is known only to them. It has its own qualities, which must be experienced to be known and cannot be understood only through the abstract model of life as filtrating boundaries above. In this sense, this chapter contributes to recently emerging anthropologies which re-ask Erwin Schrödinger's (1944) powerful question – what is life? – in an ethnographic key. Different 'notions of vitality' between staff and patients at Sommeil Psychiatric Hospital in Yaoundé, Republic of Cameroon, Elizabeth Durham writes (2024), explain their differences. For staffers life is a responsibility, for many patients Durham spends time with it is relaxation.

Attending to life's plurality, Bhrigupati Singh has it, is to 'inhabit a flux and a movement of forces' (2018, p. 563). What do we mean by the ubiquitous phrase 'quality of life'? he asks (2015), in his account of material striving in rural India, and can we be sure everyone means it in the same way? If anthropology has long relativised 'culture', with its turn to questions of the 'good life'

(Ortner 2016; Robbins 2013) being the latest evidence for this, with life itself it has been slower on the uptake. To know the quality of someone's life itself is not just to codify that life in terms of the 'values' it is lived by but to attend to the irreducible, affective specificities of its inhabited flux and flow. It is to life as flux and flow that we turn in Chapter 2.

Notes

[1] Sister (*zimei*), or 'auntie' (*ayi*), Xie has six children ranging from their mid-teens to late twenties. Elder (*zhanglao*), or 'uncle' (*shushu*), Yang has two married sons, one living in Toronto and the other in London. Sister Xie's children come and go between her home and their father's on the other side of Wanqing Street.

[2] The sign reading 'Jesus is the head of this household' (*yesu shi zhe jia zhi zhu*) I have seen adorning church homes and businesses across Taiwan parallels the traditional Taiwanese reference to the Kitchen God (*zaojun*) as the 'master of the household' (*yi jia zhi zhu*, 一家之主, Stepanchuk and Wong 1991, p. 8).

[3] Wang (1974) writes that traditional Taiwanese homes have both a guest receiving room, where the ancestral tablets are kept, and a more private, family living room. The Yang–Xies also have a TV-watching room, where the family often relaxes, just behind the main living room where Bibles, books by Ni and Li, and church songbooks are kept neatly on shelves.

[4] My placement in the Yang–Xie home, and subsequent immersion in the church in Jingmei, was achieved via contacts I obtained through my father, who is a church 'elder' in the UK. Without this connection I do not think it would have been possible to conduct research with a group which has historically shunned outside inquiry. Witness Li is said to have been quite clear about the secrecy of the group. 'Unlike the True Jesus Church', wrote Swanson in 1970, 'this church has no publicly written history, no public documents, no tidy statistics ... "Our work", said Mr L[i], "is done in secret" ' (Swanson 1970, pp. 57–63). When I inquired directly from brother Zhou, described in Chapter 1, I was refused access to the data that I knew the church keeps on itself. Church members, however, are offered such data freely. During the New Year, everyone is given a booklet containing a statistical overview of the previous year – number of baptisms, financial reports (*caiwu baobiao*). As an active participant in the church in Taiwan, I was even involved in collecting such data (Breen 2019).

[5] Of course, other Christian groups in Taiwan call one another 'brother' and 'sister', and in fact use a vocabulary descendent from Ni's own.

Despite this and other apparent convergences with 'Christianity', however, I am writing about perceived differences here rather than 'objective' ones, whatever that means.

[6] An example of Li saying having more than one name is like having more than one moon, or being like a 'monster' with more than one body, can be found here: *Four Crucial Elements of the Bible – Christ, the Spirit, Life, and the Church,* Chapter 10, Section 3, accessed on 26 September 2019 via https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=30B4FD26DE

[7] The church has a distinctive musical style, similar at times to Western and Chinese opera, at others to sea shanties and traditional old hymns. It definitely does not sound like contemporary Christian 'praise and worship' songs. Most of the songs are written by Ni or Li, but there is a third, now-deceased, much celebrated church songwriter, Howard Higashi, the son of a Hawaiian sugar plantation foreman, of Japanese-Buddhist descent, who had studied to be a high school maths teacher before becoming Christian and devoting his life to the church at age 31. During one trip around Taiwan I attended following the 2015 conference, a documentary of his life was playing on repeat on the tour bus TV.

[8] See Fred (1975) for a detailed account of the 1966 church 'rebellion'.

[9] I did learn that the 1980s church rebellion in Taiwan is described by Li in organicist terms in his (Lee 1994a) book *The Fermentation of the Present Rebellion*. The initial approach to Titus Chu who initiated the rebellion and now leads his own ministry in Canada but who was set before then to become the next de facto leader ('apostle') of the church after Li, was to 'quarantine' him. I too was 'quarantined' as a teenager when I lost my faith on the church trip across the West Coast of America described in Interlude I. I have heard leading brothers describe the exercises of the churchlife as treating Christ as an 'antibiotic' which would remedy the spread of any such rebelliousness. Those who spend too much time alone accumulating spiritual knowledge are said to be 'cancerous' to the Body of Christ.

[10] The quote on my friend's wall about a divine and mystical culture is from Li's (Lee 1996) book, *How to Be a Co-worker and an Elder and How to Fulfill Their Obligations*, pp. 37, 61.

[11] The quote from Li about the atmosphere of a meeting is from *Lessons for New Believers*, Chapter 9, Section 4, accessed 28 July 2019, via www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=3EB6D9E40F

[12] More often than encountering the church as a contrast to the city per se, is the post facto realisation of this contrast's significance in brothers' and sisters' lives, as a large proportion of 'the saints' in Taiwan are 'church kids' (*zhaohui haizi*).

[13] 'Love feast' is a Methodist term (Baker 1957), its use in the church probably stemming from Watchman Ni's Methodist upbringing (Kinnear 1973).

[14] See Li's rough 1985 fellowship in Taiwan promoting the concept of blending here: Gospel Book Room (2020) '在配搭中真誠說話》話語的供應與召會的擴增', YouTube video. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VtQikH4CEo&list=WL&index=120 [accessed 11 June 2026].

[15] One can read about Li's justifications for the need for blending here: Lee 1996, p. 224; see also Zimmerman-Liu 2014.

Interlude I. Why Chinese Christianity?

What I have not discussed so far is why I embarked on this project to begin with. To – as I often joke – spend years of my life studying and writing about 'my mum and dad's church', even if it did take place elsewhere than home and in another language. Before I undertook it, one academic supervisor told me he liked everything about it, but the awkward intimacy at the heart of it. The suspicion that the project has been motivated by less than academic reasons has haunted me ever since.

The proximate motivation, I know, was opportunism. Before finally arriving at university in my early twenties, my only employment had been various forms of manual labour. I had enjoyed the work itself but struggled with the company. Growing up in 'the church' perhaps over-sensitised me to the rough banter of the building sites on which I cut cables and held ladders and to the stream of expletives circulating through the pub kitchens I chopped tomatoes and washed plates in. As graduation neared for my undergraduate degree, the prospect of returning to the working world as I had known it loomed large and leering. I must continue in anthropology at any cost, I told myself.

Having grown up in somewhat of a cultural vacuum, there was only one thing I felt I knew enough about to dare propose studying to potential PhD funders, supervisors, and host institutions – 'the church'. Besides, I had already written my undergraduate dissertation on 'the church in Nottingham'. 'This is a potential PhD project,' my dissertation assessor had said. I needed no more encouragement than that.

But these pragmatic justifications seem dubious to me now. The ultimate motivation for the project likely lies elsewhere. Possibly with an adolescent moment climbing California's San Bernardino Mountains in a minibus, peering out at the unfamiliar landscape.

At sixth form college, I made friends with a strange set of creatures: atheists. At first, I was incredulous that the obviousness of God's existence was not apparent to them. We had countless verbal tennis matches in which I became more and more impassioned and frustrated and they more amused and bemused. Lasting friendships were formed nonetheless, but neither side, after two years, were really convinced by the other. In the summer between college and university, I travelled around the West Coast of North America with members of the China and Taiwan-based transnational Christian movement my parents had joined a few years earlier. During this trip, there was a distinctive moment when God disappeared for me. I was staring out of the

window of a minibus winding its way up a mountain in the San Bernardino National Forest in California, and suddenly he was no longer there. After a life of inner conversations with God, an intimate, everyday part of my own mind just disappeared. It was as if he had dropped off the side of the mountain. I felt lighter, and free, but also experienced a distinct intermingling of physical and existential vertigo over the next few hours. As I used an electric leaf blower to clear the roofs of the ski resort chalets at the top of the mountain, owned by our Christian host, who quickly put us to work, I faced, for the first time, terrified but exhilarated, my own finitude.

A church brother, like a second father to me, picked me up from the airport on my return. It was not long before I was outed. I cannot remember what I said on the drive home, but it was unpolished – 'None of it is real!' Something along those lines. The brother thought I was being 'shallow'. It is only now that I agree with him, if only because the realness I referred to then neglected the only reality that I am sure of now – the reality of experience. The brother's son, a few years my junior, who I had known all his life, sat in the back. 'But we're brothers,' he pleaded, 'how can you do this to me?'

When I arrived home, I avoided everyone. It is church habit that whenever 'young people' go to conferences and other church trips that they 'share' what they 'enjoyed' at their home locality. My sharing was a long time coming as I exhausted every excuse not to attend. Eventually, my father cornered me. The truth burst out and he was hurt. 'You're not special you know,' I recall him saying, 'everyone doubts'. What has stayed with me longest is his parting word – 'but you'll be like everyone else'.

I did not choose not to believe, it just happened. Probably, via the cumulative stress of affective dissonance. I had failed to convert any one of my newfound atheist friends, and knowing their damned fate it no longer felt possible to enjoy church living. A girlfriend who refused to 'call on the Lord' was likely the final unconscious straw.

I think I hoped this project would be a means of 'not being like everyone else'. A thread to connect me and my father across the chasm of unbelief. If it has not done this, it has allowed me to weave new threads, across the Taiwan Strait, the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, through centuries of Chinese history and over subdiscipline divides that separate the study of one tradition, religion, or area to the exclusion of the other, and between anthropology and questions of vitality. That is enough, I think.

2. Finding the flow: everyday churchlife in Old Taipei

'Yi!' (*one!*)

clack – clack – thud

'Er!' (*two!*)

clack – clack – thud

'Saaaan!!' (*threee!!*)

clack – clack – thud

'Si!!!' (Four!!!!)

thud – thud – thud

This is the sound of the Jingmei 'church running team' (*zhaohui paodui*) that emerges from a background noise of panting bodies, shuffling shorts and evening traffic, recorded on the phone jiggling up and down in my breast pocket in May 2015. We take it in turns to chant to ten while running in step with each other along the wide banks of Jingmei river, under the shadow of its graffitied flood defences. Doing this several times a week, we feel as much like an army corps as an exercise club, which is indeed no accident because elder Li, a second lieutenant in the Taiwanese army, is our most enthusiastic member.

When we first began running together – and referring to ourselves, with a smile, as 'the church running team' – we were indistinguishable from the stream of other evening runners running along this popular route. Some of us lagged behind, others sprinted ahead, catching up with one another now and again to exchange a word of conversation, exhaustion, or encouragement. Gradually, however, guided by elder Li, we learned to run at a shared pace and rhythm. Not one set by any particular body, but rather composed out of our collective anticipations of our own and one another's combined capabilities.

We took it in turns to count the beat of our feet, and in so doing composed a collective rhythm which kept us together and moving forward at the same time. Our words were not quite an expression of intention nor that which we 'put into practice'. Our *yi!...er!...san!* became the sound of our mutuality, expressing and feeding it at once. Through multimodal rhythm, emerging from our mouths but interlaced with our whole, shared being, we attuned to one another, and in our

attunement we recognised one another as forming a common unit. Our oneness was exercised, rather than us putting an idea of it into practice.[1]

Participation fluctuates week by week, but our core members, besides elder Li and I, include a taxi driver, a primary school teacher, a software engineer, a Korean-born businessman, a receptionist, and a civil servant. Sometimes elder Li's daughter and his younger classmates from army college join us too (*xuedi* in Chinese and referred to as 'church friends' (*zhaohui pengyou*) rather than 'saints' (*shengtu*) given their non-baptised status). We are a small section of group 5 of hall 34 of the church in Taipei. This chapter describes life in this section on a finer grain than that of Chapter 1. It uses the living metaphor of our church running team to introduce 'social flow' as the core exercise and ideal of the church, but also to explore the tensions between the organic and organisational as they emerge from social flow's unfolding.

Below, I describe the church activities I participated in and helped maintain during my time in Taipei. Carrying forward the concept of 'exercise' (as opposed to 'practice'), I show how these activities aim at something analogous to the mutual attunement we achieved on our marching jogs along Jingmei river. If we ran towards a kind of non-individualised bodily flow along the riverbank, the 'churchlife' in Taipei, I argue, works towards a non-individualised flow of words, actions, and, ultimately, lives.

The pages ahead theorise this non-individualised flow characteristic of church exercises in three theorical keys: rhythm, social flow, and 'coordination'. These three keys are each coupled with a moment in the churchlife calendar. Namely, mornings, midweek meetings, and Sundays, respectively. Thus, the chapter does not aim at a fully comprehensive depiction of the churchlife in all its dynamic detail. Rather, it shows how that core tension of the organic and the organisational plays out in the everyday lives of church brothers and sisters.

Running together in mutual attunement is not a well-circulated metaphor for organic oneness within the group. (We will arrive at such imagery soon.) This is possibly because it is not particularly Biblical. But it may also be because it is quite a complex metaphor to articulate, only being really felt in its enactment. Nonetheless, in its contingent emergence, the church running team serves this chapter as a living metaphor for the church as a whole, arising as it did as a happenstance of my fieldwork. Indeed, such contingency is not unknown in the churchlife.

The apparently peripheral is often central to what this group is about. In church meetings the surprises of living become the means by which Li and Ni's words, interlaced with scripture, become 'life' and 'nourishment', the 'organic' substance of the Body of Christ, or the 'vitalised difference' of Chapter 1. The brothers and sisters use happenings from their lives to 'share' with others how the 'churchlife' (*zhaohui shenghuo*) and the ministry that guides it has touched, moved, enlightened them. Stories about failed exams, overcooked chickens, and household disputes become the means by which 'the reality of the spirit', which I theorise as social flow in this chapter, is reiterated and experienced. I employ our church running team in the same way, just extending

my 'sharing' in a new direction, towards the readers of this book, and in a different key, that of ethnographic description and anthropological analysis.

There is also a difference in kind as well as degree, however. Churchlife sharings unequivocally report and extend the 'organic' aspects of this Christian life, eliding 'the organisational'. I, on the other hand, report on the difficulties of excising the organisational from life in 'the church'. Thus, I employ the borderline problematic role of elder Li in managing our otherwise impromptu exercise club analogically, below. My writing in this sense may not nourish the brothers and sisters in the way Ni and Li's ministry often does, this ministry after all being 'absolutely organic, absolutely of life', as we heard in the Introduction. But this is the price I pay for being anthropological, as one brother Zhu will tell me soon.[2]

Conundrum of coherence X: the organic, the organisational

The church running team did not only run. We hiked and swam too. It was elder Li who invariably initiated these outings. It often seemed that he brought with him an authority that he was used to asserting in his role as a military commander. Our church running team was, to my knowledge, the first of its kind and initiated by elder Li when he learned that I regularly went jogging alone – perhaps his way of disciplining me out of my 'individualism' (*geren zhuyi*, another dirty church word). He evidently had his own reasons though for founding our spur-of-the-moment club. He is rather self-conscious about his ageing body.

Alongside teaching his classes in political warfare, he is currently retraining in preparation for an expected promotion (he feels pressure because his

Figure 2.1: Watching elder Li swim



Source: Author.

father is a retired general). At the army college where he is studying, he has formed a swimming team with his fellow students. They have been practising hard for an upcoming intra-college swim tournament. Crowding around his laptop one evening, he proudly shows us, of hall 34, group 5 of the church in Taipei, a video, edited by young sister Liu, a film studies student, of the big day (Figure 2.1). 'Look at that pudgy tummy!' (*kana, duzi hen pang*!) sister Sun yells as elder Li appears on the screen in his swim trunks. 'I didn't know monks were allowed in the army!' jokes brother Jin (*jun you heshanga, buzhidaola*!), perpetually proud of his own thick hair starkly contrastive to elder Li's. We laugh, but elder Li is not amused, he threatens to turn the laptop off, so we stifle our mirth and continue with more respectful expressions of interest and admiration, exchanging only silent smiles and raised eyebrows. We block our flow to respect his authority.

Once, we sat in the municipal sauna with a few brother-attendees from our exercise club, one Chinese, the others Taiwanese. The heavy, humid air drew us into conversation with those non-brothers we were sweating with, about Beijing, its inconveniences and its pleasures. Suddenly, elder Li asserted awkwardly, 'We are Christians!' (*women shi jidutu!*). It had nothing to do with the conversation and killed it instantly. 'Why did he say that?' I asked one of the brothers, as we followed brother Li to the changing rooms moments after his outburst. 'Beats me' (*wo ye bu zhidao*), the brother replied shrugging his shoulders. During our church runs and trips to the swimming pool, elder Li worked hard to keep us coordinated, making sure we stretched together by the poolside before jumping in, helping us teach and encourage church members who were less fit and able, keeping us in step through army-style running chants. During church outings, he would also work hard to keep the group as a group, making sure no one wandered off in sub-groups or on their own. At times there were grumblings – 'Don't listen to elder Li,' one brother whispered as we climbed out the pool once, at our elder's bidding, 'your front crawl is fine.' In the sauna that afternoon, feeling responsible for sustaining our oneness, I think elder Li responded with panic to its fading outlines. But to some it felt we were being organised rather than organic.

So, the image of our flowing on our feet together, along the bank of Jingmei river, illustrates here that which church ritual strives for, through its own coded words and actions. Namely, 'the organic'. In parallel, I want the conditions under which our weekly flowing feet arose together – conditions often assertively set by elder Li – to illustrate the frequent sense of the organic's putative opposite that arises in churchlife settings. Namely, 'the organisational'. The point is less that organic flow and organisational discipline so often go together, than to explore what it takes in the everyday workings of 'the churchlife' and those who live it to attune to one aspect of collective life to the exclusion of the other. Or rather, what it takes to experience the organic as so primary that the organisational, as secondary, becomes something else altogether going as it does in church circles under completely different terms. Terms such as 'coordination' (*peida*), 'serving' (*shifeng*), labouring (*laoku*),

'functioning' (*gongneng*), or 'inner operations' (*neili yunxing)*, versus 'outward work' (*waimian gongzuo*).

The figure of elder Li and his relationship to our impromptu exercise club parallels the figures of Ni and Li and their living 'co-workers' (*tonggong*). It is easy to see them as the 'leaders' and the rest of us as followers, them as the clergy, us as the laity. But this perspective arises precisely from the mode of being that church participants describe as 'the soul', with its resultant 'degradations' – 'organisation', 'Christianity', 'religion'. From an organic perspective, leadership and laity alike arise from a common, flowing source, and express that source equally, if not in the same way. This chapter describes the arrangements, attitudes, and exercises by which church members in Taipei habitually resist the organisational mode of the soul, grounding and regrounding their 'churchlife' in the 'organic oneness' of 'the spirit', their terms for what I call below social flow. This perspective, we will see, in practice (or rather in exercise) reverses the roles of followers and leaders, a reversal leading to the apparently paradoxical condition of leading being a secondary means by which followers follow, or rather, flow.[3]

I thus offer an irreducibly situated outline of the church in Taipei, the most populous and long-standing 'locality' within Ni and Li's global following. I reintroduce this locality, where I conducted research from January 2015 to July 2016, and December 2022 to January 2023, as a microcosm of the group writ large.[4] The main aim of the chapter is to outline the conundrums of coherence that follow in the wake of pursuing social flow as the modus operandi of this group's spirituality. It explores the tensions between the 'organic' and the organisational as respectively foregrounded and backgrounded aspects of the group's lived sense of itself. This provides the ethnographic basis for Chapter 3, which describes how many church members understand organic oneness not to be, just, an emergent creation of mutually attuned gathered bodies but as a never-ending revelation of the 'essence' of the church.

Conundrum of coherence XI: repetition and repetitiousness

Morning rhythm: every day I spent in Taipei was occupied in some way with church activity. Early each morning I awoke to a cheesy ringtone. It was usually brother Jiazhi – elder Li's right-hand man, our 'responsible brother', and a regular member of our church running team who nonetheless wore boots and jeans to run in – on the other end, eager to begin 'morning revival' (*chenxing shengyan*). These are a set of spiritual exercises that begin with 'calling on the Lord' (*huqiu zhu*). Many church meetings begin with collectively calling on the Lord. In these contexts, it is done exuberantly, fists pumping, with abandon. It is likely why the group and its offshoots are often nicknamed 'the Shouters' (*huhan pai*) in China (Bays 2012; Irons 2018). But throughout the day one may also hear church members doing it quietly under their breath, in

the face of crisis or just to get through the daily grind of being alive – *oh zhu ye suuuu*. Calling on the Lord is the easiest way to 'exercise one's spirit' (*caolian ling*) and consists of repeating the phrase 'Oh Lord Jesus' (*O zhu yesu*) over and over, with quiet or loud enthusiasm. 'When we feel that we are down or low, we can lift and stir ourselves up by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus,' Witness Li said, calling it 'spiritual breathing'.[5]

Calling on the Lord with Jiazhi, who would respond to my groggy *wei?* ('hello?') with an *Ohh Zhu Yesuuu*, whilst still trying to remember who and where I am, gave me a sense of emerging into an awareness which was already laced with the fabric of church reality. One certainly does not feel oneself to be enacting, putting into practice, a prior set of thoughts or beliefs. Rather, I feel myself being reborn into a day already set to the rhythms of the churchlife: *Oh Zhu Yesuuu, amennn, oh zhu yesuuuu, amen* … And this indeed is the aim: to start each day by reinfusing oneself afresh with the 'substance' (*cailiao*, *benzhi*) of Christ, to forget everything you thought you knew the day before and to re-experience Christ's 'freshness' (*xinxian*) as organic, spontaneous, non-calculated 'flow' (*yongliu*).

The churchlife is also referred to as 'the Bodylife'.[6] Calling on the Lord with others, one exits the idiosyncrasies of one's own mind, emotion, body, and will. One 'enters the flow' of a larger Body of which one is a 'vessel' (*qimin*) through which 'the life of the Body', 'the Mingled Spirit' of humanity and divinity, also known as 'the pneumatic Christ', flows.[7] That deep, unthought part of you through which this flow occurs is one's 'spirit' (*ling*), the 'innermost organ' of the human being. The knowledge of which was lost, the brothers and sisters say, until re-revealed to Ni and Li.

This spiritual flow is invariably felt through repetition. Through repetitive church exercises, that is, like calling on the Lord. My morning revival partner brother Jiazhi, a software engineer who argues frequently with his denominational wife over their Christian differences, inadvertently demonstrated to me the contrast between 'the potentially deadening effects of the *repetitious*' and 'what might be seen as the accumulative, progressive character of the *repetitive*' (Bandak and Coleman 2019, p. 121, my emphasis). If church exercises are repetitive, Jiazhi's work life was, for him, excruciatingly repetitious.

He once exhibited his frustration through miming his life as a software engineer for a few brothers and sisters gathered at elder Li's home by repeating over and over the motions that characterised his work – tapping away on his computer keyboard, receiving instructions from his boss, tapping some more on his keyboard, receiving some more instructions from his boss, tapping away on his keyboard … As he did this he laughed hysterically. The rest of us, however, after some initial chuckling, fell silent while he laughed. I think we sensed that Jiazhi's laughter was not coming from a place of joy. That it masked an everyday, but deeply felt, pain. It was laughter which, like a Freudian joke, revealed too much.

I return to varieties of laughter soon. Here, I only point out the difference between the *repetitiousness* of many work lives in Taipei – where many church

members work obligatory unpaid overtime, with a very fragile social security net, and increasingly diminished family support, and feel the constant pressures of job market competition – and the *repetition*s of the churchlife. On the most banal level, church meetings occurring throughout the week become a kind of 'refrain', rhythmizing the otherwise 'boringness' or 'meaninglessness' (both frequently used terms in church testimonies to describe non-church lives) of everyday tasks. These everyday tasks in turn become grist for the vitalising mill of churchlife testimony. Moreover, they are infused with the lingering morning revival rhythmic vitality that precede them and laced with the building midweek anticipation of evening meetings which come after.

There is a sense in which the content of Ni and Li's ministry replicates that of work culture in Taipei, at least for the many white-collar brothers and sisters there. The ministry speaks of God's 'economy' (*jinglun*), his 'plan' (*jihua*), and 'the work' (*gongzuo*) to be carried out. The church is the 'corporate' (*tuanti*) Godman, there are 'conferences' (*tehui*) with 'outlines' (*dagang*, *tigang*) and lengthy 'registration' (*baoming*) processes. Church wear is strikingly similar to office wear, complete with white shirts and blouses, ties and tie pins (impressed with the church logo), pencil skirts and well-pressed trousers, side-partings and neatly tied buns, well-polished shoes, and clean-shaven faces. The manner of 'worship' in the group is, despite its loudness, relatively regimented, with flat palms on outstretched arms emphasising vital points. It seems to me that the power of the churchlife here lies in its capacity to rhythmise the otherwise bland and oppressive contents and aesthetics of modern life, which for many in overworked Taipei is near-synonymous with work life.

Rhythm as relative freedom

Unlike workaday tasks, church attendance is relatively freely chosen. There is an agency in turning up there that is not felt in attending work. 'How do you find your work?' I would often ask church attendees. I never heard any response other than, 'It's just work, it has to be done,' or something along those lines. I write '*relatively* freely chosen' intentionally though. If church members do not turn up to meetings several times in a row, 'responsible brothers', such as Jiazhi, will pay them a friendly 'visit' (*tanfang*) to encourage them to return.[8] I was never allowed access to them, but there are records of church attendance held in Xinji Building going back decades.

It seems to me that this sense of *relative* freedom in church attendance leads us from the repetitive more specifically to rhythm. Rhythm, like repetitiveness, has a sense of that which came before it and that which is to come. It both follows on and anticipates. Repetitive unlike repetitious repetitions are always slightly different from each other because of what comes before and after them. Rhythm, however, also has a sense of *continuous* becoming which makes it feel like a single unfolding process rather than an agglomeration of so many discrete instances.

More than this, though, rhythm seems to involve a sense of *relative* freedom. When we are rhythmised, in dance, through voice, musical instruments, through the pen, or in any everyday task that becomes rhythmised,[9] we have a strongly enthused sense of active participation, I venture. But we also have a complementary sense of being pulled along. For a human being, at least, this seems to be part of the pleasure of rhythm – the simultaneous sense of self-originating activity and of being moved by a force, a flow, beyond us.

We might think of this as a perfect balance between what anthropologists call 'structure' and 'agency' (e.g. Kipnis 1997). While the latter emphasises the capacity of individuals to act with their own volition, the former stresses the ways in which action is always shaped by the political, economic, and cultural structures that precede, condition, and surround it. Anthropologists have generally worn each other out arguing for one side over the other (Ortner 1984). Or, more often, in trying to find conceptual syntheses of the two, with Pierre Bourdieu's articulation of 'habitus' as the 'structuring structures' of the body being only the most famous (Bourdieu 1977). I would suggest, however, that how everyday people balance these two aspects of existence in their own lives, minds, and bodies is a more interesting question than how we analysts might reconcile structure with agency in our theoretical modes.

The structure–agency problem is the social scientific version of the philosophical conundrum over free will. Musings on rhythm stretch back just as far, and have just as much relevance for thinking through human life, in many eyes. 'All life is rhythmic', writes the philosopher Susan Langer (1953, p. 126). 'Rhythm', predicted the anthropologist E.T. Hall, 'will … soon be proved to be the ultimate building block not only in personality but also communication and health' (1983, p. 224n). He held, too, that 'the rhythm of a people may yet prove to be the most binding of all forces that hold human beings together' (1983, p. 156). Nonetheless, rhythm has never been posited, as far as I can discover, as a solution to social scientific, or philosophical, questions of freedom.

I think this is because for rhythm to be an answer to the question of freedom, it has to be felt, from the inside as it were. Social science, due to the 'science' bit, no doubt, is not always good at feeling for answers from the inside. A second problem is that feeling for rhythm is not straightforward. The sense of rhythm is not always, directly, sensory. It is not always immediately evident to the senses.

During my time in Taipei, I found myself drawn towards conducting my own 'rhythmanalysis' (Lefebvre 2004). Often exhausting my capacity to keep up with the content of what church members were saying (in Mandarin and sometimes in Hokkien), I found myself, in these moments, paying special attention to the rhythms of speech. Listening back to the city sounds I recorded from uncle Yang's rooftop, and to my recordings of church meetings, I found that rhythm revealed itself as what Yi Chen calls a '*meta-sense* which synthesises bodily and extra-bodily impressions' (2016, p. 2). That is, rhythm ties together other senses, touch, sight, smell, etc., into a distinctive

synaesthetic 'level of reality' (Chen 2016, p. 15), that may not be recognised by simply and directly attending to these more immediate sensations.[10]

If it is true, moreover, that '[t]he most characteristic principle of vital activity is rhythm' (Langer 1953, p. 126), it is also true that historically some have been more attuned to this rhythmic aspect of life than others (Bandak 2014; Peña 2017). It seems that rhythm has been the answer to the structure–agency 'problem' (perhaps, in fact, it has always been a conundrum) for many in Chinese-speaking life and history in particular. Haili You (1994a, 1994b), following Marcel Granet (2012 [1934], Chapter 3), suggests rhythm as an analytical starting point for understanding Chinese thinking in general and the body in Chinese thought in particular.[11]

After reviewing the various terms used by scholars attempting to characterise 'the Chinese world picture', she asks, '[b]ut why can we not use the term rhythm as the key to all these keywords: order, dance, cyclic recurrence, pattern, harmony, spontaneity, and of course "mysterious resonance"?' (1994b, p. 473). Wandering through Beijing, Perry Link (2013) notes that its signs and sounds are much more 'rhythm-conscious' than in non-Chinese places. 'I noticed a sign that was intended for pedestrians crossing Haidian Road', he begins,

> In other countries such a sign might have said 'Caution' or 'Look both ways.' But this one read: *Yi kan, er man, san tongguo* 一看，二慢，三通过, 'First look, then go slowly, then cross'. The phrase is not only rhythmic but exhibits the 1–2, 1–2, 1–2–3 pattern of syllables that is at least as old as mirror inscriptions of the Han period and that has pervaded not only elite poetry but folksongs, proverbs, and storytelling in many later eras (Link 2013, p. 8).

After reviewing several such examples, he goes on to muse: 'Whether or not they were used intentionally, the rhythms seemed to *add something* to the phrases they inhabited. What was it? Should we call it "meaning"? Can rhythms by themselves "mean"?' (2013, pp. 10–11).

If 'meaning' is not the word, then I suggest here that rhythm mediates structure and agency in a powerfully felt way. Rhythm is the route to the empowering paradox of the vitality, of the organic oneness, of the church for many brothers and sisters: 'the churchlife' is actively lived even as it lives itself out through you.

There are limitations to a rhythm focus, nonetheless. At least in the church in Taipei, rhythm is a means for, but not the end of church activity. To participate in rhythm one must enter it, and in doing so it eventually enters you. But rhythmic attunement to others, to oneself, to the world around, after a while, starts to feel more like 'flow'. When rhythmic action is repeated often enough it begins to feel effortless. This indeed is how many artists, athletes, and experts of all kinds describe their perfected activities, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2008 [1990]) tells us. They describe these activities as

effortless 'flow'. And indeed, 'flow' (*liu*) is the word the brothers and sisters most often use to describe church meetings. To join the rhythms of calling on the Lord and the other repetitive church exercises described below, is, in their words, to 'join the flow'. To disrupt those rhythms, by non- or misparticipation, is to 'block the flow'. In this next section, we turn to midweek meetings where rhythm turns to flow.

From rhythm to flow

Experiencing rhythm as flow is to feel the quantitative qualitatively. A central way in which church members speak about the quality of the churchlife is through the metaphor of eating. The opening section of the designated daily Morning Revival, for example, is entitled *Morning Nourishment* and is the most important bit. If short on time, many members just do this part, returning to complete the revival later in the day. The notion of nourishment is part of the church's equation between the spontaneity of divine life and 'eating the Word', logophagy. 'You don't analyse your food before you eat it do you? No, you just eat it.' I have heard this line many times for church members questioning my questioning of Li's ministry.

There is often little differentiation between eating the Word, eating 'the ministry', and eating God. As one devotee proclaimed at a church meeting, 'I realised that my problem was not with sin, or the self, or the world, but with eating. All my problems are solved when I just eat this ministry, when I eat the Lord!' (cue chorus of *amens*). A favourite children's song rejoices in 'eating Jesus every day', declaring, 'He's so sweet!' Another song sings of 'masticating Jesus', while another is ominously titled 'Some, these days would tell us that our Jesus is not food.' Witness Li referred to the group he helped found, at times, as 'the recovery of eating'.[12]

Each morning, then, members are expected to pair up, usually over the phone, and pray over and read through a designated section of 'the ministry' (*zhishi*) accompanied by two Bible verses. There is a never-ending series of books which contain each daily reading. 'Localities' (*difang*) try to stay synchronised in their reading, meaning sometimes weeks are skipped or doubled up as translocally connected church members try to keep their localities 'coordinated', or, we might say, syncopated, in step, in rhythm. These translocally connected ones are usually elders or responsible ones. As we saw, their authority is attained not by top-down command, but via the degree to which they are more intraconnected[13] than others. Uncle Yang, whose home I lived in, as an elder, would start each day with up to six different morning revival calls in a row. An exhausting feat, which some, we will see, might give as evidence of the suspect motives of becoming an elder in the first place.

After calling on the Lord until sufficiently enthused, Jiazhi and I engage in another spontaneously ordered exercise, introduced briefly in the introduction: 'pray-reading' (*daodu*). Pray-reading involves taking a designated Bible

verse and reading it in turn, word by word, or phrase by phrase, enthusiastically while the one(s) not pray-reading say(s) *amen!* to each word or phrase uttered. Here I briefly recount a section of one of our pray-reading sessions.

The following is the Bible verse within the *Morning Nourishment* section of the page for week 9, day 6 of volume 2 of the 'crystallisation of Exodus' Morning Revival series. The topic of the week is *The Change of Diet to the Heavenly Christ as the Unique Food for God's People*. The reader may be familiar with the story in the book of Exodus of manna (bread) raining down each morning in the desert to feed the wandering tribe of Israelites being led by Moses. This week breaks down the significance of that manna into 16 different points and explores each in turn. The words are both *about* 'Christ as food' as well as, in the exercise below, *being* that food. What concerns us here is the transformation of words into 'food' through particular exercises, that is, the transformation of the 'organised' into the 'organic', the 'objective' into the 'subjective' (see below), the planned into the spontaneous. Here is the verse:

> And Moses said, This is what Jehovah has commanded, Let an omerful of it be kept throughout your generations, that they may see the bread which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out from the land of Egypt. And Moses said to Aaron, Take a pot, and put an omerful of manna in it, and place it before Jehovah, to be kept throughout your generations (Exo. 16:32–33).

So, brother Jiazhi and I would start our 'morning nourishment' together first by reading through and then pray-reading a verse such as this one. Below is a translated transcript of us pray-reading the above verse:

JZ: 'And Moses saaaid!!'
GB: 'Amen! And Moses said!!'
JZ: 'Yes, ameeen!! Moses. Said!'
GB: 'Amen!!! And Moses said, This is what!'
JZ: 'Amen!!!! Brother Gareth, And Moses said, This. Is. Whaat!!!'
GB: 'Haha, amen!! This is what. Jehovah has commanded!'
JZ: 'Ohh ameeen, thank you Lord that this is what You commanded.'
GB: 'Amen, This is what You commanded.'
JZ: 'Amen. This is what Jehovah commanded, Let an omerful of it be kept!!!'
GB: 'Amen, be kept!!'
JZ: 'Be. Kept!!!!'
GB: 'Amen!!!!....'

One can see that the 'meaning' of the word being pray-read, its semantic object of reference, is not the primary significance of each utterance. Rather, the designated daily verse becomes the medium for mutually responsive, rhythmic interaction between brother Jiazhi and me. In the process we 'become one with'

the spontaneous rhythms, style, and poetics of the church-body. Eventually our pray-reading seems to flow through us effortlessly. Timothy Morton writes that '[d]elivery is precisely the physicality of your rhema, your speech' (2011, p. 211). Here our rhythmisation of the Bible verse is our way of distilling the most physical part of our speech so that we might 'feed' and 'nourish' each other. Quantity becomes quality, words become food, rhythm becomes flow. The flow, that is, of divine substance mutually feeding brother Jiazhi and me.

But this sounds awfully metaphorical. If it is not the content but the form of our speech that nourishes us, what kind of nourishment is this? Rhythm, I argued above, becomes a means by which the structure and agency of life are balanced out. 'Flow', as, in my terms, that which rhythm becomes when we are truly lost in it, for Csikszentmihalyi,

> denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement … . It is the state in which action follows upon action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part. We experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future (1975, p. 43).

This sounds ever so much like being 'in the spirit', where self and other, human and divine become one, in which there are no calculative intentions but rather only organic, spontaneous flowing. It sounds like sister Xu's being 'washed' by the brothers and sisters and like elder Li prevented from being his worst self. Flow is nourishing, I will eventually propose, drawing especially on the work of Henri Bergson, because it is the closest many of us come to our primary condition. A condition free, that is, of the conscious and unconscious work it takes to be a 'self' separate from, in competition with, the world around us. Characteristic of flow is the loss of 'the self construct, the intermediary which one learns to interpose between stimulus and response' (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, p. 43). Flow is freedom from these learned everyday efforts and thus, to be metaphorical, it replenishes, nourishes, washes us.

Here it is important to note why eating is a primary frame through which flow is described and attained within the Chinese Christianity of this following of Ni and Li, and what is 'Chinese' about it. A crucial condition in attaining a state of flow, Csikszentmihalyi discovers, is skill level that is well matched with the activity engaged in. Flow fits perfectly between 'boredom', where the skill level too far exceeds the demands of the activity, and 'anxiety', where the demands of the activity too far exceed the skill level. In the flow state, stimulus and response are so well matched that there is a continuous feedback loop between self and environment. The feedback loop is so smooth as to become continuous, and, in my terms, the quantitative, rhythm, becomes qualitative, flow. As noted, a key difference between

Csikszentmihalyi's discoveries and my own is that he does not seem to posit the social itself as an object and means of flow. It may be the context in which flow activities occur for Csikszentmihalyi and the athletes, artists, and experts he writes about, but it is not their ultimate concern. Not so in the church in Taipei.

One can see why food would almost universally become an idiom for the process whereby self and other become united. Harry Walker (2018, p. 19) writes of 'logophagy' in the context of Peruvian-Amazonian Urarina ritual modes of group formation. For the Urarina he writes, 'much like sharing food, sharing words allows people to mutually inhabit one another, to belong to each other'. He cites (NASB) Biblical precedents for understanding eating words as a form of receiving God, such as Ezekiel 3:2–3: 'So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll. He said to me, "Son of man, feed your stomach and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you." Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.' And Ezekiel 2:8: ' "Now you, son of man, listen to what I am speaking to you; do not be rebellious like that rebellious house. Open your mouth and eat what I am giving you." Then He said to me, "Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them"'. If these verses demonstrate a Judeo-Christian precedent for eating God's words, the church in Taipei completes the logical circle by their understanding that if we can eat God's word and God is His word, then by eating that word we eat Him and so become Him. If language for the Urarina is 'an index of common being' it is for the brothers and sisters an actualisation of their shared divinity.

More specific to Chinese-speaking contexts, however, is the notion that food, eating, nourishment would become an idiom for skilful, social activity, and although there is a kind of recognised shared ground of being, participants are not collapsed into it. Rather their differences are vitalised through being differentiated out of this shared ground. Group 5 of hall 34 paid much more attention to the etiquette, the aesthetics, and the form of food than I have observed in the UK or US. Every love feast spread was photographed and shared online with (often) myriads of church-designed emojis flowing in their stead. It is noteworthy, too, that eating is a much more common way of speaking about experiences in Mandarin Chinese than it is in English (Link 2013, pp. 171–73).[14] Perry Link has even conducted a small experiment to demonstrate the point:

> Wanting to test objectively whether … *chi* is used metaphorically in Chinese more than 'eat' is in English, I did a word search of two novels, chosen essentially at random: Lao She's novel *The Philosophy of Lao Zhang* (*Lao Zhang de zhexue* 老張的哲學) in Chinese and Mark Twain's novel *The Mysterious Stranger* in American English. In Lao She's text, *chi* accounts for one in every five hundred characters, and in Twain's text 'eat' (including 'ate' and 'eaten') appears once in every twenty-five hundred words. This difference is accountable in part to the fact that eating in a *literal* sense gets more attention in

> Lao She's novel than in Mark Twain's … The contrast in metaphorical uses of *chi* and 'eat' was sharper: there are five instances in Lao She's novel, none in Twain's (2013, pp. 172–73).

There is deep historical precedent in Chinese history for the idea that eating is no mere collapse of other (food) into self. Rather it is a means of attunement to the ultimate reality, the Dao, that pre-coherent oneness from which things arise and upon which a harmonious society must be built. In the third century BC *Book of Master Han Fei* (the so-called 'legalist' philosopher), the following is written of Confucius:

> Confucius was sitting next in attendance to Duke Ai 哀 of Lu 魯 (r. 494–77 BCE). The duke offered him a peach with some millet and said, 'Please help yourself.' Confucius first ate the millet and afterwards took a bite from the peach. Those who witnessed the scene broke out in laughter, their hands covering their mouth. Duke Ai spoke: 'The millet is not for eating but should be used to clean the (skin of the) peach!' Confucius replied: 'Of course, I know that much. But millet is the most noble among the five grains and in sacrifices to the ancestors it is an offering of supreme standing. Among the six kinds of fruits however, the peach is the lowest sacrificial offering. During ancestral sacrifices it is not even good enough to gain access to the temple. I have heard that a gentleman uses what is base to clean what is noble but I have not heard of using what is noble to clean what is base. So to use that most valuable among the five grains to clean the lowest of fruits would amount to availing oneself of what is superior to clean what is inferior. I take this to be a case of obstructing righteousness and therefore dare not allow the peach to be ranked in preference over the most precious offering in the ancestral temple' (Sterckx 2015, pp. 11–12).

There is a poetics of interaction in church ritual that, one might argue, closely parallels the aesthetic care of love feast preparation, itself with deep Chinese historical precedent. Their relation, however, seems to be more than metaphorical. They are different ways of doing the same thing, of attaining social flow, thematised as 'exercising the spirit'. Indeed, while ex-church member Zimmerman-Liu (2017) reports that this is less accepted in church localities in the US, and can even be a source of tension between Chinese- and non-Chinese-speaking 'saints', in Taipei, providing words and providing food were recognised as interchangeable contributions to the churchlife. These are differences to be vitalised. While some are gifted with the art of speech, I heard many say, others are more gifted in the kitchen.

Although commensality is often remarked upon by anthropologists for its capacity to enable mutual belonging (e.g. Carsten 1995), the intimacy of eating together rarely goes as far as directly 'feeding' one another as Jiazhi and I are

doing with language above. In doing so, we approach a mutualistic experience of one another as God for whom the language of the Bible and of the ministries of Ni and Li is food. There is, in the midst of church ritual, an often perfect synthesis between the otherwise troublesome pair of oneness ('speaking the same thing') and organicism (spontaneous mutual responsivity) explored previously.

That this process is empowering is perhaps reflected in a striking comment made by Li. Expositing on Matthew Chapter 15 in Taipei, January 1972, Li said to those gathered, 'Consider this: who is greater, you or the Lord Jesus? You have to boldly say, "I am greater because I am a child and He is the bread." ' He concluded the point by declaring '[w]ith all sincerity of heart, you can say, "Lord, I thank You and praise You! Today You have become my food. The eater is always greater than the food. Lord, You have become the small food for me to eat." ' One Sunday church hymn, put to the tune of *How Great Though Art*, sings, 'How small Thou art, how small Thou art! And Thee we'll eat through all eternity; How small Thou art, how small Thou art!'

I suggested to brother Zhou, the aforementioned 'president of the church', a comparison between the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the church. He replied in good humour, admitting some superficial resemblances. 'But,' he concluded, 'they [Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses] do not have blending. They have headquarters, they have hierarchy.' 'The Body,' he said in contrast, 'is a mystical spiritual organism, not an organisation'. When I ask him to elaborate, he continues:

> God did not reveal himself in a very objective way, he does not write out what He wants in the sky, he reveals himself through particular lives. The beauty of the Bible lies in difference. Some part of me is the same with [the Apostle] James, some part of me is the same with [the Apostle] Paul.
>
> This is the principle in the New Testament, is incarnation, not just Logos. The word, Logos, became flesh. So we have an incarnated God, so word became flesh, became what we can touch, that we can understand, even enjoy to a certain extent, so God revealed himself in a very subjective way. Objective way is laughable.

The inference is that organisation is related to the 'objective way', and that the church as an organism is related to the 'subjective way'. In Mandarin the terms *zhuguan* ('subjective') and *keguan* ('objective') can be more literally translated 'host perspective' and 'guest perspective', respectively. God reveals Himself, it seems to me brother Zhou was saying, from a first- not a third-person perspective. We know God by becoming him, and we become him by hosting him as a Spirit in our spirits. 'Now the God who was once objective to us has become our subjective reality,' Li is recorded as saying many times. 'Christ is in us,' Li also often said, asking, 'but is He a guest or the host?' His answer was that Christ should not remain a guest but 'He should be the Host who can settle down and make His home in us.'

Adam Chau suggests a contrast between notions of divinity in Christianity and in Chinese popular religion in terms of guest–host relations. 'In Christianity', he writes,

> God is the supreme host; humans (Christians) can only be guests at God's banquet but they cannot host God in return. It is explicitly an unequal relationship. And even though they are unworthy of such generous treatment Christians must accept this divine grace and join the communion. The eucharist, the most important Christian ritual for almost all Christians, is a constant reminder to Christians that they are guests, and that when they go to heaven, they will be God's guests eternally. In the Chinese case, on the other hand, the household hosts the spirits by providing offerings. Gods, ghosts and ancestors are invited to the bountiful banquet at fixed times of the year and then sent off when the banquets are over. The spirits can only be guests; they do not, and indeed cannot, host human guests. In Chinese religious culture there are no accounts of spirits, be they deities, ancestors or ghosts, hosting humans. In the Chinese hosting of spirits, the guest is accorded honour and respect, but it is the host who is the most active, potent and pre-eminent agent. In other words, agency rests with humans. And the social idiom of hosting enframes the entire cluster of ritual actions (Chau 2014, pp. 492–3).

We can see perhaps why Chinese Christianity, as I am theorising it, is irreducibly Chinese-Christian. It is somewhere between Chau's picture of Christianity and the Chinese case. Nonetheless, as already explored with *guanxi*, there are major differences with 'traditional' notions. Church members are less interested in contacting God as a majestic separate entity, host, or guest than with experiencing the church-world *as* that divine entity. Or rather as a divine process, a process that overall, in both exercise and content, seems to relish an interplay of mutually responsive perspectives.

The church song titled *To the Lord We're as a Garden*, sings in the voice of God 'I am eating honeycomb with honey pure.' Songs like this one point to the other side of the deificatory coin: if humans are eating God, then God too is eating our humanity. Just as Chinese *yinyang* cosmology understands that the moon and the sun are simply two sides of the same universe, Witness Li once said, so humanity and divinity, God and the church, are two sides of the same reality. In 1952 during a message given by him at a training event in Taiwan a church member asked, 'What does "many first will be last, and many last first" mean (Matthew 19:30; 20:16)?' He began his answer thus:

> We should realize that there are always two sides to the truths in the Bible. The things in the physical world have this same principle. For example, our head has a front side with seven 'holes' and a back side with no 'holes.' In the universe, according to Chinese philosophy,

> there are yin and yang, males and females, the sun and the moon. This simply reflects a law in the universe that everything has two sides. In spiritual matters, from God's side, everything is related to His mercy; from man's side, everything is related to man's responsibility.[15]

It is clear that, for church members, what from a human perspective is the utterance of words, is from the divine perspective the eating of substance. Words-as-food is less a metaphor here, than it is a way of using language to speak something, a linguistically incarnate solution to the paradox of divinity being both beyond one's disempowered life and accessible by it, separate and distinct but also the ground of one's being. The desire to experience language as food, as God does, is especially evident in certain church practices which aim to distil experientially the physicality – hence edibility – of church language. 'Morning nourishment,' it seems, is a process of making church language – that is, the Bible and 'the ministry' – more tangible and substance like. Thus enacting experientially the desired state of being God, in which capacity words are edible substance.

Midweek meetings: social flow

If eating God can reverse the usual roles within the hierarchy of Him and humanity, what do the exercises in eating God which constitute much of the churchlife in Taipei do to the hierarchies otherwise perceivable amongst humans? To requote Jiayin Hu:

> Group pray-reading features spontaneity and order at the same time. A certain phrase or word is like a ball being freely passed in a circle: believers voluntarily pick up, play with, and pass the ball in order. Anyone may initiate the reading of a particular word or phrase, reiterate the pervious [*sic*] reading, or utter a short prayer or praise in the midst of the pray-reading session. Believers usually share a tacit agreement on when the process should conclude (Hu 2017, pp. 175–76).

Like calling on the Lord, pray-reading is ubiquitous throughout 'the churchlife'. The almost daily church meetings and gatherings which set the pace of this life each incorporate these exercises, or versions of them. They are the micro-foundations that bind this group together. On Tuesday evenings, for instance, are 'prayer meetings'. After calling on the Lord, perhaps a song or two will be sung. Church members are often proud of the number of times they sing through the same song. I have heard humble brags of 10 or 20 times singing over and over the same song. Often each iteration is done with variations, however, that celebrate difference in oneness, plurality in singularity, individuality in the corporate.

'Okay, now sisters on verse one, brothers verse two, young people stanza three, and working saints on verse four,' someone will shout as the guitar keeps playing, after the first, second, third iteration of a song. (A song drawn from either Li's iteration of Ni's original 'hymns for the little flock' hymnal which endowed this group with its most famous alias – 'the Little Flock' (*xiao qun*) – or the pink booklet full of more playful tunes written anonymously by 'ordinary' brothers and sisters.) As each demographic sings their respective verse, all others will pray-read the stanza over the top of them. The multiplicity of sung, strummed, and shouted rhythms are exciting to partake in. Many songs incorporate 'rounds' with two melodies being sung simultaneously. The cacophonous ordered spontaneity is often quite thrilling. I can understand the reluctance to stop. Church members scrabble for new demographic combinations to justify singing another iteration. 'Okay, now we sing stanzas individually!' elder Li would sometimes exclaim, to my horror.

Needless to say, singing the same song many times means that many church members learn them by heart. At conferences, the 'speaking brothers' will sometimes break spontaneously into a relevant song from the podium with thousands of voices quickly joining in unison. This is one way in which conferences, which can have tens of thousands of participants, are made continuous with intimate everyday church lives. Another way is that the topic of each morning revival series is derived from the topics of the seven annual conferences ('feasts'). So what is said from the conference podium – each 'message' (*xinxi*) 'released' (*shifang*) being a more or less creative reiteration and recombination of Ni and Li's ministry – continues to be absorbed and reabsorbed throughout the year on more intimate levels.

If the reiteration and repetition of roughly the same linguistic content eventually leads to the skilful capacity for flow, what we might otherwise theorise as 'power', even 'control', travels along these lines of flow. The opening page of a bilingual booklet given out at the 2015 Chinese-Speaking International Conference outlines the role of this and the other 'seven annual feasts' in this way:

> Today, God is speaking continually to His people on earth through the speaking in the seven annual international conferences and trainings. The brothers and sisters from the churches in Taiwan faithfully follow and enter into the speaking of the ministry, actively seizing opportunities to go abroad to participate in the seven annual feasts. Immediately after each feast, various blending meetings, conferences, and trainings would be conducted in Taiwan, in which the brothers would minister to transfuse into the saints the speaking and the burden received overseas. The Lord's speaking in one locality thus becomes His universal speaking among the churches in Taiwan. In this way the saints are constituted with the truth to speak the same thing with one mouth. This has also laid a good foundation for the blending among the saints, bringing the churches in Taiwan into an unprecedented one accord.

> The riches we receive from the ministry have not only become our materials for gospel preaching, nourishing the new ones, small group pursuits, and prophesying in the Lord's Day meetings, but have also become the content of our mutual fellowship in the universal one new man for the bringing forth of the reality of the Body of Christ.

The 'burdens' (*fudan*) of the speaking brothers, in this understanding, thus gradually become the burdens of the masses of church participants. There is room for surprise here too, though, as there is not a one-to-one correspondence between feast and morning revival. Each year there is a palpable sense of excitement as participants wait with heightened anticipation for the exact morning topic titles to be announced. 'This year's morning revival topics have been released!' someone announces on church WhatsApp, Weixin, and Line groups. This is truly enchanted consumerism existing alongside a wider spiritual–material thrill that electrifies consumption of a vast panoply of church books and paraphernalia, especially when displayed in post-conference stalls.[16] Difference vitalised.

Conundrum of coherence XII: coordination, control

How, then, are organisational communications made, if not in an explicit, didactic, or command-like manner? They are 'truthised' (*zhenlihua*), through the exercises thus described. When I attended meetings for elders and responsible ones in Jingmei, which occurred each month before the Sunday ('Lord's Day' (*zhuri*)) meeting in our hall, we began by 'calling on the Lord'. The *O Zhu Yesus* gradually flows into 20 minutes of prayer, out of synchronised oneness emerges vitalised difference. Into the oceanic chant someone would shout *Zhu a! Zan mei niii*! ('Oh Lord! Glory to you!') and everyone responds with a booming *ameeen!* Then unfolds the first individual prayer. With the change in rhythm comes a change in the psychosocial quality and purpose of the meeting. We have now, ideally, moved away from non-church-related thoughts into embodied (or 'emBodied') participation. We now inhabit our church selves with all their implicit knowledge evident in the linguistic fluidity of our prayers. These kinds of unorchestrated shifts between exercises are part of the art of a church meeting as a collective endeavour, the art of organic oneness.

The prayers come to an end and the announcements begin, usually led by my host father, uncle Yang, who stands up when he feels the time is ready. There is discussion over the meeting to come as well as wider issues reported by each elder. Even within the eldership, there is a circle of older, more respected elders who take the lead. After each elder has his say, uncle Yang will announce the first topic to be prayed over, again referred to as 'burdens' (*fudan*): a coming conference, a gospel trip, illnesses, weddings, and threats to the life of the church. Now we swivel our fold-out chairs around and kneel on the concrete floor to pray,

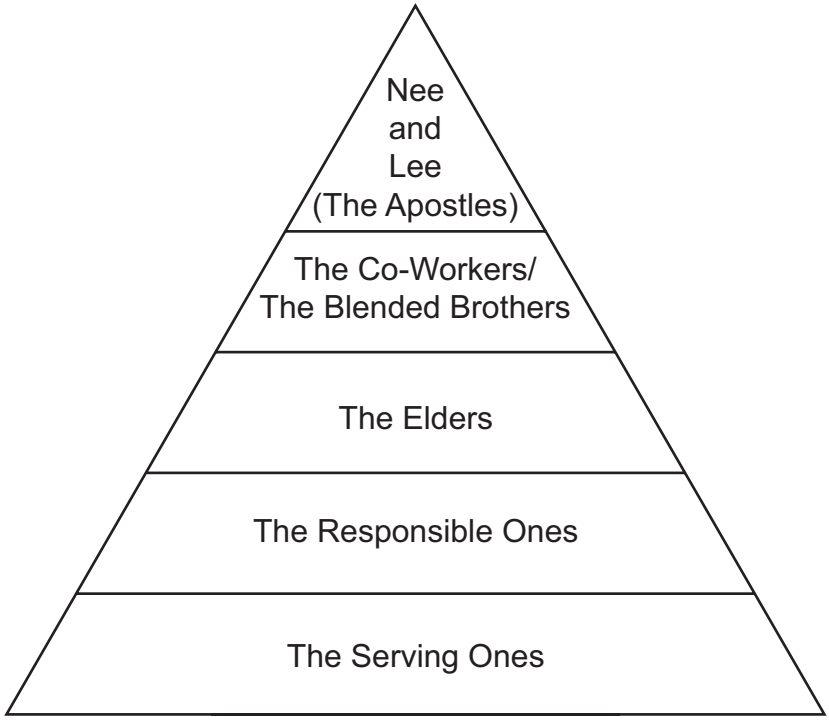
resting our elbows on the seats and bowing our heads. In this way, what would otherwise be thought of as 'directives' become, in church parlance, the 'burdens' of everyone. We might say that the ordered action of a few (the co-workers, the blended brothers) becomes the spontaneous actions of the many (the elders, the responsible ones). But this would be too presumptuous. We can only say that what could be experienced as the commanded action of oneself or of more powerful others, in other contexts, is – ideally, at the very least – experienced as a spontaneously, 'organically' transmitted burden here.

Hu's last point in the quote above points to a key phenomenon of church meetings in Taiwan and elsewhere: there is no official, designated director. When I asked elder Li whether he was an elder, he responded with a *shhh* but also the faintest of nods. It is a *faux pas* to address elders as 'elders' (*zhanglao*). It is just a silent assumption that that is what they are, confirmed by the fact that they attend 'elders' meetings'. The same is true of 'co-workers', 'apostles', and 'responsible brothers'. The reasons for not having a title are similar to those for the church's not having a name.[17] It is understood as a means of keeping things 'organic' rather than 'organised'. Nonetheless, while no hierarchy is explicitly acknowledged, traversing it can have serious consequences in many members' understanding (Figure 2.2).

In Taiwan, the following of Ni and Li is a relatively integrated lifeworld. Members see one another daily; their children grow up together. It is not uncommon to bump into other church members in the marketplace or the local park. Aiguo's whole social life was encompassed by the church. His family, friends, co-students, and even colleagues were part of it. After graduating from university, he spent two years at the church's so-called 'full-time training', which, as noted, is both scholarly and soldierly. There, trainees learn Greek and Hebrew, memorise large portions of Ni and Li's ministry and do plenty of chores, so that they can be crafted into ideal 'vessels' (*qimin*) of the Body of Christ. Eventually Aiguo pursued his dream of going to the West, telling me, already a little despondent by that time, of his ambition to bring the truths revealed to Ni and Li to the Western world. It is there, in the UK, that I first met Aiguo, before going to Taiwan to do doctoral research.

Returning from Taiwan in the summer of 2016, I kept in contact with Aiguo and his family, and one evening we were sat on his sofa after a hybrid feast of noodles, dumplings, and pizza. As before with other church members, often to similar consternation, I questioned Aiguo about church organisation. How is it decided whether a member is an elder or not? Are there official elders and unofficial ones? I went through a short list of seemingly authoritative church brothers asking whether they were officially designated elders or not. At one point, Aiguo suggested that there was only one true elder in Taiwan, a very large man whom I had seen in photos taken across the years, in black and white and fuzzy Kodak colour, often sitting or standing right next to Witness Li. However, in a line I had heard before, Aiguo also stated that eldership was a matter of the 'organic life of the Body'. That elders and everyone else knew who they were, but it was not a matter of human decision but organic, divine life.

Figure 2.2: The implicit hierarchy



Note: 'Sisters' may act as 'serving ones' (*fushizhe*), but all other positions are, implicitly, reserved for 'brothers'.

Aiguo seemed frustrated, partly with me, partly because I had put him in a state of mind in which these questions were an issue. In an attempt I think to get himself out of that state of mind, he pointed quite abruptly and seriously to his face. 'See these scars?' he said. I nodded, seeing the acne scars on his cheeks and forehead. 'Once there was a brother, who everyone called "elder"', he went on. 'I didn't think he was worthy of being an elder, and I said so to other brothers and sisters. Immediately these spots appeared all over my face.' It was not that he was incorrect, technically, in his criticism, it was that he had stepped beyond his 'allotted portion' (*fen*). He had transgressed the organic order of things and was not so much punished for it as he was suffering the automatic, spontaneous, consequence of that transgression.

Not only did Aiguo experience his acne as resulting from his obstructing the substantial divine power of the Body of Christ, by questioning the authority of an elder, but the scars on his face are daily reminders of his own history of alienation from the larger body he is a vessel of. They are both a warning and a trace of shame. Not only this: his acne has deeply shaped his sense of himself. His wife often comments on his appearance, and her hope that their children

will not look too much like their father. Aiguo himself told me in tears of his gratitude how his wife eventually agreed to marry him, despite initial problems with the way he looks. (In Taiwan, similar to traditional practice across rural China (Kipnis 1997), marriages are arranged in the church by church 'aunties' (*ayi*), still with an element of individual choice.) Now, he says, his parents' love for one another and for the church are models for his own life with his wife and two sons. If Aiguo was once a church rebel, I conjecture that his acne saw to it that this rebellion was a very short phase: suffering his acne, Aiguo also suffered the acme of his otherness in relation to his God.

There are at least two relevant layers to what Aiguo said. First, he shows that attending to organic oneness in no way precludes the possibility of power. In fact, there is a deep power to the way 'the Body' is conceived here. It does not emanate from any particular body. Rather, it is a property of the Body as a whole. Transgressing the lines of life which flow through the Body automatically, spontaneously, leads to punishment. Not a punishment as decided by anybody, not even God, but as the natural consequence of not following the flow. These consequences do not come from without, but, as with my friend's acne, from within, welling up from one's own blocked (*zuse*) spirit. This is reminiscent, some may notice, of diagnoses within traditional Chinese medicine (not at all incompatible with the churchlife for most in Taiwan), which attribute certain conditions, manifest in expertly detectable hues of the face (Kuriyama 1999), to blocked *qi,* a long-standing cosmic substance in China that I return to in Chapter 4.

The second point Aiguo's reaction demonstrates is that speech and being are inseparable in the church. My questioning forced him into his mind, into a rationalising, calculating kind of thought-being. His outburst was a response to this, he was trying to bring himself out of that rationalising way of being that is habitual, for instance, to social scientists who write of calculative, instrumental, spiritless 'power'. Another time, we spent weeks studying the gospels together. He wanted to show me that their accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection, despite claims to the contrary, can in fact be reconciled. As we gradually discovered that some very complex and speculative reasoning is required in order to do this, he put our sessions abruptly to an end saying that they were no longer 'nourishing'.

Conundrum of coherence XIV: dealing with the outside

Dealing with outsiders is thus always problematic. One risks being pulled into one's 'mind, emotions, and will', those three components of 'the soul'. This was once vividly demonstrated to me at the church's annual European Young People's Conference, held in a highland border village in Poland. The 'speaking brother' asked for two young volunteers. One stood on a chair and was told to try to pull the other one up onto it. The other was then told to try to pull the one on the chair onto the floor. The comparative ease with which he did so demonstrated the ease with which brothers and sisters can be

pulled out of the church as compared to pulling non-church members into the church. Given that the church's most frequent human other is 'Christianity' rather than 'the World', this was a parable about living a life 'in the soul' as much as it was about living beyond the Christian life altogether.

My own relation, to Aiguo and to other church members, was usually perceived as taking place on flatter ground. I am, after all, the son of a church elder. I have been baptised in the church, twice. What is more, in my questioning, I sought not to attack or disprove Ni and Li's ministry but only to understand it from an ethnographic perspective. 'How does the ministry shape your life?' I asked, not, 'is it true?' If received negatively, these questions were perceived as annoying or irrelevant, not hostile. My professed atheism was likewise usually dismissed as mere evidence of me 'being in my mind'. My participation in church meetings, prayer, singing, reading, and sharing, on the other hand, indexed my (limited) capacity for flow and thus possibly my possession of a 'regenerated spirit'. My strange positionality was at times identified as that of a 'seeker' (*xuqiuzhe*), my anthropological atheism a temporary confusion that would in time fall away. Either way, the mild dispute with Aiguo was not radically different from the ways in which church brothers and sisters become 'stumbling blocks' (*banjiao shi*) to one another, occasionally 'blocking the flow' with their tangles and frictions, drawing one another, temporally, out of their spirits and into their minds.

When it comes to unambiguous outsiders, it is noteworthy that often the best proselytisers are not known to be the most 'spiritual' (*shulingde*) church members. Aiguo's mother once said to me that his younger brother was 'smarter' than him but that he 'loves Jesus less'. This brother was in many ways much easier to talk to than Aiguo. He was less rigid in his adherence to Ni and Li's ministry. He once said to me, of a popular syncretic sect in Taiwan, *Yiguandao* ('the Way of Unity'), that they were 'very smart' as they worshipped Jesus alongside the Buddha and Muhammed, together with other deities. 'Jesus is best for most things,' he said, 'but Buddhism is better for others.' He was known to be a very successful proselytiser. He was responsible for elder Li's conversion, for example, despite being more than 20 years his junior, no small feat in a society that still intensely values patrilinealism. The logic here is that because Aiguo's brother spends more time in his mind than my friend, he relates much more easily to outsiders.

Relations with outsiders are not all bad. In fact, I observed them, in a different capacity, to be vital to the churchlife, serving the important function of reversing the possibility of repetition becoming repetitiousness, rhythm becoming routine – a distinct likelihood for a group that reads exclusively the words of two authors and which spends much of its time in the same small groups. These outsiders, like 'Watchman' Ni, 'Witness' Li, act as witnesses to the unified existence of the church. Being witnessed, it seems to me, is in fact the chief role of Christ as an external figure too, as the literal 'head' of 'the Body of Christ'. This explains a Freudian slip I sometimes heard in which 'brother Li' or 'brother Ni' and 'the Lord' are mixed up.

The possibility that the role of the divine is as witness has been much missed by an anthropology of religion that has been much taken up with questions of mediation. If presence is always a problem, in other words, the notion that the chief role of the divine, as an external figure, could be to induce a sense of being witnessed is not likely. In contrast, it became apparent to me in Taipei that God as an exterior figure is a divinisation of the 'church friend', a vitalising witness to a churchlife that might otherwise become routine.

There were very often 'newcomers' (*xinren/xinlaide*) to the meetings in Jingmei. Some of these newcomers returned again and again but neglected to be baptised so were referred to as 'church friends' (*zhaohui pengyou*) or 'gospel friends' (*fuyin pengyou*). Mostly, however, friends and family members would come from outside the church once and not come again, or not for a long while. At first, I wondered if church members were frustrated at having so many come to church meetings but neglect to commit on a more permanent basis. But then I realised that these newcomers were valued as newcomers. That is, as relative outsiders.

Whenever new ones were there, they were welcomed with a group chant and clap, called a 'love cheer' (*ai de guli*), a relatively common practice in Taiwan.[18] This welcoming ritual was part of a whole sense of refreshment and excitement that came with newcomers. 'Testimonies' (*jianzheng*) would be given in which the brothers and sisters reminded themselves of why they had first joined the church. Everyone was on their best behaviour: no slouching or phone swiping whilst others spoke. The sense of performativity that newcomers injected into meetings seemed to make the difference between repetitiousness and repetition, routine and rhythm, habit and flow. The balance between the newness and familiarity of church attendees was nonetheless a delicate one. Some, like me, after a few months, were not new enough. After a while, they became relatively merged into the group, giving no vicarious sense that this was a unique and vital phenomenon to be witnessed.[19]

Newcomers who agreed to it were baptised as soon as possible, often during their first ever church meeting. This was always a very exciting event. Running the bath taps, getting the towels ready, finding clothes to be baptised in, the anticipation was palpable. The rule is that there must be two 'brothers' present who can actually do the baptising. Once, during a Bible-reading meeting at a church hall, there was a young woman for whom this was the first encounter with the Bible. On learning of this, the sisters began to get excited. 'So, do you want to be baptised?' one asked, with wide eyes. She was not sure, she did not know what baptism was about. After some explanation, she agreed.[20]

As there were only two males present, in the end, despite my protestations, I helped baptise the new-coming woman. As we closed the ceremony with a prayer, the two leading sisters of the group were in one another's arms sobbing onto each other's shoulders. I was perplexed, neither the person being baptised nor one of the baptisers were very committed to the whole thing. It was a bit of a botched ceremony as far as I could tell. I mentioned afterwards that they seemed very touched by the affair and that they must be very happy for this new church sister. 'Well actually, I don't think she will return,' one said.

'Yes, people often don't come back after baptism,' agreed the other. But, they explained, every time someone is baptised the angels rejoice in heaven, so they were rejoicing alongside the angels. To me, this confirmed that the change in the interior state of the person being baptised was not what was at issue but the sociospiritual line between 'church' and 'not-church' that it exposed.

Speaking to church members about their own baptism, I heard several times that the experience, for them, was not particularly moving at all. It was only much later that they learned to appreciate the significance of it. Again, to me, this confirms that baptism in the church in Taiwan is not really about one's own experience of being baptised but everyone else's. People enjoy others' baptisms because it gives a heightened sense of the church–world threshold, it brings the object of their concern into heightened relief. If I had room, I would argue the same for church weddings, gospel marches, and the many other intra-church performances. One long-time church brother confessed to me that, although the church must always be growing, it was well known that when too many 'new ones' entered the church the 'richness' (*fengfu*) of the churchlife was impaired. The smooth art of organic oneness faltered as skill levels failed to match the activity of church ritual and less flow resulted. Meetings with those outside of the church were less significant for their potential to swell the numbers of the church, than to enable members to vicariously experience afresh the church as a unique and momentous world amongst worlds.

The notion that the church comes alive most when enunciated and enacted in the presence of those outside of it is perhaps further confirmed, in an admittedly obscure way, by elder Li's mother's response to my question to those gathered at my final meeting with the Jingmei group. After conducting a collective interview with everyone there, I asked, 'Does anyone have any final questions for me?' 'Yes', she replied, before hesitating a while, obviously considering carefully the way she might word her question. She was a forceful figure and often took the lead in meetings, to elder Li's slight chagrin. Here, I got the impression that she was speaking as the representative of the group after some prior discussion I was not privy to. She continued: 'Are you Jesus?' She was, of course, joking, but still she went on. 'Because when you first arrived, with your beard and long hair, we thought you might be.' I looked around the room and people were on the edge of their seats looking at me with smiling, expectant eyes. I laughed, and everyone laughed with me. I felt silly even saying 'No,' so I turned the recorder off and thanked everyone before the post-meeting hubbub resumed.

In some ways, at least at the beginning, I believe I may have embodied for my 'informants' the figure of the 'witness' or 'watchman', so valued by followers of Witness Li and Watchman Ni's combined teachings. I and other outsiders may have filled a similar role to that of God, as an entity distinct from His Body, the church.[21] Perhaps the optimal witness for church members was God. God is the ultimate observer, who in observing confirms the significance of the church as a global–local, social, and spiritual entity. God, like church friends, strikes that happy medium between self and other, kin and stranger. God-as-witness, referred to as 'the Lord' (*zhu*), confirms the cosmic significance of the church without taking away any of its local intimacy.

Sundays: vertical time

A notable structural feature of the church calendar is that Sundays, 'the Lord's Day' (*zhuri*), put emphasis upon God as a distinct and separate entity, as a father figure. This is especially true once a month, when the Sunday meeting is held at the local church hall, with several sub-groups meeting there, to make up numbers from between 100 and 500. While morning revival and meetings throughout the week are intimate affairs, in which church members 'feed' one another with the word and life of God, Sundays at one's local hall are more like a public performance. The brothers and sisters are expected to 'share' (*fenxiang*) what they 'enjoyed' (*xiangshou*) from that week's morning revival.

Lord's Day, 'Lord's Table' (*zhu de zhuozi*) or 'Bread-breaking' (*bobing*), meetings over the years 2012–14, according to one church report I was shown at least, had a markedly lower attendance than other meetings. Here the timbre and structure of church gathering shifts. Different kinds of songs are sung. They are directed towards 'the Father' and are about reverence, praise, and adoration rather than about the 'small', edible, drinkable, flowing 'Christ'. The jouissance of song repetition is absent and there is greater restriction on the songs to be sung, there being special sections in the church hymnal (church songbooks are not used in these meetings) used for the Lord's Table.

Chairs are arranged in straight rows radiating out from the table, which is covered with a white cloth and has the wafer and jug of red grape juice rested on it, also covered with smaller white cloths. 'Leading brothers' sit on the front row with sisters (sometimes with cloths on their heads) and others with less overt authority sit further back. A select few leading brothers quietly pray over and break the Eucharist wafer together halfway through the meetings while the rest of the congregation sings and ushers, sometimes wearing bibs, prepare to distribute the broken bread and 'wine' (usually red grape juice). There is a stiffer air as everyone is, ideally, dressed in formal attire. Most of these meetings are held in the same homes as weekly meetings, making the contrast all the starker.

The language used to describe these meetings is different. No longer about mutual nourishment and energetic flow, they are described as 'burning incense' (*fen xiang*), which sends up a 'sweet fragrance' (*xinxiang*) to the Lord. A church locality is not a locality, not a 'golden lampstand' (*jin dengtai*), until it has had its first Lord's Table. This is a language of representation rather than logophagy, symbolising God rather than being infused with him. There is also more exclusivism here. One cannot take the Eucharist without having been baptised and having confessed one's sins. The bread is thought by some to be spiritual, possibly physically, toxic to a person who has not met these preconditions. While weekly meetings very often feature 'new ones' and 'church friends', these meetings do not.

After the bread is ceremonially broken by a few brothers who pray over it, the second half of the meeting is a culmination of the week's morning revival. Each is supposed to 'share' a few points they 'enjoyed' from the week's readings, using notes written on notation lines within the morning revival books.

There is a sense in which this is not a spontaneous, lateral sharing between each other, but a performance, a presentation to the Father–God, as solemn witness. Often there is reluctance to share, especially among the young. They have to be prompted, even, if elder Li is around, commanded, to share. There is a starkly different atmosphere here, and I think, a sense of relief when the meeting is over. Then everyone eats together, they might go on a relaxed outing or spend hours sitting around, chatting, dozing, snacking, playing with children, drinking tea, and joking.

If one spent only Sunday meetings with a Chinese Christian group, I surmise, one would conclude that they are hardly different from their counterparts in the UK and US (as Chambon (2020) at times appears to). There is a clear sense in which the relation with God is one of almighty presence. The meeting is about, at once, closing and maintaining, exploring, the gap between humanity and divinity. But here context is everything. These meetings, I argue, are significant because they suffuse the weekly meetings and everyday exercises with anticipation and a sense of performativity.

If many are attracted into the church through the prospect of reciprocity and relatedness without obligation, Sunday mornings feel much more obligatory, more formal and duty bound than weekday meetings. It is perhaps noteworthy that Kipnis (1997) describes more formal banquets that emphasise hierarchical difference in Fengjia village as being held around square tables rather than the circular tables at more informal banquets that emphasise relative equality. Likewise, midweek meetings held in homes are always conducted in circles. Sundays, by contrast, are square and in rows. The most authoritative church members sit at the front, and men usually sit separately from women and children. If meetings throughout the week are co-witnessed by other ostensibly equally positioned human beings, this one is witnessed by a hierarchical Other, God.

Church members being expected to 'share' something which they enjoyed from the morning revival throughout the week in a rather formal manner is understood as an offering to God. Witness Li envisioned this act as the offering of 'sweet smelling fragrance' to God: 'Christ is our incense,' he said.[22] When the first 'Lord's Table' is held at any new locality around the world, a new 'golden lampstand' is said to have been 'raised up' (*xing qi*) offering 'sweet incense' to the Lord.[23] If church members are focused on 'eating Christ' as the Body of God throughout the week, now they are oriented towards 'the Head' (*yuanshou*). The rather distant gaze of the fatherly head confirms their existence as its collective counterpart.

Beyond church: proselytising

This notion of outsiders, church friends, and God as head or father as witness figures that induce a sense of being witnessed, and thus performativity, and infuse church exercises with more rhythm than routine, goes under the radar.

It is something *I* have observed, not something that is explicitly thematised by the brothers and sisters. As far as church leaders are concerned, the churchlife is always 'organic', including in its relations with outsiders.

The logic of proselytism spelled out by Witness Li is exponential. The idea is that when one makes 'church friends' that one gradually introduces to the ministry and the churchlife, those church friends in turn will do the same. Using a graph drawn up by Li himself, co-worker Yu explained the principle in detail. 'It is a Fibonacci series … it is a fruit bearing series,' he tells a seminar room of church trainees in Anaheim, California. It is a principle of cell division, he explains, which is how the body grows. This is simultaneously how authority emerges. As the Fibonacci sequence one puts into motion grows, one's own authority grows with the expansion of this nascent group. 'You will go from group leader to district leader, and so on,' co-worker Yu says.

This, needless to say, is a principle of 'organic' growth, a growth from within rather than imposed from without. Neither does it take the individual as the unit of salvation. '[T]he unit of God's salvation', leading brothers often remind others, 'is not an individual person, but the whole family, the whole house' (Li in Zimmerman-Liu 2017, p. 70). Each stage of expansion in 'the growth of the Body' should be characterised by the same reciprocal responsivity that characterised mine and Jiazhi's calling, our pray-reading, our morning revival. 'It is all about relationship,' co-worker Yu says.[24]

Hopefully one can see how the mutual attunement we attained with our marching run at the opening of this chapter is an image of the sublime sociality which informs every level of this worldwide group. Returning to prayer meetings, when the singing has come to a close, people often use the lyrics to move into prayer. For example, the line 'We eat Jesus every day, Feeding on His humanity …' might become 'We want to eat you tonight, Lord, to feed on your humanity!' In this way prayers too do not emerge in the mind first to then be delivered in speech so much as they flow into and out of the praying person. Likewise, with sections of a meeting: one merges into the next, 'spontaneously'.

There is an art to this way of life, though one that often involves subtle conducting. If the conductor is too overt, however, there is likely to be some pushback. In the UK, I witnessed a Taiwanese church sister admonishing an ex-Pentecostal pastor within the group as he over-spoke his mandate, his control being too overt: 'No Patrick!! Not the old way!!!' By the old way, she meant the way of 'Christianity', in which, according to Ni and Li, one man speaks while the rest listen. Still, conducting certainly takes place. And it is here again that potential tensions between the organisational and the organic emerge as true conundrums, subtly mediated and emergent through the everyday living of Chinese Christianity.

If a song is spontaneously called out that does not fit the purpose and mood of the meeting (hymnals and song books are divided into thematic categories), and there is someone with enough seniority there, the request will be quietly cancelled and replaced with a more suitable number, often without much

comment. Moreover, it is usually senior members doing the calling out in the first place.

Li characterised this subtle conduction as neither democratic nor autocratic. 'It is a big failure for the elders to practise democracy among themselves,' Witness Li is recorded as saying at a training session in Taipei in 1960. 'On the other hand,' he continued,

> If there is autocracy within the eldership, and there is only one man giving commands, we also have a worldly situation. The administration in the church is neither a democracy nor an autocracy. It is not the opinion of the people, nor is it the proposal of one … . In order to have the coordination, all the elders have to accept authority and to accept the ordering in the authority. Every elder should know where he stands in this order. As an elder, you have to find out among the elders your authority. Coordination in the church is neither a democracy nor an autocracy but a body principle.[25]

We may understand the 'body principle' in Taiwan to extend beyond the eldership of the church. The body principle consists of mutual attunement to the recognisable, semi-repeatable, shared atmospheres that characterise life in the church in Taiwan. Although certainly not democratic in any explicit sense, there is a certain bodily, poetic democracy involved here. This does not involve putting forward one's thoughts, opinions, or knowledge per se, but it does involve a distributed bodily, sensory participation of in the most basic sense. Each feels themselves contributing to a collective, cosmic endeavour, perhaps comparable to Tan's (2003) notion of 'Confucian democracy'.

Still, there are agendas to be fulfilled. Prayer meetings, after the singing and opening non-topical prayer, have a time in which anyone can put forward a topic to be prayed for. These are usually very local topics – a backsliding church member who has stopped attending, an illness, a life decision to be made. But there is also a list of prayer topics that the 'responsible brother' or elder, if present, will read out. These topics, which are called 'burdens' (*fudan*), have more global scope. They are passed along from one gathering to the next. Specifically, there are special gatherings for 'elders and responsible ones' in which these burdens travel from the blended brothers who reside in Anaheim and Taipei, mainly via regional to local meetings. To give an example of a (heavily abridged) recent list of burdens for prayer meetings, relating specifically to 'burdens for Europe':

1) German-speaking young people's conference at Gut Elim (8–10 March)…
2) Chinese-speaking conference at Woodland Camp in London (9–10 March)…
   Please pray for the Lord's blessing through His rich speaking in this conference.

3) Meeting halls in Malaga and Barcelona, Spain; Paris, France; and Stuttgart, Germany…
   Please pray that the Lord will continue to provide for the remodeling of these properties. Pray for the submitting and approval of the necessary permits…
4) Bible distribution at the 2024 Summer Olympic Games in Paris…
5) Update on the UK Building Project…
6) The conflict in Ukraine
   Please pray that the Lord will protect the tripartite being of all the saints and will rule in the heavens over every aspect of this conflict so that the result will advance His economy on earth.
7) Migration to six European cities and strengthening of lampstands
   Please pray for the migration of burdened saints to six cities – Barcelona, Brussels, Dublin, Lisbon, Rome, and Zurich…
8) Distribution of Bibles in Europe
   Please pray for the spreading of the translated, interpreted, and understood divine truths in Europe for the Lord's recovery and restoration….

As one can see, there is a lot to get through, not always leading to much time for more personal concerns. One could, of course, give a classical anthropological reading of this practice – in the mode of what Peter Sloterdijk (1987) calls 'cynical reason'. Namely, that once meeting participants have gotten themselves into a receptive, non-critical mode of interaction via the repetitions of calling, pray-reading, and singing, the concerns of those church leaders interested in expanding the church project become the concerns of those emotionally receptive meeting participants. Organisation must be framed 'organically'. To the degree that church leaders are operating strategically this is surely true.

But the meetings for elders and responsible ones are structured in very similar ways to the prayer meeting structure I outlined above. It seems they too are concerned to 'get into their spirit' before they begin dishing out directives in the form of burdens. There too there is an intrinsic, autotelic, motivation to be in the spirit, in that receptive, non-critical mode of being and self, because it is 'enjoyable' (*xiangshoude*). Everyone in the group that I have met, from Ni and Li's co-workers to keen teenagers, seeks this enjoyment. Moreover, the burdens themselves flow 'upwards' from low- and middle-ranking church brothers, if I can use the language of hierarchy for a group that explicitly rejects it, as much as they do downwards. This is not to deny that power restrains, nor that it is concentrated more in some bodies than others, it is to say that it is propelled as much by enjoyment, up and down the 'hierarchy', as it is by Nietzschean will-to-power impulses.

Elders as toddlers

Perhaps the most authoritative co-worker alive today, a former primary school teacher who from the 1970s on has written document after document defending

Li's following from outside attack, often complains publicly of the 'great burden' of being a 'leading brother'. There is a sense too among some that being an elder is not a spiritually advantageous position to be in. Once Aiguo and I sat on his sofa discussing the effects of inappropriate leadership action on younger church members. Characteristically, he cut into the conversation by asking 'Who is the head of this household?' 'Christ?' I suggested, thinking of the sign that most followers have in their home declaring, 'Christ is the head of this household' (*yesu shi zhe jia de zhu*). 'Yes, besides Christ,' he urged. 'You?' 'Nooo.' 'Meili [his wife]?' 'Ha, closer, but no,' he continued. Flummoxed, I offered, tentatively: 'Your son?' 'Yes! Which one?' he asked. 'Your eldest?' 'No!' he gleefully concluded.

Aiguo argued that his five-year-old youngest son was the true head of the household. What is more, this was an analogy for church eldership. Aiguo went through with me the stringent requirements for eldership, based on Titus 1:6–9: 'unreprovable', 'not self-willed', 'not quick tempered', 'not an excessive drinker', 'not a striker', 'not greedy for base gain', but rather 'hospitable, a lover of good, of a sober mind, righteous, holy, self-controlled'. 'Who would want to submit themselves to those conditions?' he asked, rhetorically. Only someone with childish pride, he suggested. Elders are necessary for the functioning of the church, but in the true spiritual hierarchy of Christlikeness, they were far from being at the top.

This chapter has explored how the attitudes of church members to their own minds, and how church arrangements and exercises, are orchestrated to keep the 'organisational' at bay and foreground, or 'enter into', the organic. The organic, we saw, is characterised by ordered spontaneity, social and psychological flow, rhythmicality, and smooth, undeliberated interaction. The next chapter explores the language with which these ideal, but attainable, experiences are described and framed. It unfolds what I argue is the ontology at the root of this language. In a nutshell, the argument will be that the exercises in flow I have described in this chapter are not felt and thought to be the creations of those involved. Rather, they are revelations of the dynamic essence of the church. This essence, I argue, is a thematised version of what Henri Bergson called *durée*. That is, the ever-generative life of consciousness itself.

Despite my introduction of the term ontology, I hope this chapter has already shown that church conceptions are far from neatly consensual or stable. Organic oneness, as a form of sublime sociality, comes with its own conundrums, such as the relation between the organic and the organised. There are other problems with the organic. We saw that the churchlife, given its reliance on the words of only two authors, is prone to routinisation, another enemy of organic spontaneity. Presence, of a relative other, be it Christ or an anthropologist, is one solution to this danger. Indeed, this may be Ni and Li's central roles – to act as relative outsiders infusing the group with performative energy.

Subjecting ourselves to power

One question anthropologists seldom ask is, why do people subject themselves to power? There are perhaps good reasons in many contexts for not asking

such a seemingly callous question. But there are many others in which to not ask it is to not understand. David Graeber, for instance, has long maintained that all societies are founded, at least implicitly, upon a set of consensually arrived at values, be they that debt is fair (2011), that bureaucracy is efficient or that an economy can be entirely regulated by market forces (2015), or that no alternative way of arranging society is possible (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). A king, for Graeber (2001, 2017), is only a king because people find some kind of value in treating him as one. But is value the only register in which to ask the question, why do people subject themselves to power?

This chapter suggests, in addition, that people feel their way into being subject to what, at least from the outside, looks like power. Church members accept the authority of others because in doing so they experience themselves as organically re-emergent from a ground of shared oneness, they partake in sublime sociality. We may frame this as 'valuing' this experience, but to do so possibly misses the point. Whatever goes on 'in the mind' – valuing this, valuing that – church members will say, when one joins the flow of the churchlife such diversities of opinion melt away. 'In the spirit', one does not experience oneself as a valuing being, laying down blueprints and acting them out. Rather, one submits oneself to the values of another, God, who desires only human vessels for his oneness to be diffracted through.

Might there be other such sensed sublime socialities at work in the various ways human beings subject themselves to others? Perhaps they are articulated in less explicit ways than takes place in 'the church'? In Chapter 3, I delve deeper into the question of social flow and its relation to the valuing mind. In doing so, I suggest an alternative way of assessing the 'truth' of religious claims that perhaps a value-oriented perspective is not capable of following.

Notes

[1] See the Introduction for the key distinction between practising and exercising.

[2] 'Becoming anthropological' is also a liberation from the injunction to nourish the brothers and sisters, as I describe to some degree in Interlude II.

[3] The apparently paradoxical condition of leading being a secondary means by which followers follow is different from democratic ideologies of the leader as 'servant of the people' only in its rejection of representation. The words of Ni and Li do not 'represent' the brothers and sisters so much as they become a means by and through which the brothers and sisters can flow together.

[4] The ethnography of Chapter 2 is a 'microcosm' of the church writ large as long as we take the term to mean a rough version of the whole which is nonetheless irreducibly specific to the time and place being described.

The descriptions of this chapter thus relate to the global movement metonymically, they stand in as images of it. They are more specifically a synecdoche, a part standing in for the whole. We might think in turn of the opening anecdote of Chapter 2 as a synecdochal metonym of the whole chapter, which in turn is a synecdochal metonym of the group writ large. I used one small portion of the church in Taipei to suggest what the whole is all about.

[5] Read about 'calling on the Lord' as 'spiritual breathing' here: *Calling on the Name of the Lord,* Chapter 1, Section 1, accessed 29 August 2019 via https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=0E1AC67BF9

[6] Technically, according to Li, the term 'the Body' as opposed to 'the church' is an eschatological principle. It refers to the perfected church composed of perfect organic action. It also refers to the non-pragmatic, 'heavenly' aspect of the church in the present. That aspect of the church, that is, which God 'sees', which is its organic aspect, not all the pragmatic aspects and everyday moving in and out of 'the spirit' that characterises its 'earthly' aspect. But most brothers and sisters use the terms interchangeably.

[7] Point 1, sub-point D of Message Five in the New Year conference outline summarises Li's ministry this way:

> The life-giving Spirit is the Lord Spirit, the pneumatic Christ, for the metabolic transformation of the believers and for the growth and building up of the Body of Christ [*ci shengming de ling jiu shi zhuling, na shi ling de ji, weizhe xintu xinchen-daixie de bianhua, yiji jidushenti de zhangda yu jianzao*].

[8] I think that the churchlife achieves what is often spatialised in Chinese history as 'centredness' and aestheticised as 'blandness'. The moral roots of the aesthetic of blandness are evident in the Confucian classic *The Doctrine of the Mean* (*zhongyong*), which Watchman Ni was deeply familiar with (Meng 2018), and which no doubt influenced his own most influential text, *The Normal Christian Life* (*zhengchang de jidutu shenghuo*). We can see the link between centredness and blandness in an explanation of the central notions of *The Doctrine of the Mean* by the third-century courtier Liu Shao (courtesy-name 'Confucian genius' (*kongcai*, 孔才)). He wrote:

> In general, in human character, centeredness [as in the ability to remain in the center – *zhong*] and harmony are most valued. And in order for a character to be centered and harmonious, it must be plain, bland, and flavourless. This type of character is thus able to coordinate the five aptitudes and adapt smoothly to all situations (Jullien 2004, p. 60).

Being centred, plain, bland, and harmonious meant resisting extremes and particulars, never straying too far from the generic and (apparently) universal.

[9] See Dobler (2016) for the notion of rhythmicisation of northern Namibian peasant work itself as a means of inducing a greater sense of flow.

[10] Rhythm, to quote Malinowski, during fieldwork became my 'method of discovering invisible facts by constructive inference' (1935, vol. 1, p. 317, cited in Goldman 2018, n.p.).

[11] See Palmer (2019), Shue (2022) and Weller (2021) for Chinese rhythm analyses.

[12] An example of Li using the term 'the recovery of eating' took place in Taipei, in January 1972, recorded here: *The Lord's Recovery of Eating,* accessed 28 September 2019, via www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?id=2AEEADDE89

[13] I use the term intraconnected rather than interconnected because the latter term suggests 'extrinsic' connections between otherwise independent entities. As explained in the Introduction, and developed throughout the book, the ideal of organic (as opposed to 'organisational') oneness is that it is not characterised by interconnection between independent entities, but by a oneness that precedes any subsequent entityhood at all. The term intraconnection thus mirrors this principle of intrinsic relatedness characteristic of 'the organic'.

[14] Here are some examples Link (2013, pp. 171–72) gives of the use of eating idioms in everyday Chinese: *Wo bu chi ni na yi tao*, 'I don't eat that stuff of yours', means 'I don't buy it'. *Chi yi ge zier*, 'eat a piece', means 'to take a chess piece' in a game. *Chidiao dijun*, to 'eat the enemy army', means to defeat that army. To enjoy popularity is *chixiang*, to 'eat fragrance'. *Chi huikou*, 'to eat return discount', is to receive a kickback. *Chi taiping fan*, 'eat great-peace food', means passing one's days in comfort. *Chi doufu*, 'eat bean curd', is sometimes used where the beancurd stands for the soft white flesh that a male metaphorically nibbles when he flirts with a female. *Chi laoben* is to 'eat original capital – live on past gains'. *Chi kui*, 'eat loss', means to get the worst of something. *Chi zui,* 'eat crime', is to take the blame for something. *Chi ku*, 'eat bitterness', means to suffer hardship, and *chi jin*, 'eat tension', is to be tense or hard pressed. *Chi jing*, 'eat surprise', is to be startled or shocked; *chi bai zhang*, 'eat defeat in battle', is to lose in battle; and *chi guansi*, 'eat a lawsuit', is to be charged in a suit. *Chi hei zaor*, 'eat a black date', means being hit by a bullet, *chi cu*, 'eat vinegar' means feeling jealous. When a ship is loaded and, as English puts it, 'draws' water to a certain depth, Chinese says *chi shui*, 'eats water', to the same depth.

[15] Find Li's *yinyang* depiction of the relation between God and man here: *Guidelines for the Lord's Table Meeting and the Pursuit in Life,*

Chapter 10, Section 4, accessed 28 August 2019 via https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=0548091ED0

[16] Besides being an essential means of group synchrony, *Morning Revival* is financially essential to the church's publishing arm, Living Stream Ministry (LSM), which has exclusive rights to Li's corpus and organises each of the seven annual feasts. There is a symbiosis between the LSM and the churchlife that is difficult for outsiders, and many insiders, to disentangle. LSM's outlet in Taiwan is the Taiwan Gospel Bookroom (TGB), in Europe it is Amana Books (AB). TGB also coordinates the clandestine printing of *Morning Revival*, and other products within Li's ever-expanding *oeuvre*, in China. Interestingly, many church members in Taiwan find the official *Morning Revival* too dense, long, and complex ('It is like theology or something, I can't understand it!' one non-Christian Taiwanese friend exclaimed), so green A3 sheets of paper are printed with simplified versions of the week's reading.

[17] For many in Taiwan there was little problem with hierarchy. This parallels Feuchtwang's (2001) contrast between the Chinese Imperial cosmology in which order was achieved 'organically', through 'harmonic resonance' between the spheres of the kingdom – Emperor, Mandarins, and Peasantry – and the local, 'demonic' cosmology, which understood this same order in terms of a command hierarchy. Several church members in Taiwan referred to brother Zhou as the church 'president' and to the main church office in Taipei as the church 'headquarters' with a wink and a smile, to the consternation of some Western church members who associate being organic with equality. But this does not mean that it is okay in Taiwan for one person to speak while the rest listen for any period of time. All must speak, contribute, and live as 'the One New Man' (*yi ge xinren*).

[18] Here is an example of the 'love cheer' elsewhere: 'In Taiwan, young children are taught to applaud success by clapping in socially appropriate ways … For instance, clapping in the following way: clap-clap/clap-clap-clap/clap-clap means "cheering with love" in Taiwan … .' (Perry and Dockett 2008, p. 94).

[19] Sometimes newcomers were overwhelmingly new. On a hike up Yangming Mountain, Jingmei church members met a group of resident foreigners who hardly knew a word of Chinese. Nonetheless, they were invited to a church meeting, which five of them attended. The Jingmei group was overwhelmed however, the meeting became a competition, for some, of who could give the most heart-rending testimony, while others were so shy they hardly said a word.

[20] 'Baptism', as used in the church, is a neologism. While other Taiwanese Christians use the term *shouxi*, the church uses *shoujin*. While the

former denotes 'washing, rinsing, being made clean', the latter denotes 'immersion, being seeped or soaked'. From the church's beginning (Cliff 1983), there has been an embrace of baptism by immersion, now much more widespread than then, as a demarcation of death to the world and an entrance into the life of the church. Even if newcomers are already Christian and baptised, they are usually rebaptised into the church at some point; this is imaged as paralleling the ancient Israelites who first crossed the River Jordan and then the Red Sea. At the other end of the spectrum were those who had never encountered Christianity before and who I often spoke to after church meetings, during which they may well have been baptised. 'Yes, I enjoyed it,' would be the gist of their answer, 'but I have no idea who this "Jesus" is.'

[21] The thought that the whole period of my field research was suspected of being the Parousia is an unsettling one. A literal case of the white saviour complex as one anthropological colleague pointed out with shaking head. In another way, though, recognising this possibility could expose the long-standing anthropological hubris of being an observer who truly, 'objectively', observes, knows the place of which they write.

[22] Li is recorded as saying 'Christ is our incense' here: *The Divine Dispensing of the Divine Trinity,* Chapter 36, Section 3, accessed 20 September 2019 via https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=2029FEC1AA

[23] Here is one example of the first 'Lord's Table' in a locality being referred to as the establishment of a 'golden lampstand': churchinba (2016) '2016 First Lord's Table in Budapest', YouTube video, 24 July 2016. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pqE_uyOrBUA

[24] Noteworthy is that when co-worker Yu tried to procure a 'yes' or 'no' out of the listening congregation, asking several times 'Am I right?' about the idea of church expansion as a Fibonacci sequence, all he could get were *amen*s, to some frustration. 'Yes' and 'no' are terms used by the deliberating, calculating mind and the brothers and sisters in attendance refused to go there.

[25] To read Li's positioning of church authority as being between democracy and autocracy, see here: *The Elders' Management of the Church*, Chapter 8, Section 7, accessed 2 September 2019 via https://www.ministrybooks.org/.cfm?id=2FCFCE0808

3. Flow as revelation: the truth of the spirit

'There are two kinds of truth,' says brother Zhu, Editor-in-Chief of the *Taiwan Gospel Bookroom*. 'One is in the spirit and one in the mind,' he continues. Brother Zhu is tall, slim, and bespectacled. He is also instrumental to the life of Ni and Li's global following. The distinction between the two truths, of the mind and of the spirit, is at the heart of Ni and Li's ministry and is reiterated within the meetings of followers world over. In one particularly memorable instance, one of the international church leaders, a 'blended brother', as world-touring 'speaking brothers' within the following are called, was holding a 'question and response' session with a few hundred devotees in a hired-out budget hotel in the British Midlands in 2015. He was handed an anonymous question, pulled out of a Tupperware box brimming with them, which asked if he ever regretted becoming a Christian. In his response he said that he probably struggled more with his faith than anyone else in the room. 'If I stay in my mind for more than 10 minutes,' he declared momentously, 'I am an atheist!' There was a moment of tense silence, interspersed with rumbles of nervous laughter. 'But then,' he continued, 'I just shout "Hallelujah!!! Oh Lord Jesus!!!"' The yellow-carpeted conference hall erupted with a relieved cacophony of amens, hallelujahs and Oh Lord Jesuses. Here, the truth in the mind, atheism, was rejected for the truth in the spirit echoing around that rather drab hotel room.

Anthropologists often refer to their 'gatekeepers'. These are instrumental figures who grant and facilitate the anthropologist's entry into 'the field'. My own gatekeeper with respect to the church in Taiwan, Aiguo, features heavily in this book. Though Taiwanese, with many connections to church members in Taiwan, he currently lives near to my own house in the UK. Before I left for Taiwan to conduct my fieldwork, we took a walk one day along a nearby river. Aiguo asked me about my research plans and listened patiently as I told him about how I would try to understand what was distinctive about the church in Taiwan. I would spend time with church members to get to know their stories, I said, I would note down the infrastructure of the church and the patterns of meeting, do some historical research, and so on. As I paused, he had his question ready: 'But what is the spirit?!' he enthused, 'how will you explain the spirit?'

Answering Aiguo's question

In this chapter I aim to answer Aiguo's question. I explain what I think 'the spirit' is and I outline how anthropology might take seriously its 'truth'.

The sublime sociality that church members call organic oneness is neither experienced as an affective or emotional product of human activity, I propose, nor as the practice of a prior set of convictions or beliefs. These are the two sides of a dialectic made famous by Emile Durkheim in his 1912 text *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. There he argued that the fundamental constituents of religion were two: the 'collective effervescence' generated through the gathering of human bodies and the 'collective representations', which, however indirectly, reflect and then become the context for these experiences of bodily presence. While there have been many critiques of Durkheim's peculiar framings and the shaky evidence on which he relied, the structure of his dialectic, with conceptual representation on one side, and emotional buzz on the other, is still definitive of anthropological theories of religion. While no anthropologist denies the importance of representations or emotions entirely, their approaches to religion can be differentiated to the degree that they emphasise the primacy of one over the other.

This anthropological emphasis on either conceptual representation or emotional buzz seems uncannily close to Ni and Li's picture of 'Christianity' being rooted in the concepts of 'the mind' and 'the emotions' of 'the soul'. But if the truth of the spirit that Ni and Li are thought to have 'recovered' is neither the conceptual, representational truth of the mind, nor quite the 'emotional truth' of feeling the excited buzz of gathered bodies, nor even the 'truth' that exists in the correspondence between representations and emotions (famously described by Renato Rosaldo in his *Culture and Truth* (1993)), then what is it? The truth of the spirit, in contrast to the truths of the soul, do not, it seems, originate with either the individual or the gathered collective. Rather, it is a joining in with, an entering into, a releasing, of a flow that precedes the existence of both each individual and each church gathering.

Organic oneness, the social flow I described in some detail in Chapter 2, is framed by many brothers and sisters, we see in this chapter, as revelatory. It is not, primarily, the enactment of a set of collective representations that are believed to be true. Rather, the enactment itself is true: the amens, hallelujahs and Oh Lord Jesuses echoing around a hotel room. 'The truth of the spirit' that we encountered above is a truth revealed through doing, through revelling in a sublime form of sociality, rather than being represented accurately. It is a truth that is 'entered into' rather than reflected or generated. How do we think through this framing anthropologically? The Durkheimian dialectic seems not quite up to the task. The effervescence above is not *just* emotional stimulation, not correspondence between concepts and facts or representations and affect. It simultaneously uncovers and enacts a reality of flow, I propose, that precedes it. It revels in flow, is a revelation of flow. This is the 'truth' element. I suggest, then, that we should begin by tracing a fresh genealogy, back not to Durkheim but to his contemporary, his institutional and intellectual rival, Henri Bergson (1859–1941).

Towards a Bergsonian anthropology

Bergson is often considered a philosopher only, a 'philosopher of life' (Caeymaex 2013) whose 'vitalism' has since been surpassed by more scientific, mechanical conceptions of what it means to be alive. These assumptions are equally misguided I, and others (e.g. Barnard 2011; Capek 1971; Grosz 2004), think. First, Bergson was often quite pragmatic in his writing, focusing on embodied as much as more cerebral modes of attending to the real. He was also a theorist of religion, as can be discovered from his final, admittedly not unproblematic, work *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1977 [1935]). In this work he offers a compelling critique of the Durkheimian model. Finally, Bergson's vitalism is currently being rediscovered as a viable and even necessary mode of thought for understanding recent biological, as well as sociological, findings.

Just as Ni and Li offer a path beyond the soul, I believe Bergson leads us down a route beyond Durkheimian dialectics. The groundwork has already been laid. E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1965) (and later Edmund Leach (1976)) influentially critiqued Durkheim's approach to religion on two rather devastating fronts. First, Durkheim's account of how 'religion' began in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (2008 [1912]), was entirely speculative, a just-so story typical of Victorian evolutionary thinking. With some recent minor exceptions, this critique largely put an end to taking Durkheim's account of the origin of religion seriously. However, the second critique was not about Durkheim's account of the origins, but of the mechanics of religion. Evans-Pritchard accused Durkheim of 'pop psychology' in his notion that the gathering of bodies produces feeling of 'collective effervescence' which in turn form the emotional bedrock for religious beliefs and ultimately post facto justifications for society itself.

Whether the critique was fair or not, post-Durkheimian theorists from Leach to Laidlaw have sought to contextualise the emotions produced in group settings by focusing on various modes of collective and individual mentation which precede them. These mental activities range from the generic 'culture' (Leach 1976) to the much more specific and useful notions of 'semiotic ideologies' (Keane 2007) and ethical principles (Laidlaw 2014). Nonetheless, these attempts at contextualising embodied emotion are always met in turn with arguments emphasising the primacy of emotionality (e.g. Jackson 1996). Thus Webb Keane (2014), for instance, counters Laidlaw's (e.g. 2014) virtue ethics focus on ethical life projects with the notion that ethical deliberations always emerge, reflexively, out of more embodied situations. The mind–body see-saw has thus generally set the pattern for the various turns that have defined the new in the anthropology of religion. With the rejection of origin stories, moreover, this see-saw can never really stop.

Bergson is quite refreshing, I think, in holding that reality itself is defined by movement, by flux, by flow. He is 'probably the last of the great metaphysicians', Elizabeth Grosz (2004, p. 155) writes. His was a metaphysics nonetheless

deeply attentive to experience. Bodies, minds, and social forms, Bergson held, can be more or less configured to express or obfuscate this primal reality of flux and flow. None have any role in setting this reality into motion in the first place. Flow is both the metaphysical and experiential ground from which all other phenomena (things as they appear) and noumena (things as they are) arise, reflexively or not.

A Bergsonian genealogy for anthropology is not without precedent. Matt Hodges (2008) has pointed to the fact that, without theorising it as such, recent social science has taken it for granted that something like 'flow' is 'the variable essence' (Deleuze 1991 [1966], p. 34) of social life. He proposes making this widespread intuition explicit and temporalizing it using Bergson's concept of *la durée* as 'the manifold substance of "history" itself' (Hodges 2008, p. 413). *La durée*, Hodges explains, drawing on Gilles Deleuze's explications of Bergson's thought, is perpetually 'actualised' as the flow of life from a state of pure qualitative flux and flow termed 'the virtual'. If Ni and Li's Mingled Spirit flowing through the spirits of their followers, perpetually 'new' and preceding all thoughts, intentions, and emotions, sounds esoteric, it seems no less so to me than Bergson, Deleuze, and other *durée*-oriented philosopher anthropologists.

My suggestion indeed is that Ni and Li's ministry is 'true' not to the degree that it 'reflects' a Bergsonian ontology. Rather it is true to the degree that, within the brothers' and sisters' lives, speaking and hearing this ministry configures them in ways that allow them to flow along with, and as, the spirit. As Bergson did in his letters to one Catholic critic, I too concede 'the reality of the Spirit' (Bergson 1972, p. 964) here. And that reality is none other than the reality of primal flux or flow, of *durée*, which, according to Hodges (2008) at least, anthropologists themselves seem increasingly to assume is fundamental (cf. Rockefeller 2011).

The flow of the real

It appears to be no accident that a key aspect of the spirit according to Ni and Li is 'intuition' (*zhijue*), a term which first entered mainstream Chinese vocabulary via the hugely popular translations of Bergson's work in early twentieth-century China (An 1997), though it also has deep precedent within both Daoist and Confucian thought (Ciaudo 2016). Intuition, not 'intellect', was for Bergson the only means of becoming attuned to the ontological primacy of *durée*. Bergson's critique of intellect almost exactly parallels church critiques of 'the mind'.

The intellect, he writes in *Creative Evolution* 'presents to us things and states rather than changes and acts' (1922 [1907], p. 261). The intellect, for Bergson, in Bruno Latour's (2001) term, 'freeze-frames' reality. Intuition on the other hand, Bergson writes, 'return[s us] to the direct perception of change and mobility' (1988 [1946], p. 118). Early commentators did not fail to notice the religiosity of Bergson's philosophy, with J. Alexander Gunn calling it the 'gospel of intuition'. Gunn's characterisation of this philosophy is also highly resonant

with the 'organic oneness' of the church. '[B]y Intuition', he writes, 'we shall find ourselves in – to invent a word – 'intunation' with the *élan vital*, with the Evolution of the whole universe, and this absolute feeling of 'at-one-ment' with the universe will result in that emotional synthesis with is deep Joy' (Gunn 1920, p. 109, in Leung 2022).

Via Deleuze and other recent philosophical reaccommodations of Bergson, anthropologists who have found his ideas generative thus far (e.g. Bialecki 2022; Hodges 2008) have tended, as is the social scientific tendency (Cannell 2005), to secularise them. This chapter explores both the religiosity of Bergson's ideas and their potential to illuminate religiosity. This is specifically a Chinese Christian religiosity, though I believe the ideas have much wider applicability than that. Here I show how Bergson's ideas can both form a bridge between the perpetually rewidening gap between the emic and etic in anthropology, as well as shedding light on the most intimate aspects of psychosocial life.

Anthropologists have yet to explore the Bergsonian potentials for more fine-grained analyses of how flow, or a sense of joining in with the primal flow of life, becomes the basis of significance in people's lives. However, those who have employed Bergson in their thinking have tended to put forward critiques curiously resonant with Ni and Li's critiques of Christian denominationalism and its basis in the soul. Tim Ingold, for instance, who often draws directly upon Bergson (e.g. Ingold 2018, p. 165), is deeply critical of approaches to the world apparently devoid of flow. He critiques, for example, anthropologists who focus on objects, their 'agency', and their surface 'materiality', arguing that these are desperate attempts to breath artificial life into parts that have already been severed from a living, moving whole (Ingold 2007). For similar reasons, he is critical of both the concept of 'culture' pioneered by Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and others, which, he holds (Ingold 1986), robbed anthropology of its original attentiveness to human life as a stream of intertwined, unfolding consciousnesses, and the 'nature' of the natural scientists, which, he finds (e.g. Ingold 2013), assumes a deadening impasse between the flow of consciousness 'in here' and the mechanical movements of natural things 'out there'.

An anthropology attuned to the emergent conundrums of Chinese Christianity and other forms of not-always-unproblematic efforts at 'horizontal transcendence' (Goodenough 2001) might, with Ingold, argue that these are attempts to go along with the very essence of life as flow. However, it might also lend a more critical angle to the approach than Ingold and those influenced by him are wont to do. Rather than perpetually reasserting the truth of the processual perspective over the mechanical, casual ontology of Western science and its friends (a 'duality of critique' that critiques of duality are often prone to (Hui 2020)), an anthropology attuned to flow might ask under what social, economic, and political conditions attunement to the flow of life is possible at all.

It might ask whether a purely organic, flowing spontaneous life is a fantasy, of Ingold, Ni, and Li alike. Perhaps, as I have argued is the case with Ni and Li followers, there are mechanically operated, organisational stabilisers in place

which enable Ingold and others to live lives of flow in the first place? A critical anthropology of flow might thus make more room for ethnographic descriptions of when, where, and how – under what political-economic conditions, for instance – flow can and cannot take place in the many and varied contexts anthropologists work in. That is, it might allow more room, at least, than Ingold – who declares that he has had 'enough' of ethnography (2014) – perhaps is willing to make.

Returning to Bergson is a good place to start. He gives us a clue as to the conditions for when, where, and how intuiting the flow of life might be possible. Throughout his 1920 *Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays*, Bergson differentiates between a secondary self, composed in part by the categorising, memorising, identifying intelligence, and a primary self, defined by its intuition of the never-ending flow of reality itself, a never-ending flow Bergson terms, at least as it appears in and as human consciousness, *durée*. This primary self, emergent from reality-as-flow, is curiously like the spirit, as opposed to the soul (more like Bergson's secondary self), at the basis of churchlife experiences described thus far. Here we see that this flow *is* Bergson's *durée*, historically, culturally elaborated in a different way. Put otherwise, my sense is that the centrality of social flow defines Chinese Christianity and that that flow is itself a particular experience and thus revelation of the universal flow of *durée*. Ahead, I show how we can understand (a) the education of children and (b) laughter in the church from this Bergsonian perspective. First, however, I return to brother Zhu to describe how he first compelled me to think of flow as a *revel*atory, and not just social, form.

Flow as revelation

Brother Zhu spends much of his time overseeing the translation of the ever-expanding church 'ministry' (despite the deaths of its authors), into and out of Mandarin. I have seen him many times on church stages, live translating the Mandarin- or English-speaking speaker, for non-Mandarin- or non-English-speaking attendees. He is adept in Greek, Hebrew, French, and Spanish too. From the 1970s to the early 2000s he helped carry out Witness Li's vision to edit, compile, and translate the church's very own Bible – *The Recovery Version* (*huifu ban*) – finished in 2003, and containing over 15,000 footnotes taken from Li's ministry. After waiting outside brother Zhu's glass-fronted office (Figure 3.1), which overlooks a floor of hard-working church 'serving ones', in May 2016, I am welcomed in and shown to a chair facing his paperwork-filled desk. I had sent him some questions before our interview, as requested, and as we both get comfortable, he prefaces our conversation, adjusting his glasses with a half-smile, with the following:

> Err well these questions are in one sense difficult to answer, because um you are you know you are researching into arr what we consider

Figure 3.1: The 13th floor of Believe Christ Building (*xinji dalou*), owned by Taiwan Gospel Bookroom, part leased out to Citibank, on the same road as Taipei 101



Source: Author.

> things in the spiritual realm but with a linguistic or a sociological point of view, hehe, you are trying to you know put things from two realms, hehe!, together, so … well but anyway that is your research. …

After these initial remarks, the interview which ensued was nonetheless instructive, for me at least. I tried to establish whether brother Zhu agreed with me that the distinctive vocabulary of the church was a result of the translations and translingual interactions that characterised the early decades of the church in China. He refused to put it down to social relations such as these. He told me that originally he and a team of translators had translated the *Recovery Version Bible* from English to Chinese. 'Brother Li' was not happy with it and told them to do the translation again, this time from the Greek and Hebrew.[1] He argued that the distinctiveness of the church's language was due to the fact that 'brother Li' and 'brother Ni' had gotten closer than any Christian before them to the 'deep truth' of the Bible.[2] Brother Zhu demonstrated this through what at first seemed a very pedantic point, typical of the realm of the mind, over-populated as it is by academics.

I had put it to him that a church sister who I attended a weekly Bible-reading class with said to me that the Chinese language is more polysemic than English. Often, she said, when reading or listening to the church ministry, the words used evoked unintended associations which distracted her from the intended churchly meaning. Despite being native Taiwanese, she found it useful at times to turn to the English versions of church literature to

clarify this meaning. I built upon this and suggested to brother Zhu that the language used in church congregations in the English-speaking locations was perhaps more distinctively, recognisably 'church language' than in Mandarin-speaking congregations. In the latter, the language was more like everyday Chinese, so it might take longer to recognise the congregation of one of 'the church'. He completely rejected my suggestion.

The distinctiveness of church forms of speech does not arise from any inter-linguistic, or intra-lingual phenomenon, he said. All Bible versions are translations, and all languages have their limitations, he reiterated. He emphasised furthermore that the distinction between the church and the cultures that surround it, and the church and 'Christianity', was due to the deeper truths of the church's ministry: the language of the church is the true language of the Bible. This time he added, 'Sometimes Chinese is closer to the original Greek than the English is.' This seemed an interesting point, 'Can you think of any examples?' I asked. After 'umming' and 'ahhing' for a while, he tentatively suggested Romans 8:26, a verse he had recently been using in a translation. 'It may not be a very good example,' he worried.

In the *Recovery Version Bible*, Romans 8:26 reads, 'Moreover, in like manner the Spirit also joins in to help us in our weakness, for we do not know for what we should pray as is fitting, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.' 'Now, this "joins in to help" in the Greek, is actually just one word [συναντιλαμβάνεται]', brother Zhu explains. He breaks down the Greek elements and then says that the Chinese for 'joins in to help' is *bangtong danfu*, and concludes hesitantly with, 'I think the Chinese is quite beautiful. The English,' he repeats in staccato fashion 'is "joins in … to help … us",' scrunching up his nose. 'This *bangtong danfu* is invented by brother Li,' he says. His point from a semantic perspective, I think, is that in both the Greek and the Chinese 'the Spirit' does not 'join in to help us', rather it 'takes' our weakness and 'bears' them (*danfu*). This conveys the sense of 'the Spirit' as something that 'takes over' in a single fluid movement rather than 'helps'. It implies a greater intimacy between spirit and suffering than the English suggests, an organic rather than organisational relation.

I want to briefly, parenthetically, give some wider context here to brother Zhu's chosen example. In the church ministry a basic principle is that one gives oneself to God and He in turn uses you as a 'vessel' in his Body, and you become a godman (*shenren*). This takes Paul's declaration in the book of Galatians that 'It is no longer I that live but Christ who lives in me' (2:20) or Christ's question to him on the road to Damascus – 'Why do you persecute me?' (Acts 9:4) – in response to his persecution of believers, to their logical, some say extreme, conclusion. The way in which this becoming-God occurs is 'organic', in the senses we have explored thus far. That is, it is a process of 'entering the flow', acting with continuous 'spontaneous' receptivity to the ongoing life of the churchlife. A corollary of this is that disjointed, mechanical modes of being are signs of being in the soul, which is the life of the purely human, not the human–divine. As noted before, these mechanical modes of

being in the soul are, in Ni and Li's anthropology, 'the (over-reactive) emotions', 'the (under-responsive) mind', and 'the will' which acts according to the whims of 'the self' rather than the needs of 'the Body'.

Consequently, there is an overt rejection of 'morality' in this process of becoming God. 'The knowledge of good and evil' come from the wrong Edenic tree, its fruits are soul, not spirit, food. 'It is not about good or bad,' Aiguo said to me over the phone during another discussion of younger generations who may have left the church due to perceived adult hypocrisy, 'it is about life or death.' Dave, a man in his late fifties who attended the same locality as Aiguo, was a visual aberration in church meetings, as he was covered in tattoos. Even after tattooing bikinis onto the naked women on his arms, he often expressed his discomfort at his aberrancy, once comparing himself defensively to 'fat brothers' whilst we lifted weights together. He spent most of his days in the city centre looking for people to 'talk God' to, and they were often too scared not to stop and listen, nodding compliantly until he let them on their way. His membership to the group was sporadic and his assimilation on the whole quite unsuccessful. Nonetheless, his favourite catchphrase echoed the principle that Aiguo conveyed to me: 'Don't be good,' he would say with a wave, every time we parted, 'be God!' The church, world over, thus distinctly rejects 'charity', as action which emerges from 'the knowledge of good and evil', from the deliberating, do-good soul, being merely a symptom of the ignorance and degradation of 'Christianity', 'religion', humanity.

Returning to brother Zhu: beyond aesthetics

Returning to brother Zhu, the idea of the spirit 'helping us', it seemed he was saying, lacked the flowing spontaneity characteristic of divine-cum-human, human-cum-divine, life. Or, in my Bergsonian anthropology, lacked an intuitive sense of the flowing real at the root of all life and consciousness. Admittedly, brother Zhu was conducting our interview in the 'realm of the mind'. The attention to grammar and syntax is not something that would occur in church meetings dedicated to 'exercising the spirit'. The quality of my interaction with brother Zhu, with its hesitations, disagreements, non-spontaneity (e.g. his asking for my questions beforehand), was distinctly unchurchlike. Nonetheless, these were shadows cast upon the cave walls of the mind which, I think, revealed something of the 'deeper' reality of the spirit beyond the cave mind.

Thus far, the focus has largely been upon the exercises by which one 'enters the spirit'. Brother Zhu seemed to be showing me the 'truth' that such a mode of being allows one to 'see' (Li called Ni 'the seer of the divine revelation' (Lee 1991a). It was a truth in which the embodied state of flow reveals itself to be a feature of reality. It is a state of flow, moreover, that is not only an effect of the body but can equally appear in the way words are put together. The truth of the spirit is a participatory truth that emerges through the rhythm of one's lips

and the pumping action of church fists. This is a truth that can only emerge when it enters you. It is not a truth accessed through accurate representation, that can be objectivity perceived, with 'the mind', the (literal) laughability of which I describe below. That which appears as a human construction to the mind, reveals itself as a human–divine essence to those who allow it to flow through them, this flow being accessible, in Bergsonian terms, through intuition rather than intelligence.

We might take brother Zhu's appreciation of the beauty of church language as evidence that it forms a distinct 'representational economy', but this would be to describe the truth of the spirit in terms of 'the mind' and my aim here is to take brother Zhu as seriously as I can. Perhaps 'affective economy' is a better term? Affect theory is, via Gilles Deleuze's influential expositions (1991), deeply influenced by Bergson (e.g. Massumi 2002, pp. 5–7), though it seems to have lost both his intuitive and metaphysical moorings. Bergson was very much concerned with 'precision' (Bernet 2010), which, regardless of whether one buys into it, his approach seems to offer more of. Intuition, for Bergson, is precisely the embodied sense of life, consciousness, and reality as the flowing source of everything. One does not find this degree of rooting in the real in contemporary affect theory. Given that organic oneness seems to manifest itself in the built as much as the linguistic environment of the church, then, aesthetics may be a better term?

Birgit Meyer (2010) argues that while many forms of Protestantism shun an explicit concern with aesthetics, anthropologists, as analysts, must understand that Protestant religious experiences in fact arise from distinctive, translocal 'aesthetic formations', often characterised by a relative plainness and colourlessness. Anthropologists of Orthodox Christianity, which generally embraces aesthetics, employ this concept to less antagonistic effect. They note, for instance, with regard to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, 'where there is no transnational church administration', 'a commitment to recognizable choreographies of gestures, sounds, images, and corresponding attitudes that can produce quite strong distinctions from non-Orthodox outsides' (Luehrmann 2018, p. 16). A particularly noteworthy comparison with organic oneness perhaps is the worldwide appeal to Orthodox communities of 'the idea of Byzantium, or Byzantine roots … conceptualized simultaneously as a return to a historical core of Orthodoxy and an affirmation of its universality' (Luehrmann 2018, p. 17). 'Byzantineness', Sonja Luehrmann theorises,

> is perhaps a style par excellence, where what matters is not so much individual elements such as monophonic chant accompanied by the single-tone deep drone, painting in natural pigments using so-called reverse perspective, or the practice of meditative prayer with short, repetitive formulas known as the Jesus Prayer. Rather, what produces the effect of Byzantineness is the sense that any one element is part of a larger harmonic whole that encompasses verbal, musical, visual, and monumental art. The perceived naturalness of this overarching

> style moves Orthodoxy beyond particular national histories and historical dependencies and helps set off the Orthodox 'East' from the perceived individualism of 'the West' (2018, pp. 17–18).

Characterisations of Byzantineness as a style capable of 'forg[ing] connections in the absence of a centralized structure' (Luehrmann 2018, p. 16), as an 'aesthetic formation', certainly seem to resonate with church concerns for organic oneness. Church aesthetics, like the aesthetic formations of Eastern Orthodoxy, seem to form 'a larger harmonic whole'. We might, then, say that organic oneness, as a style like Byzantineness, is an 'effect' of the 'sense' of this larger harmonic whole, its 'perceived naturalness' being a misrecognition that misattributes a more substantial reality to oneness than its actual reality, as a style.

I wonder, though, at the epistemological and political justification for this approach. First, it positions the anthropologist as the subject who truly knows. While Orthodox Christians may feel they are participating in an essence which flows back and forward through time, the analyst knows that this is a misrecognition of their own agency, a confusion over cause and effect. It is in assuming a Byzantine essence and by associating that essence with certain dynamic relations which compose an overarching style, that these Christians produce a knock-back effect on themselves. This knock-back effect is the sense of participating in a deep essence of Byzantineness. The ontological lie of an essence flowing through Orthodox history nonetheless produces an 'emotional truth', or at least a truly emotional sense of participating in that fictive essence. This is the Durkheimian dialectic I began with.

I want to raise two objections to treating organic oneness, 'the truth of the spirit', as a style resulting in certain aesthetic formations. The first is that as a descriptive concept 'style' seems too starkly at cross purposes to the notions of 'truth' and essence upon which many brothers and sisters justify lifelong adherence to the church and its ministry. Orthodox Christians embrace materiality and aesthetics more positively than most Protestants (e.g. Carroll 2018). Still, the Byzantineness that is perceived to give rise to Orthodox aesthetics and materialities is perhaps ultimately only instrumental in affording the presence of God. It is conceivable that describing Byzantineness as a 'style' does not go entirely to the heart of what it means to be Orthodox. Organic oneness, the truth of the spirit, on the other hand, is the very substance of the divine for church brothers and sisters. Describing it as a style seems to do disservice to its phenomenological, not to mention theological, significance.

The descriptive notions of style and aesthetic formation thus gloss too quickly for me over the experience of participating in a transhistorical essence. The structure of this feeling is not one of emergent creation, but creative discovering, *revel*ation. When brothers and sisters manage to speak with the cadence of church speak, putting together the difficult words of Li's ministry in just the right way, timing their interjection with perfective responsivity to the previous speaker, the sense of getting it right is a sense of having re-entered

the dynamic, moving reality of the spirit, not one of having 'produced' something. We may note that this is very often how artists – as opposed to art critics – speak of their work. As a process of discovery. We may note an artist's 'style', but most are not centrally about reproducing this. Rather, their style is the effect of a deeper process of disciplined, creative discovery, revelation even (Heidegger 2017 [1936]; Merleau-Ponty 1961 [1945]; Young 2001).

It is not only that the notions of aesthetic formations and style fail to capture the experiential significance of organic oneness. They fail to capture the fact that that which gives rise to the aesthetic formations of the church also gives rise to ethical and cosmological principles, ways of feeling, being, and interacting. Describing these too as a style seems to stretch the concept beyond meaning. Moreover, that which gives rise to church aesthetics, ethics, cosmology, and interactive modes of being and feeing, we will see, has a history and existence beyond the church itself. Thus I will continue to propose that flow as a structure of reality is the best candidate to fulfil this analytical role. I will even suggest that Bergsonian flow is at the heart of many lives, Christian, Chinese, and otherwise, whether it is conceptually recognised as such or not. It would behove us anthropologists to recognise it. Such a recognition would carry the anthropology of flow well beyond this starting point, in Chinese Christianity.

Dynamic versus static religion

The concepts of aesthetic formation and style alongside other potential candidates such as affective or representational economies, then, seem to hollow out the phenomenological sense of participation in, not just constructive reiteration of, a deeper reality that 'the truth of the spirit' seems to allude to.[3] How do we think through the existence of such a 'truth' pointing as it does to human realities which seem to pre-exist human practice while no doubt being shaped by it? I think again it is a question of redrawing our theoretical lineage.

Just focusing on the question of presence, which has been so central to anthropological understandings of Christianity so far, anthropologists of Protestantism tend to emphasise the importance of Protestant values and ideas (e.g. Wielander 2013) – or, on a deeper analytical level, their 'linguistic' and 'semiotic' ideologies – and how they shape experiences of sonic, tactile, and affective encounters. Anthropologists of Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, tend to start with tactile, sensory, affective encounters and theorise representation to the degree that it is emergent or facilitative of these. Both approaches are traceable to Durkheim's dialectic between 'collective effervescence' and 'collective representations'.[4]

While Durkheim may work fine for presence-oriented Christianities, though I think flow is there too, unrecognised, Bergson is better for the sublime sociality cum organic oneness of Chinese Christianity. However, he does

need updating somewhat. *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1977 [1935]) contains an unnamed criticism of Durkheim's theory of religion. What Bergson calls 'static religion' arises in response to the intelligence. It has, he argues, a 'mythmaking function' that placates the harmful side-effects that emerge from the evolution of human intelligence. A central such effect is awareness of our own limitations, and in particular, of death. The myth-making function of static religion is to provide the intelligence with counter-arguments to this debilitating awareness, in the form of stories of the afterlife. Though this argument starts in a different place, we can see that it parallels Durkheim's relatively closed dialectic of representation and effervescence.

'Dynamic religion', Bergson argues, in contrast, is not about maintaining the stability of the human mind and society. Rather, it arises, perhaps unsurprisingly at this point, from awareness of, attention to, attunement with, *durée*. Throughout the work, Bergson emphasises that, in practice, dynamic and static religion are inseparable. There are no pure historical forms of either. What is more, Bergson concedes, 'dynamic religion is only propagated through images and symbols supplied by the myth-making function' (1977 [1935], p. 231). Thus Meister Eckhart, for example, a fourteenth-century Dominican monk whose mysticism is uncannily resonant with our age, preached of a 'God beyond God', a fountain of endless creativity emerging from the 'silent desert' of the real (Smith 2004 [1987]). He, nonetheless, took his words and idioms from the otherwise static registers of the medieval Catholic church. This possibility for religion to be more than an evolved cultural–emotional enclosure, to find its vital sources in the touch of the really, unrepresentable, real, seems to offer a way out of the ongoing booms and busts of the Durkheimian genealogy. It seems to recognise too, with William James (1977, p. 96), that '[r]eality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it'.

Bergson needs updating, however. The emergence of dynamic religion, he held, depends upon 'mystic genius' (Bergson 1977 [1935], p. 269). This genius, he held, is exceedingly rare, having to wait for its re-emergence for the next 'great mystic' to 'have the impression of a current passing from their soul to God, and flowing back again from God to mankind' (1977 [1935], p. 40). Static religion, Bergson holds, which can at best imitate dynamic religion (1977 [1935], p. 46), characterises both earlier stages and the general mass of humanity. This bias against the mechanical masses and for dynamic spiritual elites does not feel conducive to a contemporary, humanistic anthropology. Nonetheless, Bergson finishes his last book with an interesting final phrase: 'the essential function of the universe', he concludes, is 'a machine for making gods' (1977 [1935], p. 275). As Bialecki (2022, p. 43) notes, this a strange last word of a man whose whole *oeuvre* was a prolonged critique of mechanical thinking. Perhaps he realised the dynamic and static, vital and mechanical, organic and organisational were much less separable, even in theory, than he had previously surmised. This book explores this possibility ethnographically, as a basis for understanding Chinese Christianity.

Conundrum of coherence XV: life versus knowledge

The inextricability of the organic from the organisational in attaining sublime forms of sociality becomes especially apparent when examining a key aspect of church vocabulary – that of 'life' versus 'knowledge'. The accumulation of 'knowledge', for many brothers and sisters, is felt to impede spontaneous absorption of the flow of the spirit. Li taught that 'understanding' his ministry or the Bible were non-essential.[5] In the summer of 1978, he spoke the following to a crowd of church members in Boston, Massachusetts,

> The biggest frustration to understanding the Bible is trying to understand it. This thought may contradict our concept. We may think that when we read the Bible, the purpose is to understand it. There is certainly nothing wrong with understanding the Bible, but trying to understand it is a great mistake. We simply need to read the Bible; we do not need to try to understand it. The more we try to understand, the more we will not understand.

The tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil (in other words, of morality, ethics) is 'the wrong tree' followers emphasise. In contrast, the tree of life is to be eaten constantly, starting first thing in the morning, the earlier the better. Because, that is, the earlier it is, as I found out myself, the more likely 'the mind', a key part of 'the soul' upon which 'degraded Christianity' relies, can be caught unawares, and the more likely that the mind can be 'renewed' (*xinyouhuo*) by finding its basis in a fresh, pre-conceptual experience of 'Christ' as the ever-flowing dynamic substance of the Body.[6]

In a recent online 'fellowship', with 'the church in Irving', co-worker Chen worried that *because* the knowledge revealed by Li and Ni is 'the best', revealing the 'intrinsic significance' of the Bible, it was in danger of leading to lives based in rooted in 'knowledge' rather than 'the divine life':

> All [this] knowledge, good knowledge, Recovery knowledge, in another way can become, can frustrate us, from the simplicity that is in Christ, from our enjoyment of Christ. So, we know all this, you know. When a brother stands to speak, we can finish his sentence, y'know what I mean. When a brother starts to speak on some subject, we just know it already. Erm, when a hymn is called you already know where it is. Wow, well, that's wonderful. But saints, then you look at yourself … you don't have *joy,* you're not in the *heavens,* you're defeated, or half defeated. You don't have that kind of, y'know, er, *vibrancy*, you don't have that kind of *vitality*, er, you have no impact! You have no impact! What's *wrong*?! Because we may have this [pointing to head] but we what? We lost the enjoyment of the Lord as our air, our drink, our food. …

'Y'know, there was a time out in here, when we were attacked by Christianity,' he later continued,

> for our *calling*. And they say, 'this is something from the East'. This is, er, er, what they call it, er, er, er, 'prayer with repetition'. This is chanting like 'Hare Krishna'. Y'know, like in my days, 'Hare Krishna'. 'This is an oriental chanting.' We were attacked soundly! Along with pray-reading. And, and, little did they know, that this changed our whole Christian life! So many miracles are happening, I mean true miracles, in our *lives*. We see things, this light and this joy, and this strength, and this, er, erm, grace. And I tell you that's the church*life*. But in religion they don't practise this. They know the knowledge, the law, the forms, the religion. But I'm afraid we have become like that. Or at least we can become like that, in the churchlife.

Co-worker Chen points to a seeming paradox of this group. On the one hand, it defines itself by a special kind of knowledge. This 'high peak truth' (*gaofeng de zhenli*) is encapsulated by a frequently repeated phrase of the early church father, Athanasius. Namely, that 'God became man so that man might become God.' This revelation as re-revealed to Ni and Li is most often spoken about by the brothers and sisters in terms of breath, food, and drink: breathing, eating, and drinking God so as to become Him, or more specifically to reveal that He is always already becoming you. This high peak truth also includes the more specific anthropology I have been writing about, an anthropology hidden from 'Christianity' for millennia. Namely, that it is the spirit that is our 'innermost part' (*zuinei de bufen*), not the soul, and that this spirit flows with divine life, or *zoe* not *bios* life, it is often explained.

However, on the other hand, as co-worker Chen says, knowledge arises, in this anthropology, within the soul, from 'the mind', from the wrong 'organ', and thus separates the knower from God as the flowing substance of the real. Almost every church message I have heard – and I have heard at least hundreds – tackles this basic paradox. The knowledge of the church, it is reiterated, is the highest, best knowledge that has ever been available. Nevertheless, it is also true that this knowledge teaches us that knowledge is perhaps the biggest obstacle to entering the spirit. This issue leads to such subtle but monumental differentiations by the brothers and sisters between organisation (in the mind) and coordination (in the spirit), teaching (in the mind) and giving, or 'releasing', a message (in the spirit), criticism (in the mind) and discernment (in the spirit), opinions (in the mind) and sharing (in the spirit). From the outside, each paired term may seem almost identical to the other. From the inside, 'subjectively' (*zhuguande*), as many put it, one is in 'realm of the mind', the other in 'the realm of the spirit', and as brother Zhu emphasised, they cannot easily be joined together.

There are church messages and readings which are dedicated to presenting key contents of the ministry. These usually centre around specific metaphors taken from particular parts of the Bible. We have considered breathing, eating,

and drinking already. But there are other 'typifications' of 'Christ' as the substance that flows in and as the spirit: 'the good land' (*meidi*), for instance, that the Israelites of Exodus searched for so long. There is also the romantic love between the bride and bridegroom that we turn to in Chapter 5. This leads to the notion that the brothers and sisters are, or ought to be, 'crazy lovers of Christ', not bound by either the individualised emotions or the rational mind of the soul. There is also the notion of being 'dreamers' like Joseph of technicoloured raincoat fame. Again, the idea is not being bound by the logics of the soul. There are more eschatological metaphors too of being 'soldiers of Christ' and 'the heavenly city' known as the New Jerusalem that I hardly have space to go into. From trees and rivers, gloves and pots, stars and antibiotics, there are myriad other word images used to typify Christ, as the 'pneumatic' substance flowing through and as the spirits of the brothers and sisters.

Each of these images, in almost every message, testimony, and shared word that I have heard, lead back, in some pragmatic way, to the need to 'exercise the spirit'. And there are many messages and books by Ni and Li which hardly use word imagery at all. So much so that after flicking through a few of these books on my shelves at home, my partner remarked, 'This is all about following rules.' I pointed out in no uncertain terms that following rules was the precise opposite of what the group is about. 'Following rules' is the epitome of 'organisation'. Nonetheless, almost everything Ni and Li said, as recorded by their followers, was about how to conduct oneself in ways that are conducive to being in the spirit rather than in the controlling mind. At least on paper, this can come across as injunctions to follow rule after rule on how to live. One of the many advantages of conducting ethnographic fieldwork with a group over just reading the texts they abide by – the latter being almost the sole method used to understand this group before now (see the references in the Introduction) – is that one gains insight into *how* a set of entextualised principles are followed and not just *that* they are followed.

Nonetheless, there *are* lived tensions between the organisational and the organic that define what I have been calling the 'conundrums of coherence' characteristic of organic oneness. The conundrums that occur between life and knowledge push us to consider the possibility that these tensions are not entirely intrinsic to lives guided by the distinctions between the organic and organisation, or the intelligible and intuitive in Bergsonian terms. Rather, it is the specific exclusivisms of the Chinese Christianity epitomised by the following of Ni and Li that, at the very least, heighten these tensions. Though adherents will deny it, in many ways this Christian life form is more exclusive, in spirit if not letter, than both the traditional Chinese sociologics and the non-conformist Christianity that it both synthesises and rejects.

To explain further, Bergson's *durée*, as I have reframed it, is conceptually unrestricted. Awareness of it is not limited, that is, to a particular group of people or via a particular set of beliefs. Bergson arrives at the notion of *durée* simply by observing his own consciousness and inferring that everyone else's conscious shares the same quality. Awareness of 'Christ' as the substance of

one's being, in contrast, according to the brothers and sisters, is revealed only to Ni, Li, and their followers. That others, beyond 'the church', indeed beyond the Christian faith altogether, are capable of 'entering their spirit', is, though palatable to some, not publicly conceded. This relative exclusivity means that being in the spirit is restricted to certain kinds of social context, not likely to take place, for example, in a mosque, a temple, or a nightclub.

Not only this: it is also restricted to the use of certain words – namely, those of Ni and Li – and certain textures and rhythms of speaking and interacting explored previously. After a number of years this associational link between 'being in the spirit' and 'the churchlife' comes 'naturally', that is to say culturally, to the brothers and sisters. However, the work of creating this associational link is more problematic. It involves what looks very much, not only like knowledge put into practice, but like didactic organisation. This is especially the case when teaching children an exclusivity that does not necessarily come naturally to them.

Children: the exception

Children's meetings seem almost wholly to dispense with the concern for mutuality, shared nourishment, horizontal deification, for flow. They consist of didactic, moral lessons, activities, and songs that hammer the message home. One popular children's song sings,

1 A place for everything, for everything a place.
Our shoes! Our toys! Oh, girls and boys!
Put each thing in its place!

2 A place for everything, for everything a place.
My bat and bike, my skates and trike
Put each thing in its place!

3 A place for everything, for everything a place.
My plate I think goes in the sink!
Put each thing in its place!

4 A place for everything, for everything a place.
Our hats and coats, our boots and totes
Put each thing in its place!

Though children's songs and other activities, like adult pray-reading, seek to 'metabolise' (*xiaohua*) knowledge and organisation into rhythmically flowing organic life, children are not expected to 'get into their spirits' before receiving 'the ministry' in the way adults are. The justification for this is that it is possible to become a 'broken vessel' (*posui de qimin*). Children and young people are taught basic principles of Li's ministry using the image of a cup that holds water. The cup is 'you' as a 'vessel' of God, the water the spirit that

fills you. The aim of church meetings, training, and conferences for children and young people is to craft them into worthy vessels of God. This means principally being well educated (at least an undergraduate degree), having good moral character, and not exposing oneself to things – entertainment and other 'worldly' activities, or Californian public education according to one co-worker in the US[7] – that are likely to 'damage' one's vessel.

To illustrate the consequences of such exposure, in children's classes holes are poked in the (plastic) cup to show that it cannot be filled with water. The ideal is that one's cup would 'run over' (*yongliu*), thus nourishing (*yingyang*), supplying (*gongying*), feeding (*weiyang*), other cups. This is often linked to the 'wise virgins' in the book of Matthew (25:1–13) who have enough oil in their lamps to be allowed into the bridegroom's feast. He turns the foolish ones, on the other hand, without enough oil in their lamps, away. Or in Li's vocabulary, they are cast out into the 'outer darkness', the church's 1,000-year purgatory, envisaged as a protracted training period, for all those whose vessels are not full, and thus perfected, when they die. This is a non-eternal hell which accommodates imperfect Christians – namely, all but the 144,000 overcomers said to be prophesied in the book of Revelation, who have become perfected 'Godmen'. The church, in this sense, really is a machine for making gods.

When one looks with a certain eye, didactics are pervasive throughout the churchlife at all scales. In a PhD study of the church in Taipei from 1975, Morris Fred argued that there were symbiotic sets of relations between the church and the Taiwanese education system. He notes the frequent lament that 'Taiwan students' lives are very bitter' (*Taiwan xuesheng de shenghuo hen ku*), articulating the long, intensive school days that these students must (still) endure. He notes that many of the 'testimonies' he heard from young people in the church were about the difficulties of school life. Forty years later, the same was true during my own fieldwork. I could not help noting the contrast between crying adolescents in the church in Taipei who gushed about the need to eat the Lord after suffering a low test score and my own peers in the church, growing up in the UK, for whom school tests were the least of their worries.

Fred (1975, 1977) argues that the church serves a psychological function for young Taiwanese people, giving them a space to vent and come to terms with their worries and failures. He also reads many of the exercises distinctive to Ni and Li's following as continuous with traditional Chinese schooling practices. Pray-reading, for instance, he argues is simply a Christianised version of rote learning. Fred's highly enlightening thesis (1975) and subsequent work (1977) is explicitly functionalist. It is precisely framed by the Durkheimian dialectic of emotion and representation. He argues that the function of pray-reading is to inculcate church members with Li's worldview, forming one half of a dialectic between its internalisation as a set of beliefs and externalisation as emotive church practice, vocabulary, and material culture.

While valuable on its own terms, what this perspective misses is the deep enjoyment to be found in the *differences* between educational and church

cultures. Writing of the oft-noted parallels between traditional bureaucratic and divine hierarchies in Chinese popular religion, Stephan Feuchtwang argues, in contrast to emphases on their functional similarity, 'that it is precisely the difference and *lack* of correspondence of the rites and imagery of gods and demons to the manners and features of the living which give them metaphorical value' (2001, p. 58, emphasis added). I would add, in the case of Fred's parallel between educational and church cultures, that their difference leads not just to the latter's metaphorical value but to its enjoyment.

Like work, school is highly repetitive. The jouissance of calling on the Lord, pray-reading, repeated singing, I would suggest, arises precisely not from their educative value, though, as we saw with spontaneous conference singing, that can be their result. Rather, it is in the transformation of relatively familiar technologies of repetition into techniques of which one is fully participatory within. Flow becomes prioritised over downloading content into one's mind. The same was perhaps true for brother Li's transformation of the army march into a technique of mutual attunement at the beginning of Chapter 2. One can march without worrying about war, enjoy the physicality of speech without worrying about understanding it, gorge oneself on words without worrying about regurgitating them.

Nonetheless, children's meetings are indeed much more didactically framed than other meetings. They are by no means all about enjoying the flow. Still, we can understand their function via Bergson rather than Durkheim and thus see them as more than just aberrations in a group that otherwise seems to reject the organising, moralising mind.

Being based upon processes of introspection, Bergson's concept of intuition and the 'fluid responsiveness' (Barnard 2011, p. 23) of the primary self that emerges from it are rather individualist at times. Quoting from Bergson's first book, *Time and Free Will* (*TFW*) throughout, G. William Barnard gives a helpful summary of Bergson's perspective in this regard. 'As Bergson emphasizes', he writes,

> … most of us do not give much sustained effort to inner exploration in that, for most of us, 'our outer and, so to speak, social life is more practically important to us than our inner and individual existence' (*TFW* 130). Therefore, we prefer to substitute 'the symbol for the reality,' or more subtly, we are inclined to perceive 'reality only through the symbol' (*TFW* 128). In this way, by refracting ourself, breaking it into pieces, we create a 'conventional ego' (*TFW* 133) that is 'much better adapted to the requirements of social life in general and language in particular,' even if in doing so we inevitably lose sight of our more 'fundamental self' (*TFW* 128) (Barnard 2011, p. 19).

If the church tells us anything new about Bergsonian ontology here it is that attunement to our primary, flowing, selves can be a social as much as an introspective process. (Indeed, '[i]ntrospection and self-consciousness', Ni wrote,

'are harmful to spiritual life' (Nee 1968, p. 12).) Though the possibility of repetition becoming routine is ever present in the church, as described previously, spontaneity and pre-conceptual flow are undoubtedly ever present too. This is not, I would offer, to mistake 'the symbol' (the flowing spirit) 'for the reality' (*durée*) so much as one route to a reality that can only ever be framed, by humans at least, symbolically.

Nonetheless, when it comes to raising 'church kids' (*zhaohui ertong*), tensions do arise. The ideal seems to be that church education would craft them into unbroken vessels, so that when they mature, they will have the capacity to enter and transmit the flowing life of the Body. But then to simply follow in the footsteps of parental church membership would be too mechanical, too much like the 'dead ritual' of 'Christianity' and 'religion'. One needs to rediscover the truth of the spirit for oneself, organically.

When uncle Yang, my head-of-household host in Taipei, told me about how he joined the church, it was a matter of gradually replacing his love for sport with commitment to church living. In this sense his story was not peculiar. Other church members in Taipei recounted their transition into the church as a shift from gaming, Taipei being saturated with gaming culture, or playing sports. Wei-pong, uncle Yang's stepson, gave as his reason for not being a Christian, his commitment to playing computer games with his friends on Sundays. Uncle Yang saw this as perfectly fine, saying that he did not commit to the church until he was in his forties. When I asked him how the church had changed his life, he responded:

> In the first year, I just went to the Sunday meetings. I had a satisfying life with two or three brothers. I was very simple (*danchun*). But then after 1991, [one brother] said, he saw that I was meeting but saw that I was still very simple (*hai man danchun*), saw that I wasn't burning too much (*wanre*), so [he] asked me 'Do you want to help us serve, serve as an elder?' Actually, at this time I didn't know what an elder was. They said, 'Come in,' so I replied 'Okay.' Afterwards, I realised, [this was the] Tuesday prayer meeting. Actually, in that first year, I didn't know how to pray, and I didn't really pray. So, when I'd just started, I was satisfied with just the Sunday meeting. But after they asked me to serve as an elder, my life underwent a bigger change. Because on Tuesday [I] had [to lead the] prayers, sometimes [I] had to lead the small group meeting, am I right? Every week, two or three meetings. So slowly they brought me to serve, to go visiting (*kanwang*). So, slowly, of course in this way my life very slowly changed. It wasn't that fast. They all had lots of patience with me. Bit by bit, bit by bit.

This emphasis on slow conversion, and a further emphasis on a continuity between life and the churchlife, meant that 'belief' was not an either/or event in members' own experiences. Church members were critical of evangelical

conversion narratives emphasising dramatic, sudden change. Our failures are not meant to make us more attached to our own life story, one elder suggested to me, they are supposed to turn us away from ourselves towards 'the church', 'God's plan', the 'brothers and sisters'. More significantly, uncle Yang chose not to mention that he grew up in the church until I prodded him much more on the circumstances of his conversion.

One Sunday afternoon in Jingmei, it became more apparent why. We aligned ourselves on two sides of a dispute between our elder's mother, sister Li, and brother Jin, a playful, Korean-born businessman in his sixties at the centre of every church mischief. Sparks flew when I had asked whether it was best to have grown up within the church or to have come in from outside it. Brother Jin replied confidently that one should be 'at least 45' before joining the church, to have lived life, become one's own person. It was 'shameful' to be doing the same things as one's parents as a young adult, he said. I could not help thinking uncle Yang would have agreed. He was born to church-going parents, but he is proud of the fact that he himself did not join until he was 40 years old. Sister Li, however, was outraged. 'Forty-five!!' she exclaimed, 'how can you say it is best to be in the world when we have the option of the church?!' she continued, and 'Once we have seen the vision, how can we leave?!' The dispute seemed lodged in a conundrum: learning and knowing the representational truth of the church can be an impediment to a spontaneous, organic, experiential knowing of it.

Bergsonian laughter: an aspect of Chinese Christianity

A final aspect of the churchlife a Bergsonian perspective allows greater clarity on is laughter. First, it should be noted that Bergson thought of society in a very similar way to how church members think of the Body. Ideally, it is composed of members 'aiming after an increasingly delicate adjustment of wills which will fit more and more perfectly into one another'. It 'will therefore be suspicious', he continues,

> of all inelasticity of character, of mind and even of body, because it is a possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as an activity of separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is a sign of an eccentricity (1914, pp. 19–20).

'Our laughter', therefore, Bergson wrote, 'is always the laughter of a group'. It is a 'gesture', he reasoned, that 'softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical elasticity' (1914, p. 20). If, like many in his time, Bergson thought of society in organicist terms, laughter is a response to the emergence of the mechanical, of inadaptability, a lack of fluid responsiveness.

Like his other works, Bergson's (1914) book *Le Rire* ('Laughter'), in which he made these arguments, was highly popular in early twentieth-century China. It first appeared in Chinese in 1921, Chris Rea (2015) tells us, with numerous further translations and discussions around it developing through the 1920s and '30s. Responding to this fascination with Bergson's theory of laughter, Rea writes, 'one critic even claimed that Charlie Chaplin's performance style was quintessentially Chinese' (2015, p. 13). That is, Chaplin's mechanical antics resonated strongly in a social context that had always deeply valued 'the organic'. It seems that the tendency of Chinese political, social, and religious actors to think in 'organicist' terms over millennia primed eventual readers of Bergson to be especially receptive to the notion that laughter was a response to misfit mechanical action in an otherwise organically fluid social world.

But we must also note the specific context of early twentieth-century China, when both Ni and Bergson were writing. This was firstly an age when the mechanical, industrial West threatened to undo Chinese civilisation; a civilisation, Yuk Hui (2019) argues, that, unlike the Cartesian, Christian West, had never developed a cosmology of the technical. Secondly, with Yan Fu's immensely influential translations of Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Thomas Huxley, evolutionary notions of group selection were strongly shaping a rising nationalism in early twentieth-century China. To quote James Pusey:

> Spencer, the social scientist, realized, wrote [Yan] Fu, that 'when a *ch'un* [*qun*], a society, is formed, it is in body, function, and capability no different from the body of a living thing … If we know what keeps our own bodies alive, we will know what makes a *ch'un* secure'. So too 'a country is like a body,' a true 'body politic'. That is why China would be strong if only it would 'organize,' if only it would act as a social organism, if only it would pull itself together and act as one body (1983, p. 64).

It is noteworthy that the church's first alias, 'the Little Flock' (*xiao qun*), used the same term as Yan Fu: *qun* ['*ch'un*']. If China was especially receptive to Bergson's thought at this time, this reception should also help us rethink the language with which Bergson describes society. It is perhaps only in a social context where the organic fluidity of the social is especially thematised, and perhaps acutely under threat by the mechanical in a time of social disintegration and violent industrialisation, that laughter should be particularly equated with the inelasticity, the non-responsiveness, of the machine.

It only remains to make the link between the Chineseness of Bergsonian laughter and the Chineseness of Chinese Christianity's special attention to the organic. I have already noted two instances where mechanical, unresponsive actions in church settings are the butt of a joke. One was when a speaking brother chastised Chinese church members for automatically continuing on with their Chineseness despite hearing messages telling them to deny their

culture, and the second was when brother Jiazhi mechanically imitated his repetitive worklife. A third example should suffice to develop the point.

Laughter is a big feature of church messages everywhere, but it seemed especially so in Taiwan. Most of this laughter is Bergsonian. Perhaps the loudest laughter I heard in a church meeting there came during the following section of a message shared by one Taipei brother. 'Brothers and sisters,' he began,

> The test of my true spiritual growth is whether I can join (*lianjie*) with other saints. Joining has nothing to do with efficiency. We often have the issue of inertia (*guanxing*) when we want to do something in coordination (*peida*) with others. Like our trainees. Usually, two trainees are paired together by the Lord's arrangement (*zhu zhuzai de anpai*). Often, these trainees share a motorbike. One is faster and the other is slower. The faster one will be the one who has the motorcycle. He will start up the motorbike as soon as it is time to go. Sometimes, he will set off on the bike before his partner has even got on the back seat of the bike! [Over the top of howling laughter.] Brothers and sisters, can we really call this coordination?

It is telling that there is a machine at the heart of this comical story. We may also detect a certain recurrent scepticism of the (perhaps overly) knowledgeable trainees, all mind and no spirit, who are the butt of this joke. Most importantly, of course, the joke almost perfectly illustrates Bergson's theory of laughter. The comical is that which mechanically pokes out of the smoothly organic, responsive surface of society – or here, out of the Body of Christ, the church.

This talk of human surfaces and what lies beneath them, finally, leads to another theorist of laughter, namely Freud. Freud's notion of the joke was that it provides an 'escape from the pressure of actuality' (Forsyth 1926; Freud 1922). That is, it releases repressed tensions that society habitually forces upon its members. Thinking back to those words written on the outline on our laps in Nanggang Arena in the Introduction – that [t]*he church as the Body of Christ is absolutely organic, absolutely of life, with nothing organizational* and that *[t]o even mention the word organization concerning the church and the church life is wrong*… – we may note a second function of the above joke. It implicitly recognises the impossibility of an entirely organic life, a life of perfectly fluid responsiveness. It recognises that the miscoordinated, the organisational, the mental, is an inevitable aspect of all life, churchlife included. In doing so it adds to the joke's hilarity. It results, we might say, in a Freudo-Bergsonian slip.

Joy

Too often, anthropology has forgotten the joy of life, of certain kinds of life, and joy as a motivating factor for living them. This chapter has explored

enjoyment, laughter, repetition beyond functional use, rhythmicality, the aesthetic, embodied pleasures of fluidity and flow, and not being good, as the bases of Chinese Christianity. Joy too can be the basis of circulations of power, power that empowers, but even power that subjugates. This too has perhaps been underdeveloped in anthropology. Joy and the real are yet more rarely related in anthropological theories of being human.

Joel Robbins (2013) has called for an anthropology of the good, of the ways in which people live out their visions of the good life. Sherry Ortner (2016) in turn frames this as an anthropology that turns away from the dark, the oppressive, from suffering. But for followers of Ni and Li like Aiguo and Dave, 'the good' is not the opposite of these. Rather, 'life' is, and its enjoyment. With other anthropologists of vitality, I have thus been asking not only what 'life' looks and feels like for church members, but, now, what it is like to enjoy it. Looking at the different ways of enjoying life, often beyond explicit, moralised visions of 'the good', perhaps offers new inroads for anthropologies which seek not only to diagnose the world's ills but celebrate its potentials.

In Chapter 4, I contextualise Chinese Christian life and joy within the dark times of early twentieth-century 'semi-colonialism' in China, when this indigenised religious form most significantly arose (see also Feng 2022). I suggest, in other words, that in dark times people seek reshaped forms of joy and vitality as much as they seek new values with which to live by.

Notes

[1] See Fred (1975, 1977) on Li's authoritarianism in Taiwan.

[2] I am reminded in writing of brother Zhu's translation experiences of another instance, in which a leading brother in Kaohsiung (South Taiwan) was reluctantly accompanying me on a walk around the head temple of Foguangshan, a globalised Taiwanese Buddhist sect. Perhaps aggravated by my tolerance for other religious forms than the church, he began to talk about how 'ridiculous' the beliefs of Islam were and how they drove Muslims to do such 'terrible' things. 'But isn't this part of the problem', I asked, 'each religious group asserting its own truth over others?' He stopped and turned to me, 'Yes, but the ministry [of the church] is *real*!' he emphasised.

[3] In my critiques of Durkheimian dialectics of emotion and representation, I am not the first of course to find fault with anthropology's groundless constructionism, though it is not usually traced to Durkheim. Jon Bialecki chastises what he calls the dominant 'nominalist' strain in anthropological thinking, which, he writes, 'precludes thinking about *generative commonalities*' (Bialecki 2026, p. 614), resulting in 'object-dissolving-critique' (from Robbins 2003, p. 193), which denies the possibility of writing about translocal, 'complex objects', such as

'Christianity' (Bialecki 2012), 'ritual', and 'religion' (Bialecki 2017). More importantly, 'nominalism' denies the reality of those objects which Christians themselves perceive themselves to be tangibly and obviously a part of, such as the Catholic church (Napolitano 2017), the Vineyard movement, 'the Lord's recovery', and even the *corpus mysticum* itself.

[4] Perhaps even more deeply influential than its anthropological value has been the epistemological value of Durkheim's approach. It is the job of analysis, Durkheim assumed, to uncover the human efficacies and interactions which truly accounted for religious – and other – representations. While there is an increasing tendency to bracket the question of the truth of religious representations rather than reduce them to human efficacies and interactions, it seems to me that this bracketing merely keeps the Durkheimian epistemology of the anthropology of religion in place. Nevertheless, I am not advocating religious apologetics here. Rather my aim is to help refine a new epistemology more adapted to Chinese Christianity and the histories of which it is part. Still, this is an epistemology founded on a different kind of knowing, intuitive rather than intellectual, than many may be used to.

[5] To read Li's critique of trying to understand the Bible or his ministry, see here: *Crucial Principles for the Christian Life and the Church Life*, Chapter 2, Section 5, accessed 20 August 2019, https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=3556FA0C00

[6] For a social scientist it is easy to see 'Christ as flowing substance' as a fetishisation, an objectification, an essentialisation of our own rhythmic human interactivity and the effects this has on our own sense of self. But this would be a perspective deeply rooted in the overanalytical mind. I suggest we suspend judgement for a few more chapters.

[7] See the California co-worker's critique of Californian public education here: HeavenlyFoods Js (2022) 'Fellowship – Questions and Responses – Ron Kangas', YouTube video. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvrW2qJf7y8 (last accessed 1 April 2026).

4. From value to vitality: Chinese Christianity as repaired responsiveness

To many sinologists, the notion that a 'Chinese' group would be centrally interested in oneness, and 'organic' oneness at that, will hardly be surprising. The concepts of oneness and the organic have a long pedigree in Chinese history. Yuri Pines (2000, 2009), for instance, argues that it was the ideology of 'the One that pervades the All' (*da yitong*) which lay behind the incredible longevity of the Chinese empire. Even before the first Daoist writings identified the Dao as the cosmological 'supreme oneness' (*taiyi)* out of which the myriad things (*wanwu*) of the universe were born, he argues, there was an evident consensus among statesmen that 'stability is in unity' (Pines 2000, p. 301).[1] This Warring States consensus on unity was in turn partially synthesised with an '"organismic" metaphysics which … constitutes the common ground on which the Confucian and Taoist traditions have been erected' (Ames 1994, p. xix).[2] Drawing on the writings of Joseph Needham, from this time on in China, Yuk Hui writes, 'the organic remained always the credo of thought and the principle of living and being' (2019, p. 169).

Comparative religionists may be even less surprised to hear that a religious group, especially one born out of mystically inspired criticism of established, institutional religion, is founded on a principle of primal oneness. From William James (2003 [1902]), through Aldous Huxley (2009 [1945]), to Mircea Eliade (1957), all who have sought common elements to religious traditions around the world have found something like attachment to a notion that behind, beyond, beneath all things is a Divine Reality in which 'All Is One'. One may even find versions of Ni's critique of Christianity's soul basis in the 'mystical' writings much loved of religious universalists, perennialists, and Neo-Platonists, such as those of Meister Eckhart (*c.* 1260–1328), who proclaims: 'There is a spirit in the soul, untouched by time and flesh, flowing from the Spirit, remaining in the Spirit, itself wholly spiritual. In this principle is God, ever verdant, ever flowering in all the joy and glory of His actual Self.' This principle, Eckhart continues, 'is free of all names and void of all forms. It is one and simple, as God is one and simple, and no man in any wise can behold it' (quoted in Huxley 2009 [1945], pp. 15–16). The resemblance is striking. Despite their error, one can see why many have labelled Watchman Ni's ministry 'mystical'.

Given these Chinese and Christian precedents in the pursuit of oneness, sinologists and comparativists may ask, what is surprising about the centrality of organic oneness to Chinese Christianity as exemplified by the following of Ni and Li? We may note in response that the rise of state-led attempts to produce Neo-Confucian oneness and harmony in China (Mitter 2024), and the apparently perennialist motivations of powerful 'alt-right' figures in recent years (Teitelbaum 2020) make questions of what kinds of sociopolitical forms might arise from the pursuit of oneness all the more pressing. Moreover, I point those who may find Ni, Li, and their followers' pursuit of oneness unsurprising, in the direction of Phillip Ivanhoe's summation of his 'oneness hypothesis' project (2017), which began as an exegesis of Neo-Confucian ethics, then developed in multiple disciplinary, geographical, historical directions, concluding that 'it turns out there is more than one way to be one' (Ivahhoe 2017, p. 19). Thus, I submit that followers' attachment to 'oneness' might, for sinologists and religious synthesists at least, be the least interesting aspect of the book.

Much more intriguing, I suggest to them, are the ways in which oneness is 'worlded' (Zhan 2011), or indeed 'unworlded', to the degree that it is 'organic' only in so much as it does not rest upon 'the world' and all its 'false onenesses'. In other words, it is the contexts within which oneness is lived out that are interesting, ranging from imperialistic turn-of-the-century Fujian in this chapter to high-tech transnational Taiwan, and the intense anti-cultisms of contemporary online and North American evangelical worlds described ahead. We see ethnographically, historically, that the changing ways in which Ni and Li's followers crystallise, communicate, practise, extend, close off, open up, and aestheticise organic oneness makes it a highly particular, if not unique, phenomenon.

Besides, if the ultimate concern with organic oneness is unsurprising, pointing it out seems to be unprecedented. No other study of Chinese Christianity has explicitly put organic oneness, as a form of sublime sociality, at the centre of it. The first two parts of this chapter thus deepen the case that there is indeed a profound set of historical precedents in Chinese history for this central concern.

The second half of the chapter turns to the origins of Ni and Li's following in 1920s eastern China, to ask the founding question of the anthropology of Christianity. Namely, what difference does Christianity make? (Cannell 2006, p. 1). By tracing a genealogy of organic oneness first, we are in a better position to complement this question with another. What difference did Christianity make to what? My answer is that Chinese Christianity has intensely crystallised, parochialised, and democratised long-standing Chinese historical concerns with oneness and the organic. Secondary concerns with presence, in particular the presence of a personalised God, both contribute to and destabilise this ongoing transformation.

Many analyses of 'Chinese Christianity' so far have described conversion to Western-style churches, denominations, and doctrines. Even those who

describe indigenised Chinese Christianity tend to assume a short-term perspective focused on belief or piecemeal 'Chinese' aspects of its practise, such as a focus upon healing (Hunter and Chan 1993) or pragmatic socioeconomic relations (Chau 2019), the Chinese government (Reny 2018), rural–urban migration (Huang 2014; Kang 2016), the individualisation of Chinese society (Kao 2009), the growth of capitalism (Cao 2011; Yuan 2021), and market mentalities (Yang 2005). Much historical and ethnographic writing on the subject tends to describe populations and individuals for whom Christianity is a means to some other political, social, or economic end (Lim and Gee 2013). Even scholars of Chinese theology tend to expound Chinese Christian notions in relation to external theological standards (Lian 2010). To the degree that Chinese Christianity has been directly theorised, this has been done through market metaphors of 'consumer demand' that are relatively foreign to it (Zheng 2017; cf. Cao 2011).

By taking the long view, we see a more subtle set of transformations that characterise what I call Chinese Christianity, in which the tensions between oneness and the organic are rendered more intense, everyday, and democratic. This chapter marks a midway point in the book in which there is a shift from focusing primarily on attempts to cultivate a relatively open organicness in the churchlife, to another side of things – a side of church living more characterised by the relative closure and conformity of oneness.

A genealogy of organic oneness I: ideals

There were differences in ancient China, of course, in the best way through which unity was thought to be attained. Broadly, Confucius suggested 'emulation of the past', Mencius (the most important Confucian after Confucius) 'the ruler's benevolence' as a solution, and Laozi (the original man–god of Daoism) advocated 'non-action' (Pines 2000, p. 311). Both Daoism and Confucianism agreed on some level, however, that ultimately there was a oneness that preceded any particular manifestation, namely the flowing Dao, and all that was needed was to act in accordance with it (*wuwei*), to conform one's habits and desires with it (*cheng*), and then peace (*an*) would reign within and without (An 2004; Shun 2003; Slingerland 2003). There was a core tension nonetheless within each of the ancient texts advocating this 'effortless action' in accordance with the Dao, which Edward Slingerland (2014) summarises with the phrase 'trying not to try'. Put as a question: how does one create the conditions for effortless action to arise?

Slingerland (2003) argues convincingly that *wuwei*, or what he translates as 'effortless action', is a root 'conceptual metaphor' which underpins the approaches of many foundational Chinese thinkers to the self, ethics, and the world. According to him, they are each deeply informed by the conceptual principle of 'effortless action', 'doing nothing', or 'lack of intentionality', as *wuwei* is various translated. Though they may vehemently disagree on how

it is to be achieved, the principle of acting without forethought or calculation, spontaneously in harmony with those around you, is assumed by ancient thinkers to be the ultimate state of perfection worth striving for. Each, nonetheless, must wrestle with the paradoxical question of how one might begin trying not to try in the first place. This seems to me to be an ancient precursor to the conundrum followers of Ni and Li encounter of building a 'recovery' of the global church on the principle of spontaneous, organic action.

Chin (2011) and Chang (2017) suggest strong resonances between Watchman Ni's ministry and the principal Daoist ideas. Both in Ni's critique of 'Christianity' and in Daoist critiques of the mechanical, calculative action found in Confucianist texts (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017), the critique is made in favour of a more primal unity. More specifically, this is a unity in which the moral and the cosmological are inseparable. This means that ethical deliberation in Daoist traditions, as in the church, is generally not celebrated as a virtue. Rather, the morally perfected person is someone who is so in tune with the Dao that virtuous action arises spontaneously.

Often this state is connected in Daoism with being outside society, in what we might retrospectively call 'nature', with the roughly equivalent Chinese term (*ziran*) being almost synonymous with 'spontaneity' (*zifa*, the 'self-so'). Hence the organicism of effortless action here is literal, beyond the artifice of society. The Confucian critique of Daoism is precisely that it escapes, avoids, the pragmatic problems of society, including how to rule. Still, *wuwei* is a shared principle. Paul Chang writes, in this regard:

> As with many indigenous Chinese religions, [Watchman Ni's] esoteric knowledge led the seeker to a ground of union with the infinite. It also implied an ethical and, to some extent, ontological holism that insisted that good and evil were, at some level, inseparable and indistinguishable. In other words, N[i]'s spiritual teachings idealized a kind of oneness with God that transcended rational discernment and evaluation. This meant that, for him, a normative Christian life was spontaneous and effortless. Although the process of arriving at such a state might be difficult and arduous, eventually the Christian automatically expressed the highest virtues of Christ and was able to seamlessly adapt to all the unpredictable vicissitudes of human life without artificiality or exertion. This system had clear parallels to the important Chinese concept of *wuwei*, or 'lack of intentionality,' a core principle of Chinese ethics (Chang 2017, p. 8).

For those in the church, effort is a sign that 'the will' of the soul is lying behind an action. Disharmonious interaction with those around is likely due to being in one's 'mind' or 'emotions'. If such mismotivated actions are encountered, the actor is not unlikely to be met with a 'Get out of your mind/emotions/will brother/sister!'

Meng (2018) suggests that a more direct influence upon Ni, who was a third-generation Christian, but whose mother nonetheless insisted he studied the four books and five classics of Confucianism, may have been Neo-Confucianism. To me the resemblance between the Neo-Confucianist Wang Yangming's (1472–1529), Zhu Xi's (1130–1200), and Zhang Zai's (1020–77) ethical ideals of 'oneness' and treating the cosmos as one's own body (Frisina 2022; Leder 1990), and Ni's and Li's Christianity, is so striking as to make some kind of historical connection undeniable.

This is very important for our understanding of how the church in Taiwan turned out in the way that it has. Let us look further at Neo-Confucianism, which is the most sociopolitically successful attempt to blend each of 'the three religions' (*san jiao*) of China – Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism – into a single cosmological picture, before addressing the anthropological significance of this continuity.

According to the Neo-Confucian thinkers who sought to synthesise Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist insights, often to render the latter two superfluous and thus suppressible by the state, the fundamental structure or principle of the universe, *li,* is said to be potentially obscured by the psychophysical configurations, *qi*, which characterise each individual human body–mind (Ivanhoe 2015, p. 237; Tien 2012, p. 54). Both moral and social perfection is said to consist of 'refining' (*hanyang*) *qi* so that it is more in line with *li*. Unrefined, *qi* may be thought of all the things body–minds do, say, think, feel, which are not in accord with the heavenly pattern of the universe. A person with refined *qi* is said to achieve *wuwei*, effortless action, because they are so aligned with the dynamic principles of the universe that they need not even reflect to act in accordance with it (An 2004).

This picture, compared to dominant Western, Christian images of the cosmos, has direct implications for how one engages with others. The world image to which dominant strains of Western Christianity have been anchored since the seventeenth century is a picture of a mechanical, spatially defined, geometric order which is principally detached from its maker. 'In creating the world,' Jesuit missionaries explained to their Chinese interlocutors during this period, 'the Lord of Heaven put each thing in its place. Had he not done so, there would be disorder' (Ruggieri 1584, quoted in Gernet 1980, p. 4). The world picture painted by these missionaries 'form[ed] a perfectly coherent whole in which it would be vain to look for the slightest contradiction'. The rule was, 'each thing in its place and a place for each thing'. This was 'a geometrical model animated from without' (Gernet 1980, pp. 7, 13).[3] 'Westerners' writes Hamilton,

> are obsessed with location because the self has no meaning without its being located in space. Accordingly, such a mentality fills space with people and their possessions, and requires that the geographical lines separating people be precise. Disputed lines result in arguments among neighbours, feuds among families, and

> wars among nations (Hamilton 1989, p. 151; see also Fairbank 1968, p. 9).

Whatever the truth of this depiction of 'the West', it resonates with the writing and descriptions of the first modern bearers of Christianity to China. For these Jesuits, as for many Christians today, the divine was not involved in everyday operations of togetherness. It could only enter into the world via some very special disruptive means: the divinely appointed authority of the pope and priestly orders, the extraordinary experiences of the mystic, and the rapturous second coming of the millenarians. Even for post-Reformation Catholics, the 'presence' of the otherworldly was most often miraculous (Christian 1989; Orsi 2016). Contrast this with Fei Xiaotong's (1993 [1944], p. 177) wonderment at how North Americans went about their lives without the reassuring daily presence of ghosts.

Following the picture of the world in which social unity means each having their own place, as in the Iranian-American sister Lily's image of the celestial wall encountered in Chapter 1 or the children's song in Chapter 3, the key principle of ethical reasoning is 'empathy', 'putting oneself in another's place'. In contrast, the Neo-Confucian image of cosmic unity says that you and another are already one and the same. One need only attune to the level of oneness at which this is true, like all stars shining with the same light in brother Zhou's analogy of church sameness and difference, again in Chapter 1. An even more pertinent analogy of a non-mechanical oneness is the Neo-Confucian body. 'In medical books', wrote Cheng Hao (1032–85) in his commentary on the Confucian *Analects*,

> a paralyzed arm or leg is said to be 'unfeeling' or 'not benevolent' (*buren* 不仁). This expression is perfect for describing the situation. The benevolent person, or 'one with feeling' (*ren*), regards all things in the universe with one body. There is nothing that is not him. If he regards all things as himself, where will [he] not extend? However, if he does not see them [as] himself, why would he feel any concern for them? It is like the sense of a paralyzed arm or leg. The *qi* does not circulate through them, so they are not regarded as parts of oneself … (Tien 2012, pp. 59–60, translation slightly altered).

The arch Neo-Confucian, Wang Yangming, argued that it was 'self-centred desires' (*si yu*), the 'self-centred mind' (*si xin*), 'self-centred ideas' (*si yi*), and 'self-centred thoughts' (*si nian*) that prevented our getting on in the world and from becoming benevolent persons (Tien 2012, p. 54).

> A well-known story of a founding father of Neo-Confucianism, Zhou Dunyi (1017–73), reported that he refused to cut the grass in front of his house because he felt intimately connected with it. In connection with this story, Wang averred, 'The spirit of life of

> Heaven and Earth is the same in flowers and weeds' (Tien 2012, p. 59).

'[F]or Yangming Wang,' David Tien expounds,

> the goal was to eliminate one's self-centeredness and expand one's sense of self to embrace all of reality. This entailed a loss of one's 'self' apart from other people and things. Self-centeredness, then, was a pernicious and persistent impediment to the moral life. That is why destroying 'self-centered desires', which draw a false distinction between one's individual self and the rest of the universe, is the way to preserve Heavenly *li* and finally form one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things (Tien 2012, p. 60).

These may seem lofty sources to compare with the everyday lives of church members, in Ni's day and in our own. However, the ethic and vision of the church resemble those of these Neo-Confucians to a remarkable degree. Being the state-endorsed view of things, the body of the universe that the latter emphasised was in fact largely equivalent to the social order of this imperial world (Liu 1973). In a parallel fashion, Ni and Li's 'Body' has increasingly been that of the church itself as a 'great reality in the universe'.[4] The oneness of both social bodies in question is very much tied to the 'denial of the self' (*ke ji fu li*). Aligning oneself with the cosmic body in both cases leads to spontaneously benevolent and effective action, at least towards non-barbarians and the brothers and sisters, respectively.

Ni's oneness is of course deeply related to the Christian God. But this God nonetheless takes a remarkably 'horizontal' form, most of the time. In order to refine one's 'soul' (*hun*), in this case, one needed others' guidance and discernment. In refining one's soul, in line with the brothers and sisters, one allows God, as 'the Spirit in your spirit' to 'flow out' (*yongliu*). With Li and the expansion of the church to Taiwan and elsewhere, oneness became even more tied to 'the Body', 'the church'. Others were then not only the instruments for achieving oneness; they were the substance of the oneness each aimed to achieve. 'If you love the church, you love God', one church friend said to me as we sat chatting after a Sunday meeting in a Taipei apartment. Spiritual perfection, in the church, is horizontally determined through moment-by-moment, spontaneous fulfilling of one's function (*gongneng*) within the Bodylife.

Here, oneness does not mean a rancorous struggle to align the self with others but simply attunement to that aspect of self and other at which it is true that the two are one. A key difference between the Neo-Confucianists and Ni, and even more Li, is their attitude to 'the mind'. Wang Yangming 'urges his students to monitor their own thoughts and feelings, "like a cat catching mice," always trying to identify and eliminate any self-centered or selfish thoughts that arise' (Tien 2010, 2012, p. 61). In direct contrast to both Wang Yangming and to many contemporary forms of Evangelical Christianity (Bialecki 2017;

Luhrmann 2012), Ni, as mentioned in Chapter 3, advised strongly against introspection.

In 2016, I attended a 'question and response' session at a church conference with one of Li's co-workers. He responded to questions that began with 'I think …' or 'I feel …' with 'Well there's your problem right there!' These prefaces were signs that the questioner was already approaching things from within 'the mind' or 'the emotions' respectively. With the development of the church in Taiwan and elsewhere, oneness became equal to the Body of the church and discernment was something one received from others not through one's own musing. The church in Taiwan fused divinity, oneness, and corporatism to an even greater degree than Neo-Confucianism. One might say that Christ was a crystallisation, personification, and ultimately a parochialisation of *li,* the cosmic pattern, or rather the flowing Dao, which gave rise to it.

When I asked brother Zhou how he thought the God of the Bible compared to the Dao of Daoism, he considered the difference to be 'total', but also one of a degree of clarity, suggesting even that the Dao and God are one. 'Someone tried to link Logos with Dao', he said, continuing:

> In the Union Bible they translate the Logos into 'Dao'. Daoism, Confucianism is philosophy. But many scholars show their disagreement, the Dao in Daoism it is just a kind of philosophy without a person. The Dao has no kind of plan, no economy, wants nothing. If you can tell [it is] the Dao it is not the Dao. [This is] totally different from the Dao in Daoism. [There], the Dao has to remain in a mystical, unspeakable realm, [but] the Bible *does* want to tell you the Dao.

Put otherwise, 'Christ' is the unspeakable made speakable, the mystical made manifest, the Dao embodied.

A genealogy of organic oneness II: the sociopolitical

So far, this is a rather static, textual picture of Chinese history and the ministry of Ni and Li's emergence from within it. Returning to the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) from a historical rather than merely philosophical perspective puts the flesh back on these bones. During this period, responsibility for 'oneness' was considered to reside heavily with the sovereign. As the *Lushi Qunqiu*, a document from the end of the Warring States period, explains:

> The true king upholds Oneness and becomes the Rectifier of the myriad things. The army needs the general, thereby it is unified. The state needs the ruler, thereby it is unified. All under Heaven needs the Son of Heaven, thereby it is unified. The Son of Heaven upholds

> Oneness, thereby upholding it [the realm]. Oneness means [proper] government: doubleness means chaos (Pines 2000, p. 308).

Intertwined throughout with the deep and long-standing Chinese social, political, and cosmological concern with unity, traceable at least to the Warring States period, 'the organic' is a term used again and again to characterise philosophical and religious thought in China, be it Confucian, Daoist, or the Neo-Confucianism which began synthesising them with Buddhism from the eleventh century on. Specifically, the organic is a felt sentiment more than an ontological principle. In its more literary form, it is described as *ganying*, which Yuk Hui translates as 'resonance', which 'rests upon the presupposition of unification between the human and Heaven [*tianren heyi*], and therefore *ganying* implies (1) a homogeneity in all beings, and (2) an organicity of the relation between part and part, and between part and whole' (2019, pp. 27–28).

Michael Puett (2002) and Mingming Wang (2012) argue that in the first centuries of China's unificatory period (221 BC–220 AD), there was a shift from an exclusively hierarchical mode of interaction with divinity as a series of entities to be sacrificed to, to this more egalitarian imaginary in which divine beings and essences held together the cosmos and the empire in a multitude of places and forms. Many of the core notions developed through Chinese history which emphasise the value of organic spontaneity and harmony with the Dao arise from this period, the potential for anyone to become a 'godman' (*shenren*) among them. Puett argues that these more egalitarian notions were explicitly political in being put forward to counter the claims of those close to the emperor. Claims, that is, that only they had exclusive access to the divine, in the form of a hierarchical pantheon leading all the way to the Jade Emperor and Heaven itself.

Chinese popular religionists and church members today share many of the same concerns, not least that of unity achieved through 'the spirit' or 'divine power' (*ling*; Sangren 1987), though they articulate this in radically different ways. Both Chinese popular religion and the church draw upon common background assumptions in their articulations of human-to-human and human-to-non-human relations. These assumptions are evident, for example, in the common words they use. Another example, besides *ling* for 'spirit', is the word *shen*.

The fact that 'in China human beings become gods with some regularity and thus the thought of only one such being is looked upon as strangely limiting' (Rubinstein 1999, p. 361) is encapsulated in the polysemy of this term. *Shen* is the term those in the church in Taiwan use for God, while they themselves are *shenren*, 'Godmen'. The fourth century BC Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi also uses the term *shenren*, which is usually translated as 'spirit-man' (e.g. Puett 2002, p. 124). The term *shen*, referring as it does to both entities and processes, to the human spirit and divine spirits, has come under contestation by sinologists. '*Shen* 神', write Hall and Ames in a classic study, 'is a complex notion, meaning as it does both "human spirituality," and "divinity". *Shen* does not

sometimes mean "human spirituality," and *sometimes* "divinity". It means both of these…' (1998, p. 236).

Contrastively, Puett argues, in his historical anthropology which emphasises the changing political contexts in which these terms evolved, 'that the term *shen* does *not* mean both "human spirituality" and "divinity". The term *shen* was used exclusively in the Bronze Age to refer to divinities. It was not until the Warring States period that the term came to be applied to substances within humans' (2002, p. 22).

The first, Qin, dynasty was a turbulent period in which a brutal, martialistic, and legalist regime prevailed. It was during this time that much of the most iconic infrastructure was established which would be the material, bureaucratic bases of dynasties to come. The first emperor, Qin Huangshi, standardised writing, currency, measurement, and transport systems, conducted a census, established a postal service, and built the Great Wall. Nonetheless, this was a period in which the empire was unified on totalitarian, absolutist, we might say organisational, grounds (Dean and Massumi 1992). It implemented the 'legalist' thought of Shang Yang (*c*. 390–38 BC), which recommended maintaining order through a series of draconian punishments, as well as rewards. It did not last long and was much hated.

In contrast, the Han dynasty that followed achieved what Dingxin Zhao (2015) calls 'the Confucian–Legalist synthesis'. On the one hand, there was enough political structure, enough organisation, to sustain the longest imperial history ever known. On the other hand, the incorporation of Confucian morality into the very innards of the state meant that there was a symbiosis between the sociocultural elite and this state apparatus. Structures and personnel embodying either militaristic, organisational 'legalism' or organicist, rhetorically spontaneous (Li 1995), Confucianism harmoniously co-existed. Soft and hard power, we might say, were smoothly combined. This was the first recorded form, I want to argue, that the principle of organic oneness took.

From the tenth century on, Daoism too would be increasingly incorporated into this synthesis. In both indigenous Chinese systems of thought, rejection of mechanical in favour of organicist thinking was paramount. 'For the Daoists, the refusal of mechanical reasoning is a refusal of a calculative form of thinking, in order to stay within the freedom of the inner spirit', Hui writes (2019, p. 115). Confucianists too were resistant to being made into a 'tool' within a functional system. 'The gentleman is not a tool' (*junzi bu qi*), Confucius famously says in the *Analects*. Subsequent literati thus classically held to a principle which Joseph Levenson (1958) termed 'the Amateur Ideal', in which the true Confucian gentleman–bureaucrat resisted all specialisation, remaining purposefully generalist so that he might not lose sight of the central way (*dao*), which gives rise to all specific flavours, life paths, and social roles.

In contrast to the static, proto-mechanical unity of Platonism and its later developments, Jospeh Needham (1956) famously characterised Chinese cosmology, in his monumental attempt to explain why a scientific revolution did not occur in imperial China, as 'organic'. A 'view … universal among Chinese

thinkers', that is, 'in which every phenomenon was connected with every other according to hierarchical order' (Needham 1969, p. 21). A seeming paradox of this hierarchy, however, was that it could not, ideologically, be directly enforced. Rather, Gary Hamilton writes, each layer of the hierarchy from peasants, through courtesans, to emperor was ideologically insulated from the next layer. According to this Sinocentric world order (Fairbank 1968), which encompassed 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*), China proper only being 'the Middle Kingdom' (*zhongguo*), power occurred not through command as in European political thought but through the resonance of moral exemplarity. More specifically, this meant it was assumed that the proper course of the Dao naturally led to a state of peace and prosperity. A good ruler simply let the Dao flow through their own refined but effortless moral action (*de*). Hamilton quotes Jacques Gernet's characterisation of Chinese imperial power for support:

> 'To govern is to regulate, maintain harmony and equilibrium, not to command and compel.' We are led to think of the opposition between the power of constraint (*kratos*) which defines political power in Greece, and the Chinese notion of government: *zhi*, to govern, signifies literally to regulate, especially to regulate the flow of water, to treat and to heal (Gernet 1985, p. xxxi; in Hamilton 1989, p. 162).

Hamilton notes, nonetheless, that at times at least, as with any empire, commands had to be issued, tasks carried out, control directly asserted. In contrast to many classical European political systems, however, those who carried out these commanded tasks were despised, having very low status. Paramount among these were the eunuchs. They were the aberrant go-betweens whose very existence put the lie to Confucian virtuous organicism. It is telling that eunuchs in turn, not belonging to the Confucianism part of Zhao's 'Confucian–Legalist synthesis', were often at the helm of political uprisings (Tsai 1996). We might say that they represented organisation rather than organic oneness.

In contrast to orientalist pictures of imperial China being entirely ruled through Confucian ritualistic deference, Joanna Waley-Cohen (2006) argues that the warp and weft of Chinese history has always been woven by the tensions between a literary culture (*wen*) emphasising effortless organicism through cultivated moral attunement to the Dao and a command-based martial culture (*wu*), which emphasised the need for conformity through organised unity. She differs from other so-called New Qing historians (see Waley-Cohen 2004), who tend to see the *wen* as a simple ideological obfuscation of the brutish reality of *wu*. In contrast, Waley-Cohen shows that the militaristic Manchus, for instance, who founded the Qing dynasty, 'by no means supplanted the vibrant tradition in which 'being civilized' (*wen*) reigned supreme in China', but rather oversaw a period in which '*wu* dislodged *wen* from its exclusive position at the pinnacle of political prestige' (2006, p. 4). This was a period in which organisational, command-based,

calculative conformity and its otherwise nemesis organic virtue found almost equal weight in many minds.

Finally, in a curious precedent of the tensions of organic oneness I am alluding to, Feuchtwang (2001, 2010) contrasts two competing logics of efficacy within Chinese popular religion. One reflects the Chinese Imperial cosmology in which order was achieved 'organically', through 'harmonic resonance' between the spheres of the kingdom – Emperor, Mandarins, and Peasantry – and the other reflects a more local, 'demonic' cosmology which understood this same order in terms of a command hierarchy (or what Ni and Li might call 'organisation'). It is notable again that the martial imagery of the demonic cosmos has often inspired peasant uprisings through the millennia, not least the so-called Boxer Rebellion so central to China's modern history (Esherick 1987; Ownby 1999; Perry 1980). We might thus understand Chinese history at multiple levels and in multiple aspects, as an ongoing wrestle with the same kinds of tension that characterise the organic oneness of Chinese Christianity today: the command-induced conformity of oneness on the one hand and the spontaneous mutual responsiveness of the organic on the other.[5]

Having given a sense that the tensions at the heart of organic oneness explored so far – organisation versus the organic, spontaneity versus routine, oneness versus vitalised difference – did not begin with the church, I nonetheless want to show in the remainder of this chapter how they were transformed by Ni, Li, and their still growing following. It was the specific circumstances of early twentieth-century urban China that became the catalyst for this transformation. Returning to Bergson, I theorise these transformations as fluctuations of, and unstable syntheses between, what he dichotomised as dynamic and static religion.

Christianising organic oneness: recovering a realm of repaired responsiveness

Ni's Christian life as it is transmitted by his followers was shaped by five key women: Lin Heping, Yu Cidu, Maraget E. Barber, Jesse Penn Lewis and Madame Guyon. The first was his mother, Lin Heping. She was bought at a young age from her impoverished parents by a wealthy merchant, who converted to Christianity after being healed of an illness by the prayers of an Episcopalian Methodist congregation (Lin 2017, p. 82). Her hopes were dashed when she was pulled out of medical school to be married to a stranger in Fuzhou. Nevertheless, it was this marriage which would provide a Fujianese, Protestant, middle-class network, giving Ni, two decades later, access to the print culture necessary for propagating his ministry (Dunch 2001).

Following the 1911 Xinhai Revolution which overthrew the imperial regime, a decade after her marriage, Lin found inspiration in Sun Yat Sen's nationalist party to which she donated all her jewellery. She became chairwoman of the Women's Patriotic Society and '[w]hen Sun Yat Sen visited Fujian in 1912, Lin was given an official role as a special guide for the Father of the Republic'

(Lian 2010, p. 157). By the time the party had been 'relegated to Guangdong province on the periphery of warlord-dominated politics' a few years later, however, Lin's patriotism had subsided, and she became, by her own written account (penned in 1943), addicted to Mahjong playing (Lin 2006 [1943]).

It was only out of obligation to her old classmate, Yu Cidu ('Dora Yu', 1873–1931), that Lin came to watch the now famous female evangelist preacher when she came to town. Paul Chang's (2017) description of Lin's conversion experience suggests that it stemmed from her own sense of guilt that she had turned her back on her country and on her perceived responsibility to her family. 'As Heping listened to a description of how Jesus bore the "highest pain, the shame that was most fearful, because of his love for people,"' writes Chang,

> her 'stubborn, hard heart was unconsciously melted by this lovable Lord who had given up his life for me.' She 'wept bitterly' and offered herself to God, 'even being willing to be a martyr to pay him back' (2017, p. 25).

Yu's sermons inspired Ni's mother to apologise to her son for a prior unjustified punishment for a broken vase.

From this, an act of affection and humility completely contrary to the strict Confucian upbringing he was accustomed to (Lin 2017, p. 82), Ni himself was in turn moved to attend these meetings and on the night of 28 April 1920, 'Light seemed to flood the room' as he wept over 'the grace of God's loving forgiveness' (Kinnear 1973, p. 39). Yu soon became Ni's 'spiritual mother' as he left Fujian to join her (otherwise all-girls) Bible Institute in Shanghai. After just a few weeks, however, he was dismissed from the institute for having 'lazy habits', such as getting out of bed too late. It was then that Ni, as a member of the so-called 'Fuzhou six', came under the guidance and care of the ageing rebel British missionary, Margaret E. Barber, 'who turned out to exert the single most important personal influence on the development of N[i]'s theology' (Chang 2017, p. 35; Lian 2010, p. 157). She baptised Ni, his mother, and his brother in the Min River flowing past her home. When Barber passed away at the Pagoda Anchorage (*Mawei*) she left the few belongings she had to Ni.

Under Barber's tutelage, a teenage Watchman Ni was deeply affected by the eschatological writings of the Irish aristocrat John Nelson Darby (1800–82), by the tripartite Biblical anthropology of the Welsh holiness preacher Jesse Penn-Lewis (1861–1927), and by the mystical musings of the French Catholic nun Madame Guyon (1648–1717). Together, these teachings would form the foundations of his own Christian ministry, first articulated in his magnum opus, *The Spiritual Man* (*shuling de ren*), written when he was only 24 amid life-threatening tuberculosis.

The Spiritual Man (1968) lays out the critique of 'Christianity' we have encountered. Western Christianity, Ni, held is 'all knowledge and no life' (Kinnear 1973, p. 65), and this, *The Spiritual Man* argues, is due to the fact that it is

based upon the thinking, perceiving, calculating 'mind' rather than the flow of Spirit of God, which flows through the human spirit, a 'hidden organ' lost to Western Christianity and distinct from 'the mind', and from 'the soul' the mind is a part of. Even the teachings of exceptional Western Christians such as Barber and Penn-Lewis, Ni held, are problematic because 'these stay in the mind and are unable to flow as life' (1968, p. 329). 'The life in our spirit should flow like a river', Ni writes, 'incessantly and unto overflowing' (1968, p. 387). 'The spiritual man', he held, moreover, 'discerns more quickly than others'. 'The matter for him to determine', Ni continues, 'is, where is the Holy Spirit's current? Where is it flowing?' (1968, p. 268).

Both physical and psychological problems, Ni held, were due to being 'in the mind' rather than 'in the spirit'. In times of depression and physical ailment, the solution is thus to 'get out of the mind, and into the spirit':

> The fountain of life remains within the believer, though it is now blocked. Nothing is wrong with the inlet; it is the outlet which is obstructed. The water of life does not spring forth because the flow has no way through. Were the outlet cleared, the water of life would flow unceasingly. What a child of God therefore needs is not more life but more flow of life (1968, p. 387).

The motherly bond between Barber and Ni laid the foundations for the growth and worldwide expansion of a highly integrated, theologically focused transnational group, which even now frames its own significance as a recovery of a specific kind of spiritual vitality. Ni's complaint that contemporary Christianity was 'all knowledge and no life' can of course still be heard today.

Anthropologists of China have classically centred questions of Chinese kinship around the patriline. P. Steven Sangren (2000) argues that the very desire at the heart of Chinese cultural reproduction arises from the internal resistance sons feel to their father's claims that they are simply products of the ancestral line. But Ni's father is almost entirely absent from any account of his life that I have heard or read. The difference that Christianity made here was clearly centred around Ni's relationship with his mother. Through her conversion, Ni encountered a responsiveness from her that changed his life. His subsequent development was then catalysed by various mother substitutes. But enough about Ni. Let me expand this argument beyond him, bit by bit, to show how repaired responsiveness was crucial to the indigenisation of Christianity that emerged among followers and co-workers of Ni.

The key catalyst for the formation of the unique patterns, styles, and infrastructures which today hold Ni's many followers together, across oceans, national borders, and languages, was a Eucharist wafer, tasted in the shadows of the foreign and familial oppressions of the time. In late October 1921, on the outskirts of Fuzhou, church spires rose up from a bustling, smoky cityscape (Kinnear 1973, pp. 40–41). At this time, the Western missionary presence there was still strong, though, following the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) and

the May Fourth Movement (1919), this presence was also increasingly awkward (Chow 2013; Dunch 2001; Starr 2016).

In one corner of the city, three young Chinese Christians met in secret: inspired by Margaret Barber, Watchman Ni called together a gathering with his Christian friends, Leeland and Ada Wang. They met unbeknownst to the Methodist and Anglican priests, parents, and educators who have thus far bound their experience of Christian power so closely and so alienatingly with England, North America, and with the missionary enterprise (May 2001; Woodbridge 2012, 2016). ' "Missionaries" ', Watchman Ni once complained, 'treat Chinese Christians like they were "just a kind of little toy terrier to be taken up and set down without their opinion being consulted" ', Ni's great-niece, Jennifer Lin, reports (2017, p. 128). At Trinity College, Fuzhou, where Ni was educated, an Anglican priest would administer the Eucharist perhaps once a month, after which a prayer for England was uttered. 'The shadow of imperialism seemed to hover over every communion service', Gracie May writes.

> The elements tasted foreign. The table setting looked unfamiliar. And the prayer honoring the crown of England sounded like a betrayal of China. Christianity was a Western import that had little to say to patriotic Chinese youth at the turn of the twentieth century (May 2001, pp. 13–14).

On that October evening, Ni snuck away from his mother's house for fear of reprobation, to meet Leeland and Ada. Baking their own Eucharist bread, the three blessed, broke, and ate it themselves. Ni would later recount, 'I will not forget that night until death, even in eternity. … That day, heaven was so near to earth! All three of us were so joyous that we cried' (Nee 1992, p. 308, in May 2001, p. 100). This would be recalled by followers as the first meeting of the 'recovered church', the resurrected Body of Christ, after centuries of 'degradation' under the auspices of 'Christianity'. Sidestepping the priestly administering of the Eucharist in school and church, Ni's modern-day followers say that in those early days of the group, these pioneers would 'break bread together' whenever they felt like it.

Taking hold of the most powerful symbol of the West, the sacrificial Body of its God, these Christians denied divine power to the Western church, took hold of it themselves and consumed it directly, again and again. Through these actions the original bond between Ni and Barber multiplied and spread beyond them, though it still centred around Ni for the time being. The group developed a distinct set of practices and aesthetics, acquired property, and set up a publishing house, which together sedimented Ni's ideas, his revelations, into a relatively integrated lifeworld, a 'total aesthetic experience' (Forrest 1988, p. 2).

As the number of his followers increased, the 'flavour' of Ni's meetings and those his ministry would inspire into existence would develop, and retain a

set of common qualities that were irreducible to the sociopolitical contexts in which the group was first formed, or to the infrastructures through which the group expanded. Moreover, this growing church-world was transposable: Ni's followers spread beyond Fujian to the rest of China, to Southeast Asia, and eventually to North and South America, Africa, India, and elsewhere, taking their styles of meeting, acting, and speaking with them. Indeed, it was my own taste of a Eucharist in the British Midlands, descending historically from the one that brought heaven and earth so close for Leeland, Ada, and Ni, that led to the writing of this book.

Escaping ancestral obligation

The origins of Ni's following lie not only in an intense embodied critique of missionary imperialism. What made the Eucharist so appealing to early members of Ni's movement was another freedom it promised: it allowed them, in Francis Hsu's (1948) memorable phrase, to climb out from 'under the ancestor's shadow', to escape a sense of ancestral obligation and to claim ancestral divinity immediately as their own. This is not the first time that it has been suggested that '[o]ne real benefit' of becoming Christian in Chinese-speaking communities, 'sometimes a selling point of Christianity, is that it relieves [converts] of the burden to make offerings'. Indeed, C. Fred Blake, author of *Burning Money,* writes that 'countless persons have told [him] as much' (2011, p. 18). (Often ancestors themselves do not get the message, however, hanging around in dreams and hauntings until they get their due.) For Ni's followers, moreover, ancestral power was not only elided through conversion, but, at times, harnessed and transformed.

Divinity in China has classically been a possession of the dead. Especially important in this regard is the reverence paid to ancestors. These divine dead are so central to patrilineal notions of the self, P. Steven Sangren (2000) argues, that every generation experiences them as an alienating force. This alienating force paradoxically produces the desire which keeps ancestor worship going, generation after generation. By demanding that sons recognise that they owe their existence to their predecessors (i.e. 'filial piety'), socialisation within (traditional) Chinese and Taiwanese society, Sangren argues, produces the desire for 'author[ship] of one's own being' (Sangren 2009, p. 256). Thus, while officially sons are obliged to feed their ancestors, given that they gave them life, it is also true that the continued existence of these ancestors is dependent upon these sons' offerings. From the former perspective, the son acts out his recognition that he is the product of his lineage. This gives rise to the latter perspective, the son enacting his fantasy of self-authorship through feeding the loins that birthed him, thus becoming author of himself and resisting the alienating feeling of being entirely produced by society (Sangren 2013, p. 183).

In theory, the gift the ancestors give to you is life itself. Like the official gift of Christ's salvation, this is a gift which can never be repaid, and so carries with

it the curse of eternal indebtedness. Both are also contractually obliged: what makes Christ Christ is the gift of salvation; what makes an ancestor an ancestor is the bestowal of further life. However, in practice, according to Sangren, ancestral grace is experienced in gifts given, not received. While everyday life may inscribe in a young worshipper the sense of being a cog in the machine, or worse, a spare part, ancestor worship gives a vertiginous sense of self-transcendence.

Whatever the subliminal intentions that may accompany offering to the ancestors, however, it is explicitly and aesthetically framed as an act of servitude. The freedom Sangren describes is only to be found in the *practice* of ancestor worship. For Ni's followers, who had recently ceased offering to the ancestors while continuing to be in some sense overshadowed by them, these ancestors would be all-givers and no-receivers, all-alienation and no grace. These understandings make the following oft-recounted church origin story especially significant. We may think of those involved as short-circuiting the 'cycle of yang' (Stafford 2000), in which each generation is indebted to the previous one, by directly appropriating the divinatory power of the ancestors. The story is retold here in 1963 by Witness Li:

> After we crossed nearly everything off our list and gave up Christianity entirely as a religious system, we did not know what to do, so we simply came together. In my home province a group of saints composed primarily of medical students began to meet together … . Since they did not have any place in which to meet, they went to a cemetery. Most cemeteries in China are located outside of town at the base or top of a mountain, so these young believers went to the outskirts of town to meet together in a simple way in a cemetery. In many cemeteries in China, each gravesite has a small pyramid next to it along with a stone table that people use for offering sacrifices to their ancestors … . The young brothers used the stone table as the table for the breaking of bread. They placed the bread and the cup on the stone table; then they all sat on the ground around the table and sang hymns and gave praises to the Lord. In this way they broke the bread. Someone told me that in their meeting they truly touched the presence of the Lord; they truly touched heaven. This was the beginning of the church in Tsinan (Lee 2021c, pp. 367–68).

If the traditional Chinese practice is to offer food to the ancestors, only indirectly accessing their divine power via the blessings that come from this (Sangren 2013), here Ni's adherents feed one another, and without any mediation from either missionaries or ancestors, they 'truly touch heaven'. Eating the Eucharist on the table usually reserved for ancestral offerings not only denies the earthly authority of Western Christian powers but also the heavenly power of Chinese ancestors while crafting both traditional and foreign forms of divinity into a new relationship of empowerment. In Taiwan, this

account is far from exotic, as many family members of followers today take care of their ancestors in the traditional ways. Today the significance of the shift from feeding the divine to feeding *on* the divine is still articulated in the strong emphases among followers upon 'eating', 'masticating', and 'digesting' Jesus. As noted, Li referred to the following he led as 'the recovery of eating', and it is through practices of eating both food and 'the Word' that followers understand themselves to be en route to becoming 'Godmen'.

For Ni and Li, both third-generation Christians, the power of this conception arose from ambivalent rebellions against the missionary establishment. For first-generation Chinese Christians, it is my understanding that the enthusiasm of eating the divine to become divine is inspired by the righteously rebellious shift from gifting the divine to the gift of divinity, first experienced in graveyard gatherings and still relived by followers today. With Christian conversion, indigenisation, and reglobalisation, at least in the case of Ni, Li, and their followers, this implicit capacity of ancestor worship to induce an expanded sense of self through the experience of one's own divine capacity to experience and transmit ancestral grace is brought to the foreground and explicitly embraced as the grace of becoming (the Christian) God. Both these transformations are forms of repaired, or recovered, responsiveness.

Theorising responsiveness

Ni and his Anglican schoolmates were alienated, confused, and even humiliated by the Anglican establishment and its administration of the Eucharist. What was so powerful about that clandestine evening was that they reappropriated the Eucharist bread. It was no longer a tool of oppression but a medium of mutual responsiveness. Ni's reappropriation of the Eucharist was the embodied ground on which his ministry would take root. To understand the significance of this it is useful to consider the anecdote in light of the subsequent history of the movement, a history from within which Ni recalls the anecdote.

First, there was a 'recovery' of the reciprocity which had been lost with the wider collapse of Chinese society that Christianity was partly responsible for. The mutuality of Ni, Leeland, and Ada's bread breaking contrasts markedly with the neglect of Anglican administerings of the Eucharist. Likewise with the reappropriated cemetery altars and the otherwise alienating obligation towards ancestral recognition. A new mutuality arose, a new responsiveness in a time in which the old ritual forms of responsivity were crumbling. From this mutuality emerged a new verticality, a sense of the proximity of heaven and earth. Rather than being dialectical per se, this emergence is perhaps better described as the mimetic emergence of vertical presence from intensified horizontal reciprocity.

This nascent Chinese Christianity was strongly influenced by the connections Ni and others formed with and the reception they received from

Barber and other anti-denominational Western Christians. But perhaps even more powerful was this moment of ruptured disconnection from the imperial church of their upbringing, so unresponsive to their own worries and desires. Quickly expanding beyond the original so-called 'Fuzhou six' (Lian 2010, p. 157), the group developed a distinct set of practices and aesthetics, acquired property, and set up a Shanghai publishing house, which together sedimented Ni's developing ideas/revelations into a relatively integrated lifeworld. As can be glimpsed from the vast collection of letters that have been preserved from those early years, brimming with gleeful greetings and sorrowful reports, this lifeworld gradually emerged from expanding relations of reciprocity. From Lin Heping's request for her son's forgiveness to Ni's encounter with a forgiving God, from Barber's receptivity to the mutuality of that first Eucharist meeting, responsivity, it seems to me, is the key to understanding the origins, preliminary growth, and significance of Ni's following.

Responsivity in Chinese life and history

I would like to theorise Ni's indigenisation of Christianity by contextualising these moments of heightened reciprocity in three respects. First, we should note how reciprocity, or *bao*, has been a centrally thematised aspect of Chinese social life (Chang and Holt 1994; Feuchtwang 2008; Yang 1957). Key terms describing traditional Chinese ethics and aesthetics, such as rhythm (Granet 2012 [1934]; Palmer 2019; You 1994b), resonance (*ganying*, Hui 2019; Needham 1956), *wuwei* (Slingerland 2003), benevolence (*ren*, Sun 1991), pattern (*li,* Ziporyn 2012, 2013), propriety (*li*, Zito 1993), *guanxi* (Kipnis 1997; Yan 1996; Yang 1994), magical power (*ling*, Feuchtwang 2010; Lin 2015; Sangren 1987), and even the Dao (Hall and Ames 1998) can each be understood as derivative from a basic psychosocial concern for reciprocity. I frame this concern as 'Chinese' in the extent of its heightened thematisation in Chinese-speaking community (see Stafford 2000) but universal as a form of attention to what I call 'social flow'.

Second, to reiterate, there was a widespread sense of lost reciprocity in China in the 1920s–40s. At the cosmological level, Neo-Confucian notions of harmony with the Dao, the dynamic flowing principle of the universe, became discredited. The 'Middle Kingdom' (a common translation for *zhongguo*, 'China') thus 'lost its Middle' (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, p. 3). At the political level, there was widespread dissatisfaction with Imperial and then Republican governmental failures to be properly responsive to the threats of disintegration from without and within. At an interpersonal level, there was a sense of lost shared ground as hundreds of thousands of migrants from all over China flooded the port cities. Feelings of mistrust, disconnection, and disorientation were widespread. Psychologically, there were desires for Western, modern things and livelihoods with the twin obstacles of unaffordability and

associated imperialism. In a word, the emerging world of modernity was unresponsive to those desires.

Finally, remembering the previous three chapters, we should note how the following that gathered around Ni's charismatic teaching increasingly centred on what one might call rituals of responsivity. The consensus within Sino-Christian history, following Lian Xi's (2010) powerful account, is that Protestantism especially became quite suddenly indigenised at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the hands of Ni and a handful of other Chinese leaders, due to the collapse of the Qing state. More specifically, millenarianism and its promise of a more harmonious, peaceful world to come was deeply attractive to those suffering the fragmentation of the traditional Chinese worldview, embedded as it was in cosmopolitical hierarchy. I think this is a very valuable perspective. I also think the explanation is a little premature. What this chapter shows is that intellectual rationalisations of Christian salvation are just that, post facto rationalisations. It is not that the indigenous theologies of Ni and others were not important. Rather, they arose out of pre-theorised embodied relations of reciprocity. While these relations took a form that was not uniquely 'Chinese', having their root in universally available experiences of 'social flow', they were also deeply embedded in Chinese history, both ancient and modern.

…

Let me give a deeper sense of how responsivity features in Chinese life, history, and community. 'The Chinese believe', Lien-Sheng Yang wrote in 1957, 'that reciprocity of actions … between man and man, and indeed between men and supernatural beings, should be as certain as a cause-and-effect relationship, and, therefore, when a Chinese acts, he normally anticipates a response or return' (1957, p. 291). Despite the dated framing, the general principle of responsiveness, or *bao,* that Yang points us towards, as a 'basis for social relations in China', has stood the test of time. Yang shows how the question of responsiveness as a social ethic and ideal throughout Chinese history has been intimately linked to the central Confucian principles of 'righteousness' and *xiao*, or 'filial piety'. The myriad disputations and digressions that fill the classical canon of imperial Chinese learning each frame these core questions of morality in terms of how to respond to figures and situations with 'sincerity' (*cheng*), 'propriety' (*li*), and 'human feeling' (*ren*). Indeed, responsivity was so central to written culture in China that, Yang (1957, p. 300) tells us, according to an early twentieth century estimate, editions of the popular Song dynasty *Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution* 'were even more numerous than those of the Bible or the works of Shakespeare have been'.

Classical sinology has tended to reinforce the stereotype that imperial China was characterised by rigid hierarchies of prescribed social roles. While there were historical ossifications of at least elite society, more recently historians have shown that even political rituals were centred around principles of

responsivity to a surprising degree. By the time of the late Qing, Angela Zito (1993) writes, widespread understandings of social and cosmological responsive complementarity (*yinyang*) informed the carrying out of weddings, funerals, the spring and autumn festivals, in and beyond court, as well as the imperial rituals of inauguration, diplomacy, and sacrifice.

Official manuals for how to conduct rituals in the Qing court, Zito tells us, broadly reflect the same cosmological and ritual principles found in philosophical treatises, local gazetteers, correspondence between local officials, and domestic and foreign first-hand accounts at the time. These principles were understood to manifest a similar pattern of hierarchical but complementary opposing forces: dry–moist; high–low; cold–hot; male–female; elder–younger; father–son; man–wife, etc. At an abstract level, these forces were described as *yin* – the subordinate side – and *yang* – the superordinate side. More pragmatically, they consisted of the particularistic ties of *guanxi* described in Chapter 2.

At least before the collapse of the Qing, for literate and illiterate Chinese alike, Yang concludes, 'reciprocity was always the moral standard' (1957, p. 309). Although Yang (1957) ended his article by wondering whether this norm would survive communism, numerous ethnographers at the end of the last century confirmed that despite the demise of much of 'traditional culture', reciprocity was still the guiding principle of much of social life in China, in the cities (Yang 1994) and countryside (Kipnis 1997), northern and southern regions (Yan 1996) alike. 'The response or return in social relations', to quote Yang one last time, 'need not always be immediate' (1957, p. 292). Delayed responsiveness, or reciprocity, was also a heavily thematised aspect of Chinese literate and folk culture during the early years of the Local Churches. As vast numbers of migrants entered the Eastern port cities that the following expanded within, the networks of reciprocal relations based on place, surname, and family were crystallised into ever more complex networks of *guanxi*. Indeed, although considerable nuance is added to his formulation, Fei Xiaotong's (1992 [1947]) notion that the very self of many Chinese is composed of these hierarchical, dyadic relations still persists in contemporary generalisations of 'Chinese personhood' (e.g. Yan 2020).

Responsiveness is not only an everyday ethic and principle of social relations. It forms the basis of a spiritual ideal, which for some, unites the famous 'three teachings' (*san jiao*) – Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism – that comprised both elite formulations of Neo-Confucianism and folk religious ritual and mythology in China for at least a thousand years. To return to Edward Slingerland, he argues that *wuwei*, or 'effortless action', is a root 'conceptual metaphor' which underpins the approaches to the self, ethics, and the world of many foundational Chinese thinkers, including the three most significant Confucian figures – Confucius, Mengzi, and Xunzi – and the two founders of Daoist thought, Laozi and Zhuangzi. While metaphors are explicitly stated, conceptual metaphors operate at an often implicit level, informing the use of explicit metaphors. Though the term *wuwei* is only variously

employed in the aforementioned texts, Slingerland argues that they are each deeply informed by the conceptual principle of effortless action, doing nothing, or lack of intentionality, as *wuwei* is various translated.

Though they may vehemently disagree on how it is to be achieved, the principle of acting without forethought or calculation, spontaneously in harmony with those around you, is assumed by ancient thinkers to be the ultimate state of perfection worth striving for (though the notion of 'trying not to try' is precisely the paradox that Slingerland draws out in different ways for each thinker). *Wuwei* is a form of effortless responsiveness to heaven, humanity, and earth that only sages achieve.

This ideal 'receptivity' (*bao*) is cosmologised in many classical texts as *ganying*, which Yuk Hui translates as 'resonance'. 'In Chinese cosmology', he writes,

> one finds a sense other than vision, hearing, and touch. It is called *Ganying* (感應), literally meaning 'feeling' and 'response', and is often (as in the work of sinologists such as Marcel Granet and Angus Graham) understood as 'correlative thinking'; I prefer to call it *resonance*, following Joseph Needham. It yields a 'moral sentiment' and further, a 'moral obligation' (in social and political terms) which is not solely the product of subjective contemplation, but rather emerges from the resonance between Heaven and the human, since Heaven is the ground of the moral. The existence of such a resonance rests upon the presupposition of unification between the human and Heaven (天人合一), and therefore *Ganying* implies (1) a homogeneity in all beings, and (2) an organicity of the relation between part and part, and between part and whole (2019, pp. 27–28).

Finally, there are *lingshi* and *ganying*, which Feuchtwang (2008, p. 57) translates as 'having a capacity for effective response'. After many decades of studying Chinese popular religion, he argues that they are definitive characteristics of the deities that populate its temples. Others have noted that, in contrast to much of Christianity, the capacity of these gods and goddesses to meet the needs and desires of their worshippers is often equally matched by the latter's capacity to respond to them. If a deity should not be responsive to requests, for instance, it might be punished by being dragged through the streets or ceremonially demoted. Moreover, this mutually responsive quality of human–divine relations is often inscribed into the very imagery of the gods. The powerful goddess Mazu, for example, is often depicted with a black face, meant to represent the blackening smoke of incense left by her satisfied worshippers.

As put by Adam Chau's (2008) popular religionist informants in Shaanxi province, in his book *Miraculous Response*, 'people depend on gods, and gods depend on people' (*ren ping shen*, *shen ping ren*). Feuchtwang argues that we should understand the rituals that take place in the temples that are again repopulating the landscape of China as performances of excessive 'responsive

reciprocation' (2008, p. 57). The imperial world, still present in contemporary popular religion at least, was it seems, comprised on all levels of relations of reciprocal responsiveness. When they work, church rituals take the form of near perfect communicative responsivity: '*oh zhu ye su*! – *amen*! – we want to eat you! – *amen*! – to feed on you! – *amen*! – to become you in life and nature! – *amen*!!' Or, statement A – response – statement B – response – statement C – response … ad infinitum.

Chinese Christian oneness: a new form of enclosure

The first indigenous churches to arise in the twentieth century, the True Jesus Church (*zhen yesu jiaohui*) and the Jesus Family (*yesu jiating*), displayed commitment to both millenarianism and communalistic social reform (Inouye 2011; Lian 2010). The True Jesus Church, an indigenised version of Seventh Day Adventism, 'united into one collective family, with all the members "offering their belongings to the Lord" and changing their family names to Ye (from *Yesu*, the transliteration of Jesus)' (Lian 2010, p. 51). Like Buddhist sectarians of previous generations (Ownby 1999), the Jesus Family, hailing from Shandong province, foresaw the imminent coming of 'the Great Harmony', but with Christ replacing 'the mother of No-Birth' (*Wusheng Laomu*) as its bringer. Like the Shandong 'Spirit Boxers' of the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), who 'requested the gods to attach themselves to our bodies [*qiushen futi*]' such that they 'were invulnerable to swords and spears', the divine 'descended' into Jesus Family members (Lian 2010, p. 72), realising their 'vision of an authentic mystical communion with God as the basis of Family life' (Lian 2010, p. 78). Paralleling Maitreyan Buddhists' 'Boat of Dharma' (*fachuan*), their central 'apocalyptic metaphor' was that of the Ark, which, in their leader, Jing Dianying's words,

> ferries [the saved] across the boundless sea
>
> As hardships and afflictions fly wildly by.
>
> Outside the Ark,
>
> The sea is ferocious and mankind cries in pain;
>
> Inside the Ark,
>
> Animals dance and birds in unison sing (Lian 2010, p. 73).

Watchman Ni, and the 'Christian Assembly' (*jidutu juhuisuo*) which he led, were contemporaneous with the True Jesus Church (1917–) and the Jesus Family (1927–52). Common to each group in these formative years were their millenarian visions. For their converts, becoming a Christian meant forming a new kind of society which would bring a desperately desired order to the world. This was in part because this period, the years roughly between 1839 and 1916, were experienced, according to Lucien Bianco, as 'the crumbling of

a world, a civilization, a *Weltanshauung*' (1971, p. 1). This led to what is conventionally historicised as the chaos of the 'warlord period' (e.g. Spence 1990), which is the direct context of Ni's conversion experience.

This is a period, we might say, of fracturing cosmo-political closures in which provinces and counties lived out different sociopolitical experiments – from communism, to theocracy, to fascism – and built incompatible infrastructures such as differently gauged railway lines. Frank Dikotter (2008) rehistoricises this period as 'an age of openness' focusing upon the flourishing of ideas and the political and social experiments that arose. But these are two sides of the same coin, perhaps. For many, this was an age of ungrounded difference which could either terrorise or inspire.

The crumbling of the imperial world was equally symbolic and material. Not only were the most basic social and political institutions that had served Chinese life and civilisation for centuries coming to a violent end, but death was everywhere. Lian Xi records the words of Yu Chenghua, 'an eye doctor who became one of N[i]'s lieutenants in the Little Flock church in Shanghai', who had the following response 'to the sight of truckloads of severed human limbs after a series of Japanese aerial bombings in Shanghai' (Lian 2010, p. 156): 'Let me be counted among the severed limbs of the trucks. Yes, I am already dead. I have been nailed to the Cross with Christ' (Yu 1997, p. 18, in Lian 2010, p. 156). Christianity, for this and other emerging Chinese Christian groups, was a means of escaping the destruction of one world and entering the harmony of another, a new world with its destiny in the afterlife, but also to be thoroughly established and perfected in this life first.

…

So far, I have focused upon the historical roots of 'the recovered church' in a revitalised responsiveness. But it was also true that 'the Little Flock' represented a new form of cosmological, existential, and infrastructural enclosure. My suggestion, in this respect, is that Ni and Li were significant, but not primarily in terms of the contents of their ministry, which as I have already argued had deep precedent in Chinese history and life. Rather, they were significant as world builders. Ni's role was primarily to provide a blueprint for this world in his magnum opus, *The Spiritual Man*. The book is hardly read by followers today. 'It is a book of darkness,' one UK-based Taiwanese follower responded when I asked him what he thought of it. It is not the content which is disapproved of but rather the way it is written. That is, as a systematic exegesis of a set of theological principles. Moreover, it was hardly an inspired work, but rather rehashed critiques of institutionalised Christianity from elsewhere. One of Ni's earliest co-workers, Zhang Qizhen considered that 'The Spiritual Man was what N[i] wrote down in the words of Mrs. Penn-Lewis in Chinese' (Hsu 2013, p. 46). Nonetheless, without this book, the following of Ni would likely not have had the pretext to gather together in the first place.

If Ni provided the foundational ideas, Li excelled at realising them socially. In 1943, for example, Li 'spearheaded an "evangelistic migration" [*fuyin yimin*] movement among Little Flock followers' in his home town of Chefoo (Yantai), Shandong. 'During that year', Xi continues,

> he mobilised many to give up 'all their possessions' in support of some one hundred families of the Chefoo Christian Assembly, who were dispatched to found gospel communities in Manchuria and Suiyuan beyond the Great Wall. The venture recalls the practice in the Jesus Family, with which Ni was undoubtedly familiar. In 1947, Li began to introduce similar communalism into the Christian Assembly in Shanghai … (Xi 2012, p. 195).

Lian Xi describes Li as Ni's 'devoted lieutenant', 'a gifted organiser'. Though, as Angus Kinnear writes, Li 'was careful of course to disown the concept of "organization", explaining that, like a cup containing drinking water, these arrangements were merely the vessels for communicating spiritual things.' Nonetheless, Kinnear continues, Li 'exhorted the church to be submissive. "Do nothing without first asking," he urged. "Since the Fall man does as he pleases. Here there is order. Here there is authority. The Church is a place of strict discipline" ' (Lee 1948, in Kinnear 1973, p. 133). Li could have been speaking about the fall of the Qing dynasty as much as about the fall of man. In symbiosis with Li, Ni too could be highly pragmatic. 'In what became known as the "hand over" (*jiaochulai*) movement', Lian Xi tells us,

> [Ni] preached a doctrine of 'submission' to the 'authority' in the church. He also spread the new 'light' of what he termed the Jerusalem Principle, whereby communistic life would equip 'workers' for subsequent individual evangelism [an evangelism Murray Rubinstein (1991, p. 97) calls 'overly aggressive' resulting in what many foreign and indigenous denominations of the time called 'sheep stealing']. In Fuzhou, the birthplace of the Little Flock, a frenzy of *pochan* (breaking property) took hold as Nee's followers sold their land and other belongings. One turned over his automobile dealership to the church. Elsewhere members of the Christian Assembly donated significant quantities of cash, jewelry, and gold as well as shops, companies, and stocks. In Shanghai alone, the value of items that were 'handed over' totalled an equivalent of US $500,000 by 1948' (Lian 2010, p. 195).

When I asked one elderly church member in Taipei what the most important aspect of the church was, he replied with one word: 'authority'. Many have left the church in the US over issues of authority, in particular the 'deputy authority' that Ni, Li, and their co-workers claim from Christ (see e.g. Rutledge n.d.). From an anthropological perspective, I would suggest, these

critiques miss the historical function of Ni, Li, and their co-workers, namely, to create a stable space within which 'the truth of the spirit', organic oneness, social flow, or what I have been calling 'responsiveness', could be recovered as a life principle. I think this is more readily recognised in Taiwan than the US, because in the US there was no deep, culturally thematised, precedent for the experiential truth of organic oneness to begin with. Rather this was inaugurated for them by Ni and Li, who should be its exemplars rather than facilitators.

Neither Ni nor Li were much like the sensitive souls of Christian mystic history. Ni has been accused posthumously of sexual assault by former followers (Hsu 2013) and was as much a businessman, if apparently a bad one (Lian 2010, p. 194), as a preacher, co-founding and eventually becoming chairman of China Biological and Chemical Laboratories, a pharmaceutical company. His alleged sexual and business activities would in turn become the pretext for his lifelong imprisonment from 1952 onwards by the Chinese Communist Party. Li too is accused of dictatorial behaviours, at least by disgruntled ex-church members in the US.[6] Whatever the truth of this, it is true that Ni and Li's power lay not so much in the genius of their revelations as in the creation of a sociomaterial infrastructure of ideas, aesthetics, and practices with sufficient durability and exclusion to allow organic oneness to remerge as a life-guiding principle. The same should be said, in my view, of Chinese Christianity more generally.

Cultural conditions of discontinuity

This chapter has explored the foundations of this Christian world of organic oneness, for Ni and his followers, and how exactly it transformed the history thus far considered. The foundations of this world were and are not Ni and Li per se, I argue. Rather, they facilitated its true foundations in what I call 'repaired responsiveness', that is they facilitated the emergence of a realm in which the organic thought and exercise which has characterised so much of Chinese life and history could re-emerge in a new form. A form, nonetheless, which contains its own conundrums of coherence.

To return briefly to Bergson and his theory of religion, this chapter illustrates his point that the static, or organisational, can become the conditions of possibility for the dynamic, or responsive, organic. Nonetheless, it also exposes the parochialism of his assumption that the dynamic must always be injected by some 'mystic genius' himself attuned to the never-ending flow of *durée*. In a civilisation which has always been attended to the reality of, or rather reality *as*, flow, revitalising the dynamic does not necessarily take mystic inspiration. On the contrary, it can be two authoritarian world builders who create the conditions for a dynamic religion amongst their 'followers'. This is a fresh transformation of the ever-evolving principle of organic oneness that has so often set the pace of Chinese history. It is a transformation,

moreover, of 'the Dao' into the relatively personalised, democratised, but also parochialised, 'Christ'.

The aim of this chapter has been to show how the long history of thought and practice concerning oneness and the organic in China, and the social conditions under which the church first developed, paved the way for and were developed by Chinese Christianity's ultimate concern with organic oneness.

Though individual creativities happen, and are important, this book is about the evolution of organic oneness as the central conundrum of Chinese Christianity. In taking this approach perhaps I could be accused of not taking the discontinuities between Chinese and Christian history seriously enough. One of the most impactful arguments within the anthropology of Christianity has been Joel Robbins' (2007) diagnosis of anthropological 'continuity thinking'. Up until 2007 at least, for various professional–existential reasons, Robbins argued, anthropologists had refused to look the Christianity of those they studied in the face. Anthropologists had been explaining away (or just straight ignoring) this Christianity by assuming, perhaps unwittingly inventing, continuities between pre-Christian and Christian beliefs and practice.

Now was the time to accept that cultural discontinuity, through Christian conversion, Robbins argued, was truly possible. This argument has been fruitful, but perhaps the most interesting aspect of it is only beginning to be attended to: not to the fact that cultural discontinuity is possible, but to the modes of underlying continuity through which discontinuity occurs. Regarding his own Papua New Guinean ethnographic informants' sudden conversion, Robbins (2004) argued that there were key precedents in the Urapmin's own 'traditional culture' that made conversion desirable and sensible to them. The Urapmin's 'moral torment', which marked the discontinuity of their conversion to Christianity, was nonetheless continuous with traditional notions of morality and individual decision-making.

Robbins' overall point is that one cannot understand the Urapmin's plight without taking the discontinuity that Christian conversion has brought to Urpamin culture seriously. The statement of Birgit Meyer's Ghanian informant that Christian conversion is to 'make a complete break with the past' (1998; cf. Richman 2023, p. 386)[7] has been rolled out *ad nauseum* to support this point in various other contexts of Christian conversion around the world.[8] What is more interesting, I would say, is Robbins' assertation, using here the term 'rupture' as, I think, synonymous with his earlier term 'discontinuity', that 'only cultures of rupture, or cultures that at least conceive of the possibility of rupture, produce ruptures that are culturally meaningful and of real interest to the people involved in them' (2019, p. 220).

In other words, only discontinuities wrought by Christian conversion which are in some sense continuous with pre-Christian notions of discontinuity are ethnographically significant. Robbins (e.g. 2001) shows this with the Urapmin. Humiliating marginalisation within the regional ritual system they were previously central to, and a deep concern with individual morality, were two key precedents through which the discontinuity of conversion made

sense to the Urapmin. These precedents nonetheless led to a painfully rupturous change within Urapmin culture.

It seems that the most important point here, regarding the continuity thinking anthropologists have been guilty of, is not that they ought to 'take discontinuity seriously' per se, but that they ought to think harder about how (cultural, but also social, possibly ecological, and psychological) continuity actually occurs. Robbins' deepest innovation, not often recognised even by himself, is to argue that cultural continuity (if it is rendered indigenously in terms of some kind of discontinuity) can encompass and indeed *become* radical discontinuity (in both 'emic' and 'etic' terms). Less a new mode of 'discontinuity thinking', this is 'continuity thinking 2.0'. Before Robbins' interventions, perhaps the tendency of anthropologists was to assume that Christian converts constructed a sense of discontinuity, through conversion narratives of radical change, for instance (Engelke 2004), but that this constructed discontinuity hid a deeper set of cultural continuities. Now the question is, how does radical discontinuity emerge out of continuity. Or, what are the conditions of cultural continuity in which radical discontinuity occur?

…

In this chapter, I argued that the ruptures of Western imperialism and the collapse of the Qing dynasty created conditions in which the implicit oneness that was an assumed part of Chinese traditional cultures could no longer be relied upon. Without this basis, the ultimate concern for social responsiveness, let alone the religio-spiritual ideals of sublime sociality, could not be operated. Ni and Li were, in Bergson's terms, relatively static religionists, world builders who used their authoritarianism to demarcate a new Christian ground of primal oneness, out of which the dynamic organicism of responsivity cum sublime sociality could reflow. I have thus anthropologised Bergson's assumption that that mystic genius of 'certain men' was the basis for reinjecting the dynamic into static religion. 'Certain men', in my Chinese Christian history, were significant for building a relatively static, exclusive ground through which a vitalised sense of organic oneness could re-emerge among their 'followers'. Thus there were subtle plays of continuities and discontinuities here, none of which were *a priori* assumed.

Chinese Christianity represents a significant cultural discontinuity precisely in the way that it has crystallised, parochialised, revitalised, and democratised the deep currents and tensions of organic oneness that have shaped and defined Chinese-spoken history. This is not to deny the difference Christianity makes but to more richly embed it, so as to make its implications even more tangible and extensive. It is not only Christian lives that Chinese Christianity changes but the very course, current, and flow of Chinese history.

After the intellectual effervescence following Robbins' (2007) promotion of rupture to the level of cultural reality, the anthropology of Christianity has begun to ask, 'after rupture, what comes next?' (Richman 2023, p. 384). One

answer is 'repair'. This chapter has explored repaired responsiveness as that which constitutes the continuity linking Chinese Christianity to its Chinese past. It has suggested that a condition for this repair was the organisational world building activities of Ni and Li. These activities enabled the continued transformation of a millennia-long dynamic to take place in Christian form. But there were evident changes too that have only been mentioned so far in passing. A key change, I argue in Chapter 5, is the role of men and women in the reproduction of the social world.

Notes

[1] Pines writes of the late Warring States period, that 'even those statesmen and thinkers whose personal interests should have discouraged them from advocating unification … nevertheless shared a belief in the need for unity' (2000, p. 311).

[2] We may note the striking similarity between the arguments early Chinese social, political, and spiritual thinkers used and those to be employed by Witness Li. The former would often quote a saying attributed to Confucius – 'Heaven does not have two suns, the people do not have two kings' – the latter used the moon in a very similar way to critique the state of Western Christianity:

> When I was saved, all the pastors and ministers were happy to use the word denomination. Then the Lord raised us up to condemn the denominations, and the pastors and ministers stopped using this term. Although they no longer used the term denomination, they still held onto the different names. Do you realize that every name is a division? Every denomination, every naming, is a division. Do not say that our name is 'the local church.' We do not have a name. The moon, for example, has no name; it is just the moon. We should simply call the moon 'moon.' Some people have said that the American moon is brighter than the Chinese moon. But there is no such thing as an American moon or a Chinese moon. The most you can say is the moon in America or the moon in China. It is one moon. There is only the one moon. Likewise, the church is simply the church (*Life-Study of Genesis,* Chapter 34, Section 4, accessed 25 March 2019, via https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=1806CECAC6).

[3] The transcendence of the creator has been deeply connected to the finitude of his creation. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2014) has shown, historically, (Christian) atheism has always been very closely tied to the idea that there is more than one world.

[4] For Li's description of 'the Body' as a 'great reality in the universe', see: *The Move of God in Man,* Chapter 10, Section 2, accessed 26 August 2019 via https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=0BC4C7CD6B

[5] Ni and Li both conceded that Confucians were 'ethical' and 'virtuous'. Li was even embarrassed by the fact that Confucians were more virtuous

than Western missionaries in China. However, Confucius never showed you how you might go beyond being mere creatures of God, Witness Li complained at a 'young-people's training' session in 1975 in Taipei:

> There is a great difference between living the life of God's creatures and living the life of God's sons. For example, both the Bible and Confucius teach submission. But Confucius' teaching concerning submission is merely ethical. In one of his writings called The Highest Learning, Confucius speaks of developing and cultivating the 'bright virtue.' To him, the highest attainment in ethics was to cultivate this bright virtue. Nevertheless, no matter how much we may develop this bright virtue according to the teachings of Confucius, we are still creatures of God (*Life-Study of Galatians*, Chapter 45, Section 2, accessed on 25 March 2019 via https://www.ministrybooks.org/SearchMinBooksDsp.cfm?id=1504CBC6CA).

[6] See www.localchurchdiscussions.com for decades of online critique and debate from ex-church members over Li and the Local Church.

[7] Richman points out a much-elided aspect of Meyer's original focus, in her 1998 article, which was on believers' *inability* to make a complete break with what they conceptualise as 'the past' and to become 'free' modern subjects (Meyer 1998, p. 318, in Richman 2023, p. 386, Richman's italics).

[8] See Huang 2014 for a rather unconvincing transfer of Urapmin 'moral torment' to rural-to-urban Chinese migrant Christians.

Interlude II. Limited response

Aiguo has been my key informant, my gatekeeper, through this anthropological project. Without him, I would not have been able to conduct the fieldwork I did. We have known each other for 10 years now. Though there have been moments where I lost my footing as a participant–observer, most of the time I have been able to keep the balance right. I spent a year, for example, following my 18 months of fieldwork in Taiwan, being woken by his call early each morning, being awoken to the day through the sound of his chanting, to his 'calling on the Lord'. Despite losing any temptation to believe, I stayed curious during this period, picking up yet more esoteric Sino-Taiwanese Christian vocabulary, trying out new theories of Chinese Christianity, seeing how far my own sense of 'the spiritual' might align with Aiguo's. Now, in 2025, I had just returned from a pilot fieldwork project in Northeast Hebei, not with Christians but Zen Buddhists.

Aiguo had invited my daughter and I over for dinner and he asked how I was. 'I've never been better', I replied, and meant it. 'Oh,' he said, 'that's great, what's making you feel so good?' 'I'm not sure,' I replied, 'but I have been meditating quite a lot, me and Flo [my partner] both, it's great.' 'Oh right,' he said, looking a little concerned. I tried to placate his concern and failed, drastically: 'Sometimes silence is more powerful than words,' I offered, 'just emptying yourself of all thoughts and sitting with an empty mind, it's great.' He was not pleased, and I should have known, I did know, and that was part of the point, as I will return to soon. Followers of Li in Taiwan often contrast their own practice of being 'filled with Christ' with the incomprehensible Buddhist embrace of 'emptiness'. I had mentioned my new research project and my ex-gatekeeper had clearly made the connection.

> 'When we empty ourselves,' he began, 'we open ourselves up to all sorts of demonic influences.' 'There was a church brother,' he went on, 'who was like you. He was searching for the truth, and found truth in all different religions. He learned to meditate and become a Buddhist master. He could even leave his body and do all sorts of powerful things. But then he almost went mad and nearly died, before he finally came to the church. You must be careful.'

We spent more than an hour reading through the long testimony of this church brother, transcribed on a church website. It was fascinating, occurring

as it did in 1940s China during the Second World War and then just before the CCP takeover of the country, when the brother fled with Witness Li to Taiwan. But I also started to feel frustrated. We had known each other for so long now, and I had spent many hours listening to Aiguo and trying to understand the world from his perspective. Not entirely without my own motives for juicy ethnographic data, of course. Still, ethnographically serviceable moments were few and far between. Certainly, spending a year being woken up every morning to the rhythm of *Ohh zhu yesuuu* was as much to placate his insistence that I give my ex-faith one last try, as to begin each day with post-fieldwork fieldwork.

It began to occur to me that if we were friends, then his response to my happiness was not a very friendly response. I felt he was trying to take my happiness away, warn me against it. Of course, I knew his convictions, inside and out. I knew that in some sense he was showing concern, care even. But I had to try hard to reason myself into this empathy. Feelings-wise, his response became a little cutting. I entered participant-only mode, thinking, 'This is no longer my field, this isn't fieldwork.' I tried my best to make him see that meditation was to me what 'calling on the Lord' was to him. I tried to put it theologically – 'There are many ways to God', etc. I was getting hot under the collar. Why could he not see from my perspective for once, why could he not recognise me as a person rather than a potential convert? I had never felt like this before and was surprised at myself. So was he. He just looked at me. After some time, he surprised me in turn. 'Your hair looks nice,' he said. And that was that. 'Amen brother,' he said as I collected my daughter, who had wandered out of the dining room at some point in our long exchange, from the front room. We shook hands. I left.

I left thinking that despite his surprising response to my coming out as a real person rather than a participant–observer, that maybe I had got through to him. A couple of days later I received a text. 'Brother you don't have much time. Come back to the church life now.' Underneath, a thumbnail link of Benjamin Netanyahu looking angry followed by 'look at the news it's very near the last 7 years' sent before a church graph detailing the so-called End Times. It seems he had remained unmoved.

The ethnographic chapters of this book have explored responsiveness as fundamental to organic oneness as a lived reality in 'the church'. The very conditions of this responsiveness, I have emphasised less, however – its mediation through a single vocabulary and established set of exercises, and its rooting in the flowing spirit and not the deliberating, possibly empathising, mind – lead to an experience of the very opposite for those who seek another kind of response. I am not the first one to feel hurt by the refusal of any other terms of engagement by friends and family in the church than those sanctioned by the ministry. Even those fully committed to churchlife complain often that 'the saints' need to learn to be more 'human', by which they mean engaging others as something other than godman vessels of the church. In many ways the brothers and sisters are both the most and least

responsive people I know. That the pursuit of pure responsiveness can lead to pointed neglect of those not committed to this pursuit is possibly an insight with relevance beyond Chinese Christianity. Something to bear in mind perhaps alongside my so-far celebration of 'dis-enclosure', or how totalisation, closure, become the ground, the condition, for revitalised forms of openness, intimacy, and mutuality.

5. Brothers as bridesmaids: gender dilemmas

Sister Carlita was sobbing. In-between sharp inhalations she was trying to tell us what it was that was upsetting her. Sister Rosa, a middle-aged African-American woman with much church experience, was translating from Carlita's Mexican Spanish for the rest of us, while rubbing her back with a look of concern on her face. Sister Carlita was confessing what for her was a painful sin: not getting up early enough to 'spend time with the Lord'. She was desperate to assure us of how much she loved Christ, but was worried that he might be hurt by her apparent laziness.

We were in a suburb of the Washington metropolitan area, sat around the periphery of the open-plan third-floor apartment of a young Taiwanese couple. A core exercise of this worldwide, officially nameless following of Ni and Li is to wake early each morning and, as Carlita put it, 'spend time with the Lord'.[1] Carlita found it hard to do this but wanted greatly to affirm through her tears just how much she loved Christ, nonetheless. There was a sense, in fact, that this was not really about 'morning revival' at all, nor was it a confession as such. Rather, Carlita, who was new to the group and its way of experiencing the divine, seemed to be simply overflowing with overwhelming passion for her new-found spiritual counterpart. Being prompted to 'share', these tearful profusions of love had been the result.

As sister Carlita tapered off, sister Rosa offered a response, this time asking someone else to translate her own English into Spanish. She affirmed that she knew how Carlita felt, and it was good 'that she loved the Lord so much'. But she also offered a soft rebuke: 'Sometimes a sister's love for the Lord,' she said, 'does not come from the spirit.' Rather, this love is a 'natural love', which 'comes from the soul'. As we have seen, the distinction between the soul and the spirit is the fulcrum around which Ni and Li first formed their critique of what they call 'Christianity', which they claim is yet to discover the human spirit as distinct from the soul. Discovering the experiential difference between 'being in' the spirit and the soul is a cornerstone on which followers narrate their transformations as members of the group, or in their terms as 'regenerated' Christians.

The intense natural, soulish love for the Lord, Rosa said, can in fact 'hinder God's plan', which is 'to form for himself a corporate, organic Body' of believers which would be 'his counterpart, his love, his Bride'. 'The Lord doesn't want us to love him individually,' Rosa was saying, but 'with a corporate love.' Which is to say he wants to 'love himself through us', others have told me.

Carlita's temptation, according to Rosa, was to 'love the Lord' with an individual, natural, soulish, human femininity.

This chapter explores organic oneness beyond a harmonious synthesis of the two principles. It unearths oppressive aspects of oneness in particular, in a gendered key. Brothers and sisters, we see, are implicated differently within the church project, each being denied, to some degree, the freedoms of the other, each with their own gendered opportunities for spiritual growth and enjoyment. The chapter wonders in what respects masculine–feminine distinctions are intrinsic to the sublime-social pursuit of organic oneness and whether this lived dichotomy might be less tightly tied to categorised bodies than is the case for Ni and Li's global following. In other words, the book continues its turn here towards ethnographic critique.

A significant shift: from emergent oneness to the instrumentalised organic

Ever since 1962, when Witness Li moved to California, 'the church' has been inescapably transnational. The churches in Taipei and Anaheim, Kaohsiung and Washington, are symbiotic aspects of the same transnational phenomenon. Chinese Christianity, of course, has never been entirely confined to China. Transnational connections, and the sense of Christianity's supranational significance, historians tell us (Dunch 2001; Inouye 2011), have always been part of Christianity's indigenisation, in China, Taiwan, and elsewhere (e.g. Robbins 1998). Nonetheless, 1962 is a significant date because from then on increasing numbers of non-Chinese-speaking Christians joined 'the church'. Some were influenced by the same critics of institutionalised Christianity as had influenced Ni, such as the Plymouth Brethren who, as Woodbridge writes, sought 'to return to a period before the Church became institutionalized and divided into denominations' (2016, p. 126). Others were part of the so-called Jesus People Movement (JPM). Benjamin Wayne Williamson summarises this connection:

> In 1965, L[i] acquired a meeting place on Elden Avenue in Los Angeles, and in 1969 his ministry saw an influx of white, American young people. Liu [Yi 2016, pp. 103–4] notes that many of them had been a part of the hippie movement and implies that they were converted through L[i]'s ministry leading to a 'revival' that coincided with the JPM. In 1970, four to five hundred church members were sent out to major US cities to start new churches connected to L[i]'s 'Local Church' movement (2021, p. 55).

Though perhaps not as driven by a 1960s orientalist desire for 'wisdom from the East', still today many US church members narrate their coming to the church as 'seekers', those dissatisfied with institutionalised Christianity and

with the secular world. The same is true for those in the UK and the rest of Europe who tended to join the church in the age of the internet, having discovered Li's following online, previously being readers only of the much better-known Watchman Ni. My own parents, in their words, spent 15 years 'wandering in the wilderness', having discovered Ni's writings and rejected 'Christianity', but not yet having found Li's global following, 'the church'.

As described with brother Jim in the Introduction, this orientation to the church generally results in the subtle reproduction of those 'problems of presence' so often definitive of Western Christianities. The churchlives of these seekers may not be about trying to close a gap between a transcendent God and the material, secular world, but it does often assume an analogous differentiation between the immaterial and the everyday. Theirs is the issue of implementing 'the vision' they have learned and internalised from Ni and Li's written works as a kind of 'practice', the practice of the churchlife, of 'blending'. This is subtly but significantly different from the orientation of many in Taiwan who exercise organic oneness from the morning on, from their spirits out, the ground up; the vision, if anything, being emergent from this. Indeed 'the vision' in Mandarin has none of the mentalistic implications of the English. Elsewhere (Breen 2019, p. 94), I translate it as 'strange form'.

On the one hand, almost every church message touches upon the problem of relying upon the knowledge of the mind, even if this is knowledge of the 'high peak truth' revealed through Ni and Li. In my terms, this is the problem of beginning with an image and will to oneness, with the organic as a second thought, as an ostensible putting of oneness into practice. On the other hand, Witness Li, after three decades living in the US, came to frame this visionary approach, encapsulated in the notion of 'blending', as a remedy to the primacy given to the organic in Taiwan. A remedy, that is, to a conundrum of organicness without oneness, as it were, responsivity without commitment to the global church project, attention to particularistic (often hierarchical) ties rather than holistically framed relations.[2] Thus, we can also see a symbiosis between 'East' and 'West' here as well as a set of conflicts.

Nonetheless, this symbiosis also leads, at times, to a complete reshaping of the *raison d'ĕtre* of this group. In Chapter 4 I described how Ni and Li's rather uncompromising organisational skills (reframed as necessary coordinations) became conditions for a relative closure which nonetheless enabled the vitalised differentiations, organicism, and mutual responsivity, which have variously been under- and over-currents of Chinese social, political, and ideational history, to re-emerge in Christian form. However, with increased numbers of Western church members, the lifeworld Ni and Li helped to build has become for many not the means but the end of the churchlife. 'The church', as 'the one new man', 'the Body', 'the Bride', 'the New Jerusalem', has become the ultimate concern, rather than organic oneness per se.

This is a subtle distinction perhaps but one with quite drastic consequences. The aim of the churchlife becomes not the autotelic joy of the flowing ever-responsive spirit as the groundless ground of the real, beyond mind, emotion,

and will. But rather it becomes 'the building of the Body', 'the growth of the church', with each of its 'living stones' (*huoshi*) acting as 'functioning vessels' within this all-encompassing reality. Oneness is foregrounded, the organic side-lined.

This is just another turn in the ever-unfolding dynamics of organic oneness this book has aimed to trace. Nonetheless, it results in a rather different kind of religiosity to the sublime sociality that occurs when organic oneness succeeds. We see in this chapter that it results, for instance, in quite different experiences for men and women. Women are disciplined into not experiencing Christ as a primary presence in their personal lives but as a means to the end of corporate spirituality. Men, on the other hand, in the name of masculinity, are taught to stand back from this spirituality altogether. This emergent difference itself is entangled with a transformation in gender relations that Chinese Christianity, at least under Ni and Li, represents, a transformation from women to men as the problematic gender in social reproduction. This chapter traces this transformation, and the differently gendered religiosities that emerge from it. First, I return to that Washington apartment.

Reactive masculinity

In contrast to Carlita, Carlos, from Brazil, sitting on my left in the open-plan apartment, found it difficult to love God with a divine, corporate femininity because of the discomfort he felt with addressing God from a female perspective. He cited some of the well-known church song lyrics with which to illustrate his point. The song, listened to well over a million times on YouTube with rapturous comments beneath, left by followers of Ni and Li (one can only assume), was composed by Howard Higashi, the son of a Hawaiian sugar plantation foreman of Japanese-Buddhist descent who had studied to be a high-school maths teacher before converting to Christianity and devoting his life to Ni and Li's ministry at age 31. It sings of the 'divine romance' between Christ and the church beginning with a tentative courtship – 'How could a country girl like me; Become Your match – Your bride to be?' – and ending with a consummating queenhood:

In all my being – transforming
To be Your bride and queen.
In Your love I'm drawn,
To You I belong;
I am not my own, Lord,
I'm Yours alone.
By Your love I'm drawn,
In Your name I'm charmed,
And Your Person captured me,
For I've been kissed by Thee.

In lyrics like these, and prayers, readings, and shared words more generally, the femininity of the Body of Christ as bride, lover, queen, and counterpart is foregrounded. In this sung, but also prayed and prophesied, positionality, brothers and sisters alike are gendered female. At least in heterosexual contexts, sexual similarity is anathema to sexual attraction, and sexual attraction, one sister – whose husband was not Christian – advised me in response to my interview question in her Taipei apartment, is the first requirement of all marriage. It is for this reason, I conjecture, younger church sisters have complained to me that they do not find the prospect of marrying a church brother attractive. 'My husband must be an outside man,' my host sister emphasised to me in Taiwan. As documented in rural parts of the island by Arthur Wolf (e.g. 1968), who described the phenomenon of future brides being adopted into families while both son and bride were still children, church kids who grow up calling one another 'brother and sister', and being part of the same corporate Bride, report not finding each other attractive.

Confluent with this, many married sisters embrace the principle that they are *represented* by their husbands in church meetings, that is, that their husbands represent the (divinely feminine) congregation rather than belonging to it per se. One such sister told me how embarrassed she felt when her husband stood up in church meetings and his shirt was untucked or his tie skew-whiff. If Carlos sought to differentiate his manhood from the feminine positionality of the Bride, these sisters promote such differentiation from their side too.[3]

There is an asymmetry here. Church sister femininity can be too 'naturally' feminine, can forget the corporate nature of divine love. Church brothers, on the other hand, are not chastised for being too 'naturally' masculine. Carlos was iterating a positionality, we will see, that would not be disapproved of by certain influential quarters of church leadership. Church brother masculinity, I will suggest, is caught between full feminine participation in the divine romance and manly detachment from it. This is often resolved through what I call reactive (not responsive) masculinity; masculinity, that is, defined by its abnegation of, its absolute contrast with, femininity. That there is such an ambivalence leading to reactivity is evident in recent contested discourse coming from certain church leaders.

In one 'question and response' session I attended in the UK with a 'co-worker' who is arguably the highest authority in the church today, an anonymous question was read out to him in which a brother complained that he felt his life was too 'restricted' by his wife. The elder bellowed in response 'Be a man!'; 'Take control,' he told the brother. 'You are the head of the household; you are Christ, and she is the bride.' 'She should submit to your authority,' he concluded. In a widely circulated message, this same co-worker said of his own wife, 'I am so thankful I have my companion, my wife, to travel with me wherever I go,' but I am the co-worker, he continued, 'I am the one ministering.' He then spoke words that have since been hotly contested in some church corners: 'She is nothing. She is no one. She is just my wife. I will never crown her. I will never exalt her. To do so would be to damage her.'[4]

This articulation of authority reveals the *reactionary edge* of church masculinity. Not only must men detach from feminised devotion. They must reassert a kind of human–divine hierarchy over women, as if to counter-balance the feminised identity all believers are supposed to share as corporate lovers kissed by Christ. The risk, for these heterosexual men, is being spiritually feminised to the detriment of being socially masculine – a precarious position both inside and outside the church. These were the concluding words to a prior diagnosis the co-worker above had been making. 'Over the years, we have suffered from a number of "Miriams"[5] in at least four ways,' he began, before outlining the following bullet points:

1. Some claim authority for themselves because they are married to a co-worker or to an elder. They crown themselves, saying, 'You are a co-worker now, and so am I. We are a team.'
2. The brother may make the big mistake of fostering this kind of concept in his wife. He may even exalt her, telling others, 'Listen to her. She knows how to pray with authority. She knows how to pray prayers of spiritual warfare.' In contrast, those who really know how to pray in this way, simply pray in this way. They do not boast or talk about it.
3. Some females usurp authority. They claim to be the spiritual head over their husbands. They turn everything upside down. This has actually happened.
4. The husband may give in to such a usurping wife. He may even take the lead to rebel. In 1974 the church in Anaheim was established, and a certain man, who is now with the Lord, wanted there to be leading sisters. Brother L[i] did not agree. However, this brother appointed three anyway, including his wife. They and the women who followed them caused some of the most painful and traumatic suffering that we have ever experienced. Eventually, Brother L[i] said, 'This is a cancer.' They rejected Brother L[i]'s fellowship, but the Lord cut that cancer out of the Body.

It is as if these authoritative brothers must struggle, in the purely human realm, against the very femininity in relation to the divine that the church project itself reiterates. Repeated church ritual in which brothers sing, pray, and share, as the human feminine counterpart to the divine masculine, starts to have effects in their everyday, married, or, worryingly, unmarried, lives. Unmarried sisters complain that unmarried church brothers are too similar to themselves. Married sisters too want their husbands to assume a subject position which does not share in but only reflects their own. Elders chastise them for not being 'man' enough.

Despite the centrality of corporate femininity to church worship, church leadership consists of brothers who are positively repelled by the notion that men and women in the church would share a gendered positionality. 'I love America very much,' Witness Li told a gathering of followers in Anaheim, California, in 1990, 'but,' he continued, 'there is one big defect in American

society … males and females do not have the proper knowledge and feeling concerning their masculinity and femininity.'[6] The above-quoted co-worker conceded in another question and response session the existence of gender dysmorphia and noted that it was 'beyond [his] capacity' to advise those brothers and sisters who had contacted him 'suffering' from it. He then forcefully iterated that the belief that a person could be born in the wrong body was 'functionally atheist'.[7]

One could charitably read these statements in light of previous discussions: all activity of the mind, we might say, is 'functionally atheist'. But, effectively, in moments like these the church is barely distinguishable from other home-grown US biblical literalists (Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2001). Nonetheless, there may also be a cultural synthesis at work here too. One former co-worker writes that, following Li's move to the US, 'men from West Texas brought a male dominated and male-centric culture into [the group] that melded well with the male-dominated culture of China' (Rutledge n.d., p. 32). It is noteworthy, that in a discussion with group 5, hall 34, of the church in Taipei, on the not-unrelated topic of same-sex love, after some back and forth, the general conclusion was that it 'ultimately doesn't matter what your sexual orientation is'. It seems that it is those brothers and sisters who are especially invested in the oneness, the 'entification' (Larsen 2010), of the church, and its reproduction, who are also most invested in gender policing.

The aspect of this entification this chapter is concerned with is the principle that the Christian life should be about becoming a collective, divine entity, the Bride of Christ, living in mutual adoration with the Godhead, Christ, the Bridegroom. There are daily idioms and practices within the group that reiterate this gendered positionality as an ideal, transcendental subjectivity of the group. In certain contexts, men and women within 'the church' relate quite differently to this principle. Often here masculinity is defined in terms that resist the shared subjectivity, gendered female, that this central image assumes. It is hard at times (in a world that only accepts heterosexual, binary masculinities) to be a 'man' and a 'queen' at once. This chapter thus explores how such framings of what one might call 'reactionary masculinity' unfold, and are critically reflected upon.

In doing this, I aim to help reconcile sociological accounts of gendered differences in the nature and numbers of religious participation (e.g. Miller and Stark 2002) with theological and other work on religious representation. By demonstrating how, despite the ultimate concern of the group for shared collective subjectivity, gendered female, masculinity is policed by its leaders as precisely 'not feminine', the chapter joins a growing literature which understands masculinity as inseparable from other genderings (e.g. Waling 2019), which understands 'that masculinity and femininity are not immutable notions that contain predefined meanings of maleness and femaleness, but they mutually influence one another' (Yoo 2020, p. 554). In particular, I complexify the genealogy and conundrum space of organic oneness, thus far traced, by showing how it intersects with processes of mutual gendering.

God's gender

The gender of God has long been a theological and representational problem. Marina Warner's (1976) classic historicisation of the cult of the Virgin Mary depicts her as an impossible, oppressive ideal: both virginally pure and richly procreative. P. Steven Sangren (1983) then adapted Warner's argument to frame important goddesses within the Chinese traditional pantheon, the Bodhisattva Guanyin and protectress of travellers Mazu, as similarly oppressive to women in their impossible ideality. On the other hand, Luce Irigaray (1993) and others (e.g. Joy 2013) have considered the patriarchal God of Abrahamic religion as oppressive through his expulsion of femininity from Himself as the image and form of perfection. Then again, Eilberg-Schwartz in *God's Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (1995) shows how relations between the masculinity of God and men have not always been straightforward in historical and contemporary Judaism alike. Finally, Caroline Walker-Bynum (1984) argues that it was precisely their status as women that enabled the thirteenth-century mystics she describes to experience taking the Eucharist in the ecstatic, if not erotic, manner they did.

However, while there is a considerable literature exploring the gendered tensions between God and his worshippers, there has been much less focus upon potential sociological outcomes of such tensions. What is perhaps unique to the group I describe here, in its approach to human–divine relations, is the privilege granted to a *corporate-feminine* subject position in relation to the divine male. Though, as we have seen, the ('spiritual') corporate-feminine is not the same as the ('natural') individual-feminine, these two are evidently felt to be 'closer' subject positions than the individual-masculine and the corporate-feminine.

Moreover, while the corporate-feminine positionality has capacity for indefinite numbers of individuals, its group-sanctioned alternative for men – masculine-individual identifications with 'Christ', as 'deputy authorities' and 'heads of the household' – is limited to those 'brothers' with recognised authority. Before describing how these representational dynamics play out in group members' lives, I want to first further contextualise them in relation to classical Chinese and other, Christian, hegemonic masculinities.

Chinese masculinities

Li et al. (2021) are critical of what they understand as an ethnocentric emphasis in literatures on masculinity, and fatherhood in particular, and on the role of men within nuclear families. 'The Chinese cultural tradition, in contrast', they write, 'emphasizes the family lineage' (Li et al. 2021, p. 317). It is a staple of the anthropology of China that Chinese kinship is classically rooted in a concern for perpetuating the patrilineage. Borrowing its model from the even more classic literature on African societies as primarily patrilineal (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 2015 [1940]), this literature described relations between sons and fathers and between cognates and affines in terms of this perpetuation

(e.g. Freedman 1970). It is noteworthy that like these 'corporate groups' of classic anthropological kinship literature the brothers and sisters describe themselves as 'one body' (Bloch 2008, p. 2057).

More recent literature (Santos and Harrell 2016), building upon the feminist scholarship of anthropologists such as Margery Wolf (1972), shows how, often, the patrilineage is more ideological than reflective of actual family realities. This literature describes the importance and practical power of mothers within domestic settings, influential women's groups and networks, and the cultural work done by men to erase the labour of women in producing such core cultural artefacts as ancestral shines, tablets, and rituals. More recent literature still describes how formerly patrilineal kinship ideals have been undergoing a shift as the conjugal unit becomes more and more central in recent generations' lives (e.g. Yan 2003). Mag Wong (2020), for instance, writes of the rise of what she calls 'able-responsible men' characterised more by their ability to provide for the nuclear family than their place in the lineage of traditional Chinese masculinity.

We might say that the issue of how to relate to God as a Bride and to women as 'Christ' is a peculiarly Christian conundrum which nonetheless reflects and intersects with changing ideals in the wider Sinosphere. But there have also been precedents for such modern, Sinospheric tensions. Traditional Chinese masculinity, Kam Louie (2002) influentially suggests, comes historically in two forms: the martial and the literary, or *wu* and *wen* in Chinese. While it is the literary *wen* masculinity of the Confucian scholar which has been ascendent for much of Chinese history, Louie writes, other scholars have suggested that the turn to military nationalism during the Mao Zedong years precipitated the rise of martial *wu* masculinity (Hinsch 2013), a gendered form perhaps of the long-standing Chinese historical dance between organicism and command.

Recently, it has been suggested that post-socialist China, along with East Asia more widely, has seen the emergence of a much more effeminate masculinity in both popular (e.g. Zheng 2015) and literary (Wang 2010) culture. Most relevant here, anthropologists have argued that for many Chinese converts, alongside its selective empowerment of women (Tong and Yang 2017), Christianity comes with a return to the 'soft masculinity' (Yoo 2020) of pre-communist China, a continuation of *wen* organicism in Christian form perhaps.

Nonetheless, rather than suggesting a reversion to softness per se, there seems to be the emergence of a reactionary masculinity precisely in response to a perceived soft masculinity in the Chinese Christianity of Ni and Li followers. The issue here is that, at least when framed in a gendered register, organicism can be felt to too easily collapse 'man' into 'woman'. It is not only that there are both Chinese and North American precedents for gender binarism, as suggested by the ex-co-worker cited above, but that such a collapse is felt by some at least to be a threat to the stable reproduction of the church as a (sublime) social entity, as we saw with the co-worker's reactive masculinity.

Diasporic Chinese Christian masculinities

Looking at reactionary church masculinity as a Chinese Christian diasporic gender transformation may be a productive angle. Work on Chinese-speaking migrants has shown traditional patriarchy structures to be variously maintained (e.g. Watson 1977), transformed (e.g. Chen 2009), and even intensified (Lin 2013), through the journeys migrants make. Comparative work on young Taiwanese descendants of migrants from China after the CCP came to power in 1949 has argued that they feel greater pressure to conform to traditional patrilineal family ideals than their mainland Chinese generational equivalents (Remmert 2018). As noted, followers of Ni-cum-Li migrated alongside others fleeing the rise of Maoist forces at this time. It seems they brought with them the patrilineal ideals of masculinity that are still more prominent in Taiwan than China today.

However, they also brought with them a form of indigenised Chinese Christianity rooted in the teachings of women. Not unlike the thirteenth-century mysticism described by Walker-Bynum (1984), this Christianity framed central religious experiences as fundamentally gendered with the human pole of these experiences gendered female, as the bride and lover of Christ. As described above, the difference is that the 'divine feminine' (Ruether 2005) in the case of Ni and Li followers is emphatically 'corporate' (*tuanti*), not individual. The tension is thus between patriarchal ideals and an ultimate concern with a corporate divine femininity. Here it is important to note how this religious element adds something new to our understandings of how Chinese masculinity changes with migration.

If, as Dawley and Thornton note, 'the critical relationship between masculinity and religion … remains [a] relatively unexplored conceptual terrain' (2018, p. 5), the intersections between masculinity, religion, and migration are still less explored. Leslie Fesenmyer's work with migrant Kenyan men who become Pentecostal pastors in London is pioneering in this respect. Her argument (2018) that the gendered positionality of Pentecostal pastorhood, being recognised both in Kenya and London, provides a multi-sited mode of remaking manhood transnationally, contributes insightfully to the understanding that ideals of masculinity and actual experiences of (e)masculation form 'mutually constitutive relationship[s]' (Yeoh and Ramdas 2014, p. 1203). We could extend the argument by noting that attending to religion in particular provides fresh perspective on 'whether the migration process opens up key moments for reworking expressions of male subjectivities' (Yeoh and Ramdas 2014, p. 1204).

Indigenising women

Independent women preachers and evangelists, both Chinese and Western, were foundational to the indigenisation of Protestantism in early twentieth-century China (Kwok 1992; Ma 2021). There were several reasons for this.

Women often had the least to lose and the most to gain in adopting this foreign creed. Besides the schools for girls established by foreign missionaries, which offered educational possibilities otherwise only available to boys (Kwok 1992), the actual practice of Christianity was less hierarchical than the patrilineal ancestor veneration which most of traditional Chinese religious life revolved around (Blake 2011, p. 18). Women also had less 'face' to lose than men in converting to ('foreign', 'imperialist') Christianity, given that they were only ever adjunct to the ancestral veneration at the heart of popular and elite Chinese traditional practices (Sangren 2000). These early indigenisers, it seems to me, had a lasting impact not only on the still predominantly female congregations of Chinese Christianity (Tong and Yang 2017), but on the forms that Chinese Christian folk theologies would take.

The most obvious of these impacts might be the 'female Christ' of the influential Chinese Christian group Eastern Lightning (Dunn 2009), otherwise known as Church of the Almighty God, which itself originated with followers of Witness Li (Bays 2012, p. 196). Less obvious but perhaps with deeper gendered effects, is Ni and Li's emphasis on becoming the 'corporate bride of Christ'. As noted, according to Li, '[f]our sisters were vital to Watchman N[i] in his life and work. He was saved through the preaching of Dora Yu, perfected under Margaret Barber, and sustained by two elderly co-workers, Ruth Lee, and Peace Wang' (Lee 1991a, p. 101). It is evident that Ni's deep attachment to the Song of Songs, written with 'the voices of two lovers, praising each other, yearning for each other, proffering invitations to enjoy' (Garrett 1993, p. 366), was shaped not only by these women but the women they read and relied on for instruction, women such as the mystic Catholic nun, Madame Guyon (1648–1717), and the Welsh Holiness preacher Jesse Penn-Lewis (1861–1927).

Often these women's spirituality was simultaneously a critique of patriarchal practices of exclusion, a critique which dovetailed with Ni's critique of missionary imperialism at the beginning of the twentieth century (see Chapter 4 and Breen 2022). At the turn of the nineteenth century, Penn-Lewis was dealing with being a Welsh woman in a heavily English, male-dominated Christian scene: 'several prominent Holiness leaders warn[ed] that Keswick [an annual Christian convention central to the Holiness movement] was "being threatened by the presence of mercurial and over-emotional Welsh people such as … Jesse Penn Lewis"' (Lian 2010, p. 164). In 1906, among other times, Penn-Lewis spoke out publicly against this prejudice. 'It will be of very grave importance to the whole Church of Christ', she said,

> if Keswick officially sets its face against women speaking to audiences when, at this time, God is using women in a very marked way. The whole current of life moving through the spiritual Church is towards clear and open ground for women in the work of God (Jones 1997, p. 197).

Through Penn-Lewis and Barber, Ni discovered Madame Guyon, '[a]n enchanting French mystic … who was once imprisoned in the Bastille for her role in the Quietest controversy' (Lian 2010, p. 176). She,

> had long been popular among Pietists, Quakers, Methodists, and adherents of nineteenth-century revivalism in North America. She yearned for the destruction of the 'vain, pompous edifice [that] human art and power had erected.' The horrible ruins that resulted would enable God, she wrote, to 'rear His sacred temple in us' (Lian 2010, p. 176).

'Such teaching found a curious resonance among the Little Flock', continues Lian (2010, p. 176). And indeed, translations of Guyon's works proliferated among Chinese converts at that time. Influenced by Guyon and Penn-Lewis, Ni became especially besotted with the eschatology of becoming the bride of Christ, not as individuals but as a collective. This romantic imagery forms the basis of church songs such as the one above, which sings of the 'divine romance' (*shensheng luomanshi*) between Christ and the church. It also became the basis in some quarters for a stronger emphasis on oneness than organicism through the reactive masculinity it spawned.

Another difference Christianity makes

I return to the latter point momentarily. Firstly, this emphasis on being a divine, feminine counterpart, I want to point out, is 'the difference Christianity makes' (Cannell 2006, p. 1) in this case. In the traditional ancestor veneration that Chinese and Taiwanese converts to Ni and Li's movement and their predecessors previously engaged in, it was masculinity that was – and still is – the normative gendered positionality. Correlatively, in early twentieth-century China and to a large extent in present-day Taiwan (see Friedman 2017), it is femininity not masculinity which is the most ambivalent gender form. While men and their relationship with their fathers embodies the patrilineages which ancestors sit at the head of, daughters, sisters, and mothers, in the traditional conception, are only necessary evils for said patrilineage's reproduction.[8]

As P. Steven Sangren (2000) has documented, women's labour in the celebration, maintenance, and reproduction of the lineage is often obscured. Thus, it was and is women who so often occupy a relative outsider position in traditional society; whether in their natal, patrilineal families where they are only temporary residents before marriage, or in the affinal family for whom, structurally speaking at least, they are only an adjunct requirement for the reproduction of the patriline. There are of course many sociological implications of this. As Choi writes, '[a] defining characteristic of Chinese patriarchy is that a woman relocates after marriage in order to live with her husband's family' (2019, p. 85). More complexly, others (e.g. Wolf 1972) have theorised that the

stereotypical traditional Chinese mother-in-law's wrath is a way of asserting power (over daughters-in-law) from an otherwise powerless position. A textbook case of Nancy Chodorow's (1999) 'reproduction of mothering'.

In Ni and Li's following, by contrast, it is most often men who marry into the church, which, unlike the traditional patriline, is corporately female as the *bride* of Christ. Moreover, it is masculinity which has an awkward positionality in relation to the normative bridal corporate subjectivity of the group. It is men who are (encouraged to be) relatively detached from the church, the social, body. It is also they who must reckon with the injunction to act both as insiders and relative outsiders simultaneously. Again, here lies another difference Christianity makes. Though this is not to say of course that brothers have it worse than sisters. Only that it is men as well as women who suffer the reactive masculinity I describe.

We might even say that the essence of this group to the degree that it has one is corporate-feminine as opposed to the corporate-masculine of the traditional patrilineage. This opposition between traditional and Chinese Christian collective life is not absolute, as the latter does not appear to maintain the inverse of 'a traditional 'man outside/women inside' gender division of [religious] labour' (Choi 2019, p. 85). Nonetheless, the remainder of this chapter draws out the implications of this change for Chinese Christian communities in terms of the reactionary masculinity it generates in at least some members.

Historicising reactive masculinity

In the song we had just sung, before Carlita's testimony which began this chapter, and in the prayers and testimonials within the group that use the song's idioms, the positionality of the singer/prayer/speaker, for 'brothers' and 'sisters' alike, is gendered female. Sister Carlita had only recently joined the group but nonetheless evidently deeply identified with this positionality. Of course, men within the group too enjoy and embrace this positionality in their worship. However, church elders as well as church sisters put pressure on them to resist identifying with this shared feminine subjectivity beyond these worshipful moments. Indeed, my suggestion is that masculinity within this group is defined precisely by distance from this shared feminine subjectivity of the Bride of Christ that sisters such as Carlita so easily identify with.

Despite this following's origins with women preachers, missionaries, and mystics, Ni, and then his co-workers, eventually turned away from sisterhood as a source of spiritual authority. There are records of Ni's attempts to circumscribe his own mother's role within his following (Hsu 2013) and evidence of his increasingly dismissive attitude toward his spiritual mentor, Margaret E. Barber (Chang 2017, p. 35; Lian 2010, p. 157). Where did this shift arise from? No doubt there was some shame involved. A recent YouTube detractor of 'the Local Church' screams with feigned horror into the camera: 'Did you

know Watchman Ni was discipled by a *woman*. That's a sin!'[9] Chinese nationalists in Ni's time were no less disparaging of the influence of female foreign missionaries upon Chinese men (Kwok 1992; Ma 2019).

There is a long history too within Christianity of appropriating the 'divine feminine' whilst denigrating the human feminine. Whether rooted in the Song of Songs, or New Testament imagery of the Church, early Christian Mariology, or apocryphal elaborations of the relation between Mary Magdelene and Jesus, male Christian writers have in each case sought to differentiate between the feminine as a spiritual metaphor and the feminine as a lesser human condition. Indeed, some historians (e.g. Ruether 2005) have understood Christ himself as a masculinisation of the previously feminine Hebrew imagery of Wisdom, a womanly incarnation and mediation of God the Father.

While there is much to consider in terms of the denigration of women in Chinese (and other forms of) Christianity, we should also attend to the denigration of the feminine in church brothers. Church brother masculinity, as noted, is caught between full feminine participation in the divine romance and manly, individual detachment from it. While the 'divine romance' is evidently gendered in one way for church brothers – as they sing of themselves as 'country girls' – their expected interactions with others, especially sisters, is gendered in another. They are expected not to see themselves as 'equal' to sisters, or to allow sisters to see themselves as equal to brothers. The ideal gender equilibrium seems to be one in which sisters occupy the position of collective Bride, while brothers must both do this whilst shifting out of such a feminised positionality in their dealings with sisters qua sisters.

Sisters in turn are expected to treat brothers, in the context of the home, as Christ-representatives. One UK church sister (namely, my mother) has her husband's number unironically stored on her phone under 'my lord'. Ni and Li, and now their surviving 'co-workers', operate via what they call 'deputy authority'. That is, they operate via the borrowed authority of Christ as the 'head' of his Body. This means they occupy a position which is structurally analogous to Christ as a figure external to the church. That is, as the bridegroom. This gendered relation of authority occurs across various scales of implicit hierarchy. There is a quiet but recognised hierarchy of masculinity to be climbed (see Figure 2.2).

Migration and meta-masculinity

The problem for young church brothers who are expected to emerge as implicit church authorities is that they grow up in church 'localities' (as branches of the following are called) in which it is difficult to present themselves, except pretentiously, as in any way exterior to the mothers, aunts, sisters, and childhood friends who have birthed, nurtured, and grown up with them. So, alongside more economic (e.g. the Taiwanese job market is too competitive and too poorly paid) and more explicitly religious (going to missionise) rationales,

migration is motivated, it appears to me, by the structural need to become an 'outside man' within the church. So, many young brothers in Taiwan migrate to localities beyond Taiwan. That is what Aiguo did. Aiguo, that is, who suffered his acne as the acme of his otherness to the divine in Chapter 2. Although he did not make it to the US like his 'cleverer' younger brother, he did make it to where he thought was the next best place, the UK.

Recalling his experience of acne as a direct consequence of questioning church hierarchy, Aiguo's potentially emasculating experiences of domestic and spiritual marginalisation since arriving in the UK in fact have loosened the embodied hold church masculine hierarchies have on him. He told me in great floods of tears how grateful he was to his Malaysian-born church-sister wife. Despite her initial resistance, partly due to his acne scars, she eventually consented to their church-arranged marriage in Taiwan, where they had both conducted the church's two-year 'full time training'. They migrated to the UK, for the sake of 'the Lord's move in Europe', they said, but also because of Taiwan's fiercely competitive work culture and perceived low standard of living.

For the first few years they lived in the UK, Aiguo was a pot-washer in a Chinese restaurant – this is where the tears began to flow – while his wife worked as a junior doctor in training. Almost 10 years later, Aiguo is in and out of jobs and is subject to exclusion from colleagues and oppression from at least one 'satanic' boss (see Chapter 1). Nonetheless, in a recent Facebook post he promoted his wife's new online GP business. He reminisced about an offer he received on the eve of his university graduation to work for Apple in China for a remarkably high salary. His wife-to-be gave him an ultimatum, he recollected: 'We go to the UK for "the Lord's move," or we break up.' After being extremely specific about the high salary he was offered by Apple, he expressed whole-hearted pride for 'the one he loved most in the world'.

Aiguo's experiences of various degrees of marginalisation from the central Taiwanese church hierarchy via migration have afforded him a degree of embodied detachment compared to his prior visceral, dermatological experience of it (see Chapter 2). No longer an overt critic of church hierarchy, Aiguo nonetheless orients himself to it in what seems like a critical way. He feels no need to assert his manhood in marriage. Indeed, he has often advised me in these matters, saying that one must always just 'submit'. 'Even when I know my wife is wrong,' he tells me, 'I just say "okay"'. There is a subtle meta-hierarchy here shadowing the overt one. Although Aiguo's wife seemingly comes out on top in their disputes, Aiguo satisfies himself with the knowledge that he is being 'the better man'. If anything, this is a meta-masculinity rather than the reactive masculinity of the above-mentioned co-worker.

Thinking also of his subtle critique of eldership in Chapter 2, Aiguo seems to be crafting for himself a creative picture of true masculinity as meta-level detachedness, in the church and in his homelife. Not public detachedness, not representativeness, as in the conventional church picture, but conceptual detachment from life in and beyond the church. This is a masculinity

which brothers, like Aiguo, who do not attain public authority within the church, through choice or not, cultivate. It is a meta-detached masculinity which is neither quite Taiwanese nor British or American. It emerges precisely through his migration, his embodied move from one collective approach to masculinity (in Taiwan) to another, which denies the significance of hierarchy altogether, in the UK.

This conclusion resonates with scattered literatures demonstrating that embodied masculinities (and the embodied femininities they are co-constructed alongside (e.g. Wignall 2016, 2023)) often exist in dynamic tension with so-called hegemonic, or ideological, masculinities. Aiguo's journey shows the value of paying attention to the difference that migration can make to these dynamic tensions as well as the differences they make to migratory experiences. Aiguo's journey, and the literal distance it puts between the hegemonic masculinities of the church in Taiwan and his own life and body, demonstrates the possibility of tracing the emergence of what one might call 'meta-masculinities' from the reactive masculinities they are self-defined in relation to. Attending to the intersections between masculinity, migration, and religion opens up new investigative space to explore the question of when, where, and how men become more reflective about the nature and role of masculinity within their shifting identities.

Entifications

The more recent developments described above, then, have turned the infrastructure Ni and Li built into an object in its own right, a sublime social entity, that for some should be reproduced even at the expense of fluid responsivity, of the organic. Thus, in some contexts, at least, the dynamic, the organic has become a mere means to the static, to the oneness of the whole in which each has their 'function', each their 'allotted portion', each their place as a brick in the holy wall. This functional whole in turn has certain gendered imperatives: be a man, do not love with a natural love. This is a Body in which men are corporate men and women corporate women. For some, at least, these imperatives are not conducive to the joy of social flow in which, I have argued, this following is historically rooted. If I began, in Chapters 1–4, with the organic which can lead to oneness, I develop in this second half of the book the other side of the equation: oneness which employs the organic.

Tracing this arc is to engage in an anthropology which attends to the life course of the collectives it studies. Much has been made, since Marilyn Strathern's (1996; cf. Breen 2021) seemingly conclusive critique of the existence of 'society' as an entity of anthropological study. Parallel to many other modern ethnographic stories, Aiguo's migratory transformations put the lie to the assumption (if it was there) that the sacred-sovereign society he is part of is internally homogenous. Other chapters have described the peculiar permeabilities of 'the church'.

But to deny the entitihood (however complex) of a society is not only to emphasise the heterogeneity and permeability of social formations. It is also to perhaps inhibit the possibility of making meaningful anthropological-historical arguments. Without admitting some degree of social entitihood, we make it very difficult to track social change, to track what it is that is changing in a post-'society' anthropology. The argument of this chapter thus implicitly makes the case for admitting the entitihood of the social – be it a church, nation, or yes, a society.

As with biographies of persons, which must assume the person to be at least relatively self-contained, biographies of social bodies must admit a relative entitihood too. Moreover, admitting its possibility lets us ask what happens when social forms become more or less entity-like. Chapter 6 asks and answers precisely this question for the global following of Ni and Li.

Notes

[1] In the US, as in the UK, it is more likely for 'morning revival' to be an individual exercise, though still uncommon.

[2] 'Friendship' is a much-critiqued concept in the church; see Interval II.

[3] For some would-be sisters even the vulnerability and sense of dependence that the divine romance casts upon Christ is too emasculating of the divine. One of elder Li's colleagues, a 'church friend' and intelligence officer in the Taiwanese army, who had suffered abuse there due to her gender, rejected the church for being too 'traditional' in its gender relations. But she also said she found the church notion that God 'needs' us as much as we need him repugnant. I do not want a needy God, she said.

[4] See the Shepherding Words website (2019) 'Twisting Ron Kangas's Words', 16 December, https://shepherdingwords.com/twisting-ron-kangass-words/, for the co-worker's debated depiction of his wife.

[5] Miriam was the sister of Moses and Aaron from the books of Exodus and Numbers. She thought that she and Aaron should lead Israel alongside Moses.

[6] See (Lee 1990b, p. 350) for Li's critique of US gender relations. It is noteworthy that Li's view is quite a 'Chinese' perspective. In his classic analysis of traditional Chinese thought and society, *From the Soil*, Fei Xiaotong (1992 [1947]) has a chapter entitled: 'Between Men and Women there are Only Differences'.

[7] See HeavenlyFoods Js (2022) ('Fellowship – Questions and Responses – Ron Kangas', YouTube video. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvrW2qJf7y8 (last accessed 1 April 2026)) for a powerful co-worker's remarks on the 'functional atheism' of transgenderism.

[8] Arthur Wolf describes the tradition of 'little brides' in rural Taiwan, where a future bride was adopted by the groom's family while both were still children, as a solution to this problem of ambivalent affines. Though it is a solution which spawns its own problems, he shows, of sexual attraction. 'Adopt a daughter-in-law, marry a sister', one of his articles (Wolf 1968) is called.

[9] See https://www.youtube.com/@TexasStreetPreacher for a contemporary YouTuber's critique of Ni for being 'discipled by a woman'.

6. The cult in culture, or why Chinese Christianity is not in China

Anthropologists have long rejected the notion that social relations accumulate into anything so thing-like as a 'society' (e.g. Strathern 1996; cf. Breen 2021). However, it is also true that some social groups are experienced by everyday people as more thing-like than others, as is evidenced in the long quotation below. This chapter interprets the perceived thingliness of Chinese Christian groups like Ni and Li's in North America and elsewhere and delineates the effects this perceived thingliness has in turn upon Chinese Christian life itself.

> You were told it was to be a Christian meeting … The meeting itself was unusual, to say the least…. [It] seemed to be in progress all by itself. It was mostly singing at first. And what singing! You'd never heard any like it in your whole life. Such enthusiasm. The audience of at least two or three hundred swayed back and forth almost as one man in rhythm with the music …
>
> … Then, that rather elderly, but extremely energetic Chinese gentleman appeared. The singing and vocalised responses crescendoed. Never had you seen or heard anything like it in your whole life …
>
> … The Chinese gentleman had spoken for more than an hour. … The message was constantly punctuated with the listeners' vocalized responses …
>
> … you had thought the meeting was over when the message was finished. How wrong you had been! After the message, people everywhere stood and enthusiastically repeated bits of the message with some comment on it. At times the vocalized responses were deafening. The whole group even broke into chanting at times. More songs were sung.
>
> At long, long last the meeting was over. But not for you. About twenty-five people surrounded you and sat down. Then it started.
>
> They began a rhythmic chant, 'O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus.' They seemed hypnotized. And you were beginning to feel the same way. They pitched and rolled together with the beat …

> 'O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus, O Lord Jesus.' On it went. It was beginning to become clear to you what they wanted. You were supposed to join in. The friend who invited you was smiling at you and encouraging you with his hand to join in. The heat was on. It was all of them against you. You could feel the flush of embarrassment coming up your neck and face. How did you ever get yourself into this? …
>
> … Finally you venture an 'O Lord Jesus,' but only with your lips. Smiles and encouragement come from the whole group. They like what you're doing. 'That didn't hurt so much,' you muse. You vocalize it softly, 'O Lord Jesus.'
>
> You're really into it now. You're even enjoying it. You're pulsating back and forth with them. What acceptance! You're a part. You've even got that odd intonation. Your mind is relieved. The pressure is off. Your will has been broken. And it's likely that you have just become the most recent convert to the Local Church …
>
> … And the older Chinese gentleman? Who's he? That is Witness Lee, the autonomous dictator of this world-wide religious cult (Sparks 1977, pp. 219–21).

This is a lengthy quotation from a chapter in a 1977 book called *The Mindmenders: A Look at Current Cults* by Jack Sparks, a book which church members in the US won a lawsuit against the publication of in 1985. It is not a credible source of ethnographic data on its own. For one, it is a thought experiment more than an actual description. Some details are inaccurate, and it is written in an unabashedly biased tone (Sparks was a so-called 'anti-cult researcher'). But it is representative of the North American fear of 'brainwashing' that plagues church attempts at evangelism beyond its Chinese-speaking heartlands to this day.

Early on in my Taipei fieldwork, I asked a longtime elderly brother what he thought was the most important aspect of the church. He responded with striking simplicity: 'Authority.' That word has lingered with me, not just because of its spiritual implications, but because it resonates through every aspect of the Local Church's structure and experience, from internal organisation to how it is viewed by both governments and ex-members.

Historically, the teachings of Ni and Li emerged in a China where imperial authority had collapsed and a modern nationalist state had not yet taken hold. This vacuum created a fertile environment for alternative spiritual authorities that offered order, purpose, and resonance. The appeal of their ministry, in part, lay in its ability to restore coherence amidst chaos, something that may explain the group's emphasis on harmony, spiritual flow, and submission to authority.

It is perhaps a curious reflection of the North American 'individualism' of Sparks and many detractors of the Local Church that they consider it to be a

kind of swallowing up of the Many by the One. An even more infamous text in church circles, entirely dedicated to the argument that the following of Ni and Li is a 'cult', is *The God-Men* (1981) by Neil Duddy, again subject to a successful lawsuit brought by 'the church' against it (Lee et al. v Duddy et al.).[1] Its front cover features a sketch of Witness Li wearing sunglasses. Reflected in them are the outstretched arms of his adoring followers. Again, it is the encompassment of the Many by the One. The vehemence of these critiques suggests an inescapable fear that there is some truth to their opposite. Individualism seems haunted by the 'hippie' suspicion that at root we are indeed all 'one'.

The fear of one's individuality being swallowed up, of being turned into 'a bunch of Christ robots' in Lily's phrase (Chapter 1), could thus be symptomatic of the fragility and perhaps delusion of individualism. But the above countercult critiques also reveal another aspect of this fragile but powerful ideology. Namely, that one's individuality lies in the unique content of one's mind.

Indeed, Phillipe Descola (2013) argues that this is a defining feature of what he calls Western 'naturalism', the cosmological cousin of individualism. Naturalism assumes that the exterior world is made up of the same stuff, matter, while subjects are composed of irreducibly different stuff, mental contents, on the inside. This book has argued that the basic assumptions Chinese Christianity are rooted in are often very different from dualistic Christian dichotomies between creator and created, mind and world, which lead to problems of presence. Concomitantly, there is generally less worry among followers of Ni and Li about the source of their words being in the individual or divine mind per se, but rather with the way those words do or do not induce the flow of the spirit. If Ni and Li's ministry provides, perhaps even softly enforces, a shared mental content for followers to adhere to, this content can ultimately become for them the means to a greater freedom, the freedom of fluid responsivity, of 'being in the spirit'.

So the writings of Sparks, Duddy, and other North American 'anti-cult researchers' likely reveal as much about their own assumptions as those at the root of Ni and Li's following. Anthropologists and sociologists of religion anyway have often been sceptical of the term 'cult' as a helpful social descriptor. More importantly, as Zimmerman-Liu (2017) and others (Christian Research Journal 2009) have shown, the term can have a deeply damaging effect on innocent people. US anti-cult researchers, they show, have in part influenced the Chinese government, who has in turn imprisoned many of Ni and Li's followers over many years. As noted, 'the Shouters' (a derogatory term for the Local Church) are number one on the CCP's infamous 'evil cults' (*xie jiao*) list (Irons 2018).

Still, the prevalence of the term 'cult' does seem to point hazily to something that periodically occurs within religion, and, perhaps, within this group. After reading a few of my writings on them, one ex-member (who insisted she remain anonymous) emailed to ask whether I had considered writing about the darker side of things. There is undoubtedly a pressure to conform, she urged, and not just an emergent oneness from organicism. Another

ex-member discussed in this chapter wrote a play entitled *The Restoration*, a thinly veiled depiction of life in 'the Recovery'. In an interview about writing the play, he said it had been 'therapeutic' in showing him the extent to which he had grown up in a 'cult'. Prompted by these critiques, in the pages ahead I therefore explore the dialectic between being labelled a 'cult' and potentially becoming one.

Zoepolitics

After I first started writing about Ni and Li's following, I received a trickle of email responses from interested students, researchers, church members, and ex-church members. I was most struck by the last group. Several suggested that while they appreciated my attempts to capture the ritual life and spiritual ideals of the group, I had neglected the more oppressive aspects of the following.

'Over the years I noticed cult like tendencies', one ex-member of the global following of Ni and Li, with years of multinational experience within the group, wrote. They insisted they remain anonymous, worrying that 'there are brothers and sisters who kind of report and spy'. 'I do no[t] want to become the target of any of their covert operations or their efforts to slander me', they continued, warning: 'This is often the approach they take to undermine those who voice out.' They described the group's 'Defense and Counterfeit Project', which aims to defend the group, legally if necessary, against the charge that it is a 'cult', as being 'like the Pentagon of the US'.

My aim here is not to suggest that the group is a cult, if only because that is generally not a useful term for social science (cf. Barker 2011). Rather, I want to suggest that the oppression most unhappy members feel is not so overt. The ex-member above describes the 'terribly painful' journey of leaving the group, which left them 'spiritually and psychologically depressed'. But for those who remain in the group there is a deeper, more ambivalent, and more embodied sense that thoughts of their own mind are not to be entertained at all. It is my understanding that these subtle patterns of distress arise from the prioritisation of oneness in the name of the organic.

We might say that with Aiguo's acne, described in Chapter 5, for instance, that he had compartmentalised his mental critique of church authority as a bodily conflict, a process Arthur Kleinman (1985) calls 'somatization'. In an influential set of publications, Kleinman (e.g. 1985) introduced the idea that 'somatization' accounted for the difference between depression experienced in China, which he argued should keep the term 'neurasthenia', as compared to in the US. Under the years of Maoist rule especially it was not socially sanctioned, and even dangerous, to suggest that one was dissatisfied with one's life. Therefore, Kleinman argued, symptoms that would be expressed as depression in a US context were felt as bodily aches and pains in Maoist and post-Maoist China.

Kleinman has since been critiqued for not taking Chinese ethnopsychology seriously enough. Yanhua Zhang (2007), for instance, has reminded us that the mind and body are not split up in Chinese medical ways of thinking as they are in classical allopathic medicine. The 'heart' (*xin*) is considered the site of both thoughts and feelings. Thus, the Chinese translation for 'psychology' (*xinlixue*) is literally 'the study of the patterns of the heart'. Kleinman's analysis, according to this perspective, was a pathologizing projection of Western medical ways of thinking, assuming as it did the clinical significance of transgressing a line between (depressive) thoughts and (somatised) feelings.

Kleinman and colleagues have since conceded that somatization can only partially account for experiences in both socialist and post-socialist China. His co-edited volume (Kleinman et al. 2011), *Deep China*, for instance, explores the psychological and social effects of individualism in there. Most relevant here is the argument that because surveillance in the Maoist era was more 'horizontal' (compared, say, to the much more top-down state-centric surveillance in Soviet Russia (though cf. Kotkin 1995; Pelkmans 2006), with would-be friends, neighbours, and family reporting upon each other), there is a pervasive sense of 'divided selfhood' in contemporary China. As one of Kleinman's interlocutor's notes:

> To survive in China you must reveal nothing to others. Or it could be used against you. … That's why I've come to think the deepest part of the self is best left unclear. Like mist and clouds in a Chinese landscape painting, hide the private part behind your social persona. Let your public self be like rice in a dinner: bland and inconspicuous, taking on the flavors of its surroundings while giving off no flavor of its own. Too strong a personal flavor and you may entice others to jealousy or hatred. … (Kleinman et al. 2011, p. 6).

The divided self, then, manifests here as a need to maintain a strong separation between the inner and outer self, but also to maintain a kind of vagueness across the boundary between them, vague like the mist and clouds in a Chinese landscape painting. Earlier (and elsewhere; see Breen 2026a), I suggested deep cultural precedent in China for valuing the flow of life over an entified 'mind' porous or not in its communications with realities beyond it. Work by Kleinman and colleagues raises the question of political contexts too which discourage the formation of selfhood around a 'mind' with clear contents and significant to the degree that those contents have divine, human, sane, or less-than-sane origins. Indeed, Kleinman et al. (2011) suggest that understandings of self which de-emphasise the importance of personal, mental contents may stretch much further back in Chinese history than the Maoist era.

Aiguo is practised in dissociating himself from his critical mind. As noted, he has often advised me in marriage, saying that one must always just submit. 'Even when I know my wife is wrong,' he tells me, 'I just say "okay"'. This is to act 'organically', and not according to the selfish dictates of 'the mind'. 'Being

in the spirit' is to act in oneness with others, meaning not to impose one's thinking, feeling, and intentions upon them. I have explored the deep cultural origins of this valuation of organic oneness and even the sociopolitical contexts of its Christianisation under Ni and others in the early twentieth century. However, I have not yet fully drawn out the implicit ecclesiastical politics that sustains and reproduces lived logics of organic oneness in the Chinese Christianity represented by 'the church' today. Following Li's own distinction between the spiritual life of *zoe* and the physical life of *bios*, we might adapt Foucault's notion of biopolitics to describe this implicit politics of churched life as *zoepolitics*. Zoepolitics are actions, instruments, and sensations of coercion which occur when oneness is prioritised over the organic in Chinese Christian life.

The zoepolitics of organic oneness becomes exposed as it were when the denial of 'the mind', as the source of individual opinions, is rejected or undervalued. If, like Aiguo, through persistent exercise both in and outside church meetings, one denies the significance of one's mind, this exposure is less likely to be encountered. Not everyone is like Aiguo, however. Many church brothers, I am told, tend to act organically only in church meetings. At home, they tend to revert to acting according to their minds. For many young people in the UK and US branches of the movement, these lived dichotomising effects of an absolute discursive divide between spirit and mind are spoken of in terms of hypocrisy.

Unlike in Taiwan, there are high rates of deconversion among younger members of the following in the UK and US. Many of these deconverts have told me of the perceived 'hypocrisy' of parents and carers in the following as key to their, at times, traumatic deconversion process. They acted 'one way in church meetings,' I was told, 'and another at home.' There is a website as well as several YouTube channels devoted to sharing experiences of growing up in the group which particularly focus upon the radically different ways of acting sanctioned within compared to outside the group. It seems to me that these potentially harmful effects of the denial of mind are much more likely to occur in a (very broadly defined, modern, Euro-American) culture that historians (Makari 2015), philosophers (Taylor 1989), and anthropologists (Descola 2013) have argued is centred on a model of personhood which prioritises the unique contents of individual, entified 'minds'.

The above-mentioned ex-Ni and Li follower in the US wrote a critically acclaimed theatre production, entitled *The End Times*, about his experiences.[2] The play depicts life within 'the Restoration', a group with all the vocabulary, aesthetics, and principles of the Ni and Li following. Specifically, it follows the trajectory of a young follower who is coming to doubt the validity and methods of the group. At one point he expresses these doubts to his closest friend within the movement. The friend responds with a line I have heard many times among Ni and Li followers: 'You need to get out of your mind, brother!' 'Let's call on the Lord together', he continues. 'Oh Lord Jesus …' he begins to chant, before being cut off by the exasperated doubter.

In an interview, the author of the play says that writing it was 'therapeutic', explaining that the writing process helped him realise that the group was 'a cult'. This is one interpretation. Mine is that, in the US, the group represents an anti-mind approach to life in a wider context where mind is embraced as central to who one truly is. This contextual difference can have deep effects on individuals caught between (secular) 'culture' and ('divine and mystical') subculture. Nonetheless, the moment in the play described above does express a very common ethos within the group, one we also encountered in the opening anecdote. Namely, that when one is troubled by thoughts of the mind the proper response is to 'get out of one's mind' and 'into one's spirit', using the rituals of responsiveness described in previous chapters. What the playwright especially focuses on in his play is the link between this response to thoughts of the mind and the sense of hypocrisy that young people in the group in particular often detect within it. People think one thing but do and say another. Where this juxtaposition is valued, the flowing, naturalised authority of organic oneness tends to be restructured and re-experienced as the subtle coercions of zoepolitics.

The cult in culture

That I did not hear such complaints of hypocrisy in Taiwan perhaps points to a cultural difference with significant implications for how Chinese Christianity is structured and experienced. In addition to the literature which puts social and spiritual flow at the heart of Chinese civilisational thought and action, there is a more recent ethnographic literature which suggests that Chinese people today are intensely focused upon 'living a good life' (*guo rizi*), sometimes to detrimental effect (Wu 2009). Recent work on Chinese religion and philosophy, on the other hand, often emphasises that much of Chinese life is about 'life' rather than 'reality' (e.g. Hall and Ames 1998). While Western philosophy has been about reality, what it is and how to represent it, this literature argues, Chinese philosophers have considered this largely irrelevant. Whether thoughts or concepts accurately represent or are represented by the world and action beyond them is, at most, secondary. Rather, these philosophers are interested in how to live a good life. Their answer, incidentally, has often been that it involved attuning to the flow of the cosmos, or the Dao (see e.g. Kohn 1993).

More recently, ethnography has shown how disparate cultural practices in China seem to focus much more on questions of life than reality. Ray Qu (2022) describes the resurgence of 'incense seeing' (*guanxiang*), involving going to see fortune tellers, as hardly about 'belief' at all. Rather, it expresses the increased sense among China's youth that their 'quest for the good life' (*guo rizi*) is entangled with forces beyond their control. Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang (2012), on the other hand, show how many of Beijing's elderly engage in practices of 'nurturing the good life' (*yangsheng*). Thomas Ots (1994) used the German term *leib* to express the fact that the 'life' cultivated

using the practices of Qigong and Taiji is neither the entirely physical life of *bios* nor the entirely spiritual life of *zoe*, but a process giving rise to bodily and spiritual realities alike.

The above-mentioned cases undoubtedly point to experiences of the group as more controlling than coordinating, more restrictive than responsive. I think nonetheless, that these should be seen as a set of transcultural processes and tendencies rather than necessarily inditing an either/or categorisation as 'cult' or not cult. As others have suggested (Bubandt and Otto 2010; Canclini 2007) for very different contexts, the twinned concepts of (de)totalisation seem to be apt. In the terminology of this book, oneness has a tendency towards totalisation, the organic towards detotalisation. As suggested in Chapter 5, ironically, it is the US context more than any other which seems to struggle most acutely with totalisation. Perhaps this is precisely because individualism is so dominant there. Totalisation and individualism are perhaps inseparable as the periodic emergence of fascism in modern European history may demonstrate.

Totalisation is no less likely in East Asia, of course. We saw as much with Li's critique of the rise of overly authoritative Taipei elders in Chapter 1. But often it is done in ways that, at least ideologically, synthesise conformity and responsivity, constriction and social flow, rather than pitting them against one another. Vivienne Shue (2022) describes successive governments in Imperial China as 'regimes of resonance'. 'The emperor', for instance, she writes, as 'the single socket, as it were, for sublime connectivity (in a universe otherwise conceived as intensely charged with contradictions), thus played the role of open portal, of "sacred void" or hollow conduit through which the will of Heaven might enter, reverberate on through, and resonate with Earth/Nature, and humanity' (2022, p. 684).

Shue argues that, since Mao's brutal command economy and the mass distrust of government in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre in 1989, Xi Jinping has been consciously refitting himself into this imperial cosmological mould. He has aimed to recultivate a mode of power, Shue argues, based on something like 'resonance' or the sense of mutual responsivity explored in Chapter 4. 'Xi launched his own chairmanship with a crusade against corruption of all kinds within the party ranks – from the petty to the scandalously depraved', Shue writes. In doing this, he recentred 'energy, purpose, and potency within that party – and in himself'. In repositioning himself as 'chairman of everything', Shue continues, Xi 'systematically reconfigured the hierarchies of major party, governmental, and military policy-setting and coordinating bodies, so that all bureaucratic reporting lines would ultimately converge with him'. Shue's analysis of these developments is highly resonant with my own understanding of Ni's, Li's, and the 'blended brothers" authority within 'the church' as it is most often experienced in Taiwan. '*Mutatis mutandis*, we might say,' Shue writes,

> Xi was resuming the positioning in the polity once presumed to be held by emperors …. That ancient imperial positioning, importantly,

> was *not at all* akin to the kind of personal magnetism or charisma we would associate, today, with a modern/authoritarian 'cult of personality.' For from that ultimately hollow position of 'supreme centering,' *symbolically* capturing the distilled energy of all forces at play, the emperor's chief responsibility as governor had not been to gather up popular support for himself, but rather to 'radiate' and 'resonate' the 'positive energy' concentrated in him, over all his realm (2022, p. 704).

One might say that what Xi has sought to do with his person, Ni and Li did decades earlier, reconciling as they attempted to do, authoritative presence and participatory flow, organic spontaneity and firm witnessing, vigilant watchfulness, the order of oneness and the freedom of mutually revealing rhythms. This is a return to organic power, power that emerges 'spontaneously', through a mutual responsiveness that is simply channelled and coordinated by leaders.

If not for the preceding genealogy of organic oneness traced by previous chapters, the resonance between the approach to life and power of Xi Jinping and Witness Li might be astounding. The more significant point here is that the cult status of the church in China evidently has very different motives behind it than in the US. In the US, the church is a threat because it seems to undermine the sacred principle of individual freedom, freedom from conformity, from thinking, hence being, the same as ('one with') others. In China, the group is a threat because it is doing the same thing as the government, just in a different (i.e. Christian) key and at a different (much smaller) scale.

Organic oneness, to repeat, takes responsiveness, spontaneity, fluidity, flow, and life-like growth and expansion as its ultimate concern. More and more accounts of Christianity in China show just why this is not possible there. Christianity in China, on the one hand, must be highly 'organised'. To stick only with non-denominational 'house churches', church leaders, those who do not attempt to hide altogether from government agents, must constantly liaise with government representatives (Koesel 2013; Ma 2019; Vala 2017; Yuan 2021). Everything must be consciously planned, calculated, thought through beforehand – done, that is, in Ni and Li's parlance, 'in the mind', 'in the soul'. With ties between congregations both in and beyond China increasingly being cut (Lee and O'Brien 2021; Reny 2018), the prospect of celebrating oneness beyond the household, on the other hand, is we are told, increasingly unfeasible.

In 1991, Tu Weiming depicted a paradox of contemporary China: that a civilisation always centred around its literary culture (*wen*) was now void of that culture at its political core whilst *wen* flourishes at its peripheries. Peripheries such as Taiwan. It seems that a similar argument should be made for Chinese Christianity. With Ni being imprisoned by the CCP for the last 20 years of his life and his followers still being imprisoned by them today (Bitter Winter 2018a, 2018b, 2018c; Tao 2019; Xi 2019), it is not only that the Chinese government makes life difficult for Christians, as with other religionists. The

point is that the specific form of being Christian which I argue is uniquely Chinese, a form centred around organic oneness, is being made impossible. The only forms of Christianity that can flourish in China, forms that centre around private, vertical relations with a God beyond, are distinctively non-Chinese in the ways I have suggested.

Chinese Christianity proper, defined as it is by organic oneness, cannot take place in contemporary China, where spontaneous interactivity is heavily restricted and no other mass projects of oneness, besides that of the CCP, are allowed. If organic oneness is the beating heart of Chinese Christianity, the only forms of Christianity that can take place in China today are therefore, strictly speaking, not 'Chinese'. Thus, the book exposes the circularity of government claims that it restricts Christianity because it is not 'Chinese' enough (Bell 2016). If Christianity in China is not Chinese enough, the book has implicitly but I think clearly shown, this is because it is restricted by the government.

The government's justification for clamping down on this and other Christian groups rings hollow. The justification given is that these groups might contaminate China with foreign views and allegiances. On the contrary, it is the government's approach to this and other groups that is preventing the expression of the 'Chineseness' of their Christianity, that is of the organic side of organic oneness. In the absence of opportunity for uncalculated mutual responsivity, Christians in China seem to resort to more privatised, institutionalised forms of faith, forms of faith that the CCP is cracking down on in the name of stamping out undue foreign influence.

Chinese Christianity as a conundra space

If this ethnographic history of Ni and Li's following has shown anything it is that organic oneness is a genuine conundrum. It is not an ontology, as such, nor a cultural *idée fixe*. It is a genuine conundra space. It is relatively easy for a 'spiritual atheist' like me to critique the seemingly unnecessary turn to conformational oneness described in Chapter 5. For those for whom the church has saved from lives of misery and meaninglessness, the dissolution of the group through a mutual responsiveness that knows no bounds is an existential threat.

There is good evidence to show that the distinctive social and aesthetic forms of the church serve to guide members' interpretation of the ministry of Ni and Li in a particular direction, at any rate. The roots of every one of the 'more radical sectarian' Christian groups which Daniel Bays describes, in his authoritative history of Christianity in China, as having arisen in China since the 1980s, can be traced back to the so-called 'Shouters' (Bays 2012, p. 191). Each of these groups takes Ni and Li's central teaching of corporate deification in a different direction.[3]

The most infamous of them is called 'Lightning out of the East', or 'Eastern Lightning' (*dongfang shandian*; see Dunn 2007, 2009, 2015), also known as

'The Church of the Almighty God' (see Folk 2018; Introvigne 2017, 2018). Their 'female Christ', according to Bays (2012, p. 196), 'made startling prophecies, creatively using the mystical lexicon of the "Little Flock" and the Shouters to press the idea of the urgently immanent millenarian end of time.' During my fieldwork in Taipei there was a worry that congregations had been secretly penetrated by Eastern Lightning, who were sneakily befriending and leading church members into their own group. The fact that they were deemed undetectable in normal circumstances perhaps supports the idea that seemingly identical beliefs unhinged from the infrastructure of their usual enactment can germinate into many different social forms, ethical values, and supplementary sets of understandings.

Still, if those aspects of the church which maintain its exclusivity, its form, are in some sense necessary for touching 'the truth of the spirit', for experiencing the sublime sociality of organic oneness, they also have the potential to totalise, to rob even church members themselves of their original enjoyment. So goes the conundrum of coherence which defines 'Chinese Christianity'. Though I have sketched the historical and ethnographic outlines of one case, there are doubtless many others to explore. Exploring them, I think, not only promises to rejuvenate and recentre the anthropology of Christianity to reflect the rise of Christianity's fastest growing demographic. It also suggests a new avenue for anthropology writ large. An avenue in which the ultimate concern of the discipline, social flow, and that of its research subjects could perhaps converge.

Notes

[1] Documents detailing this libel case can be found here: https://contendingforthefaith.org/en/statement-of-decision-lee-v-duddy-re-the-god-men-by-neil-duddy-and-the-scp/

[2] See https://playwrightsarena.org/theater/the-end-times/ [accessed 11 June 2026] for a depiction of an ex-church member's LA play based around his experience of the church.

[3] See Rubinstein (1994) for an account of The New Testament Church in Taiwan. This group was founded in 1963 by film star and pop singer Mui Yi, whose real name was K'ang Tuan-yi (Rubinstein 1994, p. 446), but led by former Little Flock leader Elijah Hong from 1976 onwards.

Interlude III. Becoming (not quite) anthropological

There were moments during my fieldwork with Ni and Li's followers when I felt a kind of deep-bellied existential nausea. The following is so saturated with dense and lofty vocabulary, that these moments arose, I think, from feelings of disjuncture between the words I was hearing and reiterating so often and my own sense of the truth of things. After all, I do not *believe* that the 'pneumatic Christ' is the 'sevenfold intensified, all-inclusive, life-giving Spirit'. Or, at least, I quite easily forget what this even means. At one point, I, somewhat melodramatically, wrote in my fieldwork journal: 'I must come up with some notion of "God" that means something to *me* if I am to survive this.'

Throughout this book I have argued that Chinese Christianity, though entangled with them, is not defined by problems of presence as many other forms of Christianity are. Neither is it defined, though again they are there, by the corollary issues of sincerity and meaning that anthropologists of Protestantism in particular have identified as being accentuated in many Christian communities. Nonetheless, I have also argued that members of Chinese Christian groups like the following of Ni and Li that do hail from contexts in which problems of presence, sincerity, and meaning shape basic assumptions about the ethics of language, selfhood, and materiality, often unwittingly bring those problems with them, despite touting the ontology of organic oneness at the heart of Ni and Li's ministry. And as a British child of Ni and Li followers, I am no exception.

I seek a sincerity to my words, a meaning to my actions, that would allow me to be truly present with followers of Ni and Li, my own parents included. Here I attempt to bridge this central divide in the book, not between anthropology and its interlocutors, self and other, as described below, but between these two embodied modes of approaching the real, be it divine or otherwise. One of these assumes a gap between words or thoughts and their referent and the other pays little heed to this gap and finds something like truth, reality, ultimate significance, all the same.

It is strange perhaps according to classical imaginaries of what anthropology is about to do this project at all. To the extent that I was already deeply familiar with 'the church' from my upbringing, what precisely have I been trying to discover after realising that this project will not heal the fissures that my teenage loss of faith created (see Intervals I and II)? Anthropology has often been

the task of ethnographically penetrating another's world, mind, life. To the extent to which I had already known, in some sense, what I am studying (of course there *are* many new things I have learned along the way), to this extent, what have I been trying to penetrate, to discover, to do? Although 'anthropology at home' has long been embraced, it seems that our disciplinary imaginaries of what we 'native', or 'semi-native', anthropologists are doing are yet to fully catch up. I suggest a way below in which this catch-up might take place.

Queering the anthropology of religion?

In his article 'Sociality and Sexuality' (2000), psychoanalyst Leo Bersani critiques what he describes as a prevalent heteronormative model of desire which frames sexuality as a lack in the self, answered to by a corresponding surplus in the other. But '[i]s lack necessary to desire?' (2000, p. 648) he asks. In order to remedy this bias, he returns to 'the founding text, in the Western tradition, of desire as lack' (2000, p. 648), Plato's *Symposium*. 'Let's start again' (2000, p. 642), he proposes. It is apparently Socrates who gives birth here to the notion of love as lack, Bersani first concedes. But deeper readings reveal more options, he continues. In particular it is Socrates' young lover Alcibiades who gives rise to an alluring alternative picture of desire, what it does and how it arises. Explaining the kind of love Alcibiades and Socrates share, Bersani writes:

> Just as his young lovers' beauty is what excites Socrates to give birth to the ideas teeming in his own philosophically pregnant being, so he expects those he loves to respond to his spiritual beauty by giving birth to the virtue and the wisdom in themselves. In short, the goal of a relation of love with Socrates is the loving subject's communication with himself through the other … [through] the bringing to term the other's pregnancy of soul (Bersani 2000, p. 653).

Thus, Alcibiades concedes to the other dinner guests with whom he is conversing in the *Symposium* that he has nothing to add to the great philosopher, that indeed there is nothing Socrates lacks that he can provide. Nonetheless, he claims, his very presence actualises more of the stuff pregnant within Socrates' philosophical being than could be actualised without him. And the same is true of the relation in reverse.

This is an illustration of Aristophanes' fable of the origins of sexual desire, a fable Bersani proposes retaking as a modern myth of desire. In the fable, there were originally three beings. Each was cut in half by a vengeful Zeus: a male, a female, and a combination of the two. It is only the androgynous being whose desire is defined by heterosexual lack. The other two seek only more of themselves, Bersani explains.

My parting idea is that Bersani's critique of heteronormative models of desire might be applicable to still-dominant models of the ethnographic encounter

as one between self and other, each very often possessing what the other lacks. Out of this model, there appears all sorts of epistemological wrangling over how to bridge this self–other divide. There is often raised the question, still, of whether, given their intrinsic difference, anthropologist and interlocutor can ever truly know one another. (Marilyn Strathern (1987) claims that in fact auto-anthropology is impossible as even in studying herself the anthropologist creates a division between studied other and studying self.) But perhaps there is an alternative (even if only for an Aristophanean two-thirds of anthropologists). And perhaps organic oneness points us there.

The Chinese Christianity of anthropology

One may note that the classic problems of how an anthropologist can ever know their interlocutor curiously parallels the problems of presence which define many Christian lives. And indeed, the relation may be genealogical, another instance of what Fenella Cannell (2005) calls 'the Christianity of Anthropology'. Perhaps the ethnographic encounter is the anthropologist's problem of presence. But what, with the argument of this book in mind, might the Chinese Christianity of anthropology be? What, in other words, would our image of ethnographic writing and fieldwork be if it were a conundrum of coherence rather than a problem of presence?

What if, to continue this line of questioning, anthropology was about actualising the potential of mutually resonant selves rather than penetrating the ethnographic other to fulfil a lack in the anthropological self? Here, the aim might be to differentiate a shared ground of oneness and in the process know more of ourselves, be we 'self' or 'other' in the previous paradigm.

This image gives more power and responsibility to anthropology's interlocutors than perhaps the discipline is used to. They must meet us where we are as we meet them, for mutual resonance to occur. It also puts more pressure on anthropologists to be present with their interlocutors than they may be comfortable with, to the extent that the ethnographic encounter itself (broadly defined if we like) is what they can offer, not some promised future payoff, through ethnographic representation. Writing this is certainly uncomfortable for me, who has failed at ethnographic resonance as much as anyone.

But perhaps if we were attuned to how much we and our interlocutors attain the levels of mutually resonant revelation explored in this book, there would be opportunity to help open a fresh and critical conundra space. Re-envisioning our fieldsites, that is, as latent spaces in which the intrinsic oneness of our humanity might be differentiated along so many flowing lines of emergent rhythm, resonance, attunement. To the degree that we cannot resonate, there is an invitation to critique. Possibly ourselves, possibly those we fail to resonate with, but more likely the systems that inhibit resonant possibilities.

That is what I have tried to do here: to celebrate and explicate the new forms of vitalising resonance 'the church' makes possible and to offer

cautious critique where these resonances break down or are inhibited. In the process, I think I have actualised more of myself while in a small way 'the church' may, if only in contrast to the anthropologist it has graciously hosted and allowed me to become, have actualised more of itself too. Who is Alcibiades and who Socrates in this mutual differentiation, at this point, however, I do not know.

Conclusion. Organic oneness: or life as a conundrum of coherence

It is customary for anthropologists of religion to reiterate to their audiences something to the effect that, unlike theologians or evangelical atheists, for instance, they are 'not particularly interested in determining whether religious claims are "true" or not'. Despite some time in the business, I still baulk at this self-characterisation. 'What kind of scholar is uninterested in whether their data accurately reflect reality or not?' my pre-anthropologised self protests. Of course, much of this book has attempted answers to precisely those ontologically indifferent questions that define the anthropology of religion, and the anthropology of Christianity in particular: what difference does Christianity make to Chinese life? How is cultural continuity maintained in the face of societal rupture? How are forms of unity attained in the face of difference?

Preceding chapters explored what followers of Ni and Li call 'organic oneness' as the specific form of what I call sublime sociality, the pursuit of which, I have proposed, defines what I call Chinese Christianity. I have examined the ways in which lived tensions between the organic and oneness play out within and beyond Taiwan, suggesting that versions of these tensions have shaped much of Chinese religio-political history, but that they are exacerbated in the transnational condition of Chinese Christianity exemplified by the global following of Ni and Li. But perhaps the most salient question for me that I have sought answers to came not from the sophisticated hivemind of post-truth anthropology, but from Aiguo: *but what is the spirit?!, 'how will you explain the spirit??* Though I will phrase it differently, this is really my question too. I want to close the book by drawing it out and shaping it up a little more.

Organic oneness and the real, or the essence of Chinese Christianity (and everything else)

The organic can be understood as the dynamic, evolving essence of Chinese Christianity, but left to its own devices the organic supersedes the boundaries that are set for it, being driven by the contingent dynamics of mutually responsive relations. Oneness thus contains, harnesses, and delimits the organic. It sets the conditions under which the organic is permitted to flourish as the essence of Chinese Christianity. In the case of Ni and Li's Chinese

Christianity this conditioning containment lies in the shared vision and vocabulary of their ministry, the daily rhythms of the churchlife, and a set of boundary-maintaining distinctions between the church and Christianity, mind and spirit, human-made and divine culture.

If the organic threatens to undo the bounds of oneness, though, oneness in turn threatens the organic's vitality. If concern for oneness, for instance, precedes that for the organic in churchly interaction and speech, the organic becomes merely instrumentalised, a belief put into practice, a concept enacted, thus losing its inherent responsivity, mutuality, spontaneity. This – the vitalisation or undoing of oneness by the organic and the deadening or suppression of the organic by oneness – is the unresolvable conundrum of coherence which drives the ebbs and flows of Chinese Christianity, its history, its everyday living, its attraction and repulsion.

This book has argued that the organic essence of Chinese Christianity does not just float as a cultural conundrum arbitrarily conceived by Chinese Christian communities. But rather that it taps into 'life', as such, life as philosophised by Bergson as ever-flowing, generative, creative, and renewing. Thus, the churchlife is not just the life of the church but a churching of life, I have implied. To complete this proposed picture, I need not only to suggest that the 'flow' of the church spirit is a churched version of the flow of life itself, but that life too has its own equivalent conundrum of oneness. That life too exists on the razor's edge between containment, conformity, coherence and spontaneity, responsiveness, and the freedom of flow.

Thus I want to suggest finally that there is no living thing – and a 'thing' in itself is a form of oneness is it not? – that is not composed of the conundrum of coherence that is organic oneness. Life forms arise as dilemmas of being responsive (or 'organic') only to the extent that this responsiveness furthers the ongoing internal coherence (the 'oneness') of the responding thing. In more familiar terms, living things respond to the world – through perception, sensation, conception – only in ways that are conducive to their survival (Hoffman 2019, Chapter 4). Anything else is non-living or travelling in that direction.

These are the only ontological statements this book will make. But still, for me they ripple backwards and makes a deeper sense of the chapters that have come before. If a sense of vitality is what brings people to and keeps them in the churchlife, this is inseparable from the fact that the church is, as they say, an organism, at least, if we take organic life as I am proposing, as the original conundrum of organic oneness. This framing thus also justifies a return to organic life as a model of society, which is nonetheless based less on the functional integration of organs and more on the conundrum of harnessing responsivity to the closed ends of particular forms of oneness.

To recognise that the organic rituality of *oh zhu ye su – amen!* enacts, or exercises, not just the oneness of the church, but a basic dynamic of lived reality, is not to essentialise the church, either, to naturalise it as just another form of life and so render it somehow immune to critique, as the second

half of *Sublime Sociality* has suggested. While I have recognised the value of enclosure and its inescapable intimacy with certain forms of enlivenment, I have also suggested that the exclusivist understanding of 'the church' as the only true church otherwise surrounded by degradation is a form of misrecognition which potentially limits the amount to which life and the beings which emerge from it can be enjoyed.

Revitalising the organic and mechanical: an old new theory of religion

Sublime Sociality has traced organic oneness as a conundrum of coherence that defines Chinese Christianity. But it is clear to me that it is one version of a conundrum which shapes many lives, not only those of Chinese-speaking communities but lives everywhere. It is true that organic oneness, that dynamic tension between the undirected, responsive mutuality of interfacial presence and the degrees of conformity that enable this, has been more deeply thematised in Chinese life and history than elsewhere. Nonetheless, dynamics of organic oneness, I hold, shape lives, whether consciously or not.

It is telling, perhaps, that the most salient example of a dynamic deeply akin to organic oneness that I have encountered in the English language is neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist's (2009, 2018) rehabilitation of a picture of the brain divided into distinct left and right hemispheres. It is not – as once thought – *what* each hemisphere does that differentiates them, McGilchrist argues, as each is involved in everything, but *how* it does it. If it is the right hemisphere which represents the primary mode of attending to the world, the left hemisphere processes this attention in ways suited to finer-grained, detailed tasks. Though he admits that both hemispheres are essential, it is clear where McGilchrist's loyalties lie: 'there is something more fundamental about the world', he writes, 'that is brought into being by the right hemisphere, with its in-betweenness, its mode of knowing which involves reciprocation, a reverberative process, back and forth, compared with the linear sequential, unidirectional method of building up a picture favoured by the left hemisphere' (2009, p. 194).

There are many such passages in his voluminous work, *The Master and His Emissary*, in which he contrasts spontaneity and internal coherence, mutual responsivity and strict organisation, the relationality of personhood and the singularity of the machine, which I think signal a vital resemblance between the two hemispheres and the two aspects of organic oneness. What is more, McGilchrist's overall critique is that the ills of the modern world arise from the gradual, historical 'triumph of the left hemisphere', a critique with undeniable parallels with that of Ni and Li's takedown of 'Christianity'. My only equivocation is that to me it seems that it is not only the case that 'our divided brain constructs the world', as one of McGilchrist's book subtitles puts it (2018), but that it reflects a structure that may be inherent to life itself, a structure

that emerges, at a different level of complexity, as the central conundrum of Chinese Christianity.

Future work will evidence these claims in greater depth. Here, I close this book by drawing out the implications for understanding Chinese Christianity as defined not just by a cultural structure but by a way of attending to life which may be a thematised reflection of the way in which life itself may work. For one, it suggests that we might learn from Chinese Christian interlocutors not only a curious way of being 'over there' in Chinese Christian communities, but 'in here' in our own lives. To the degree that organic oneness becomes a form of power, it also suggests that such power is not merely imposed onto life but perhaps drawn out from its own inherent dynamics. Indeed, moving beyond East–West binaries, one might see that presence, oneness, and the organic are latent potentials in all human lives. Religions are significant, from this perspective, to the extent that they hyperfocus attention upon one set of creaturely potentials to the exclusion of others. 'Religion' is thus theorised as the polarisation of human potential through politics and practices (or exercises) of attention. This differs significantly from post-Protestant anthropological theories of religion which emphasise mediating human–divine gaps.

Another term for the spontaneous, mutual, responsivity of the lived organic, it may be a surprise to read, is presence. Throughout this book of course I have been putting presence on the side of non-Chinese Christianity. But here I want to emphasise that it is presence *as a problem* that does not define Chinese Christianity. Presence becomes a problem precisely when it is expected to arise between two pre-defined things, say humanity and God. Given that in a strong sense both fully exist prior to their encounter, and are defined in advance by different substantial properties, say flesh and divinity, it is difficult to see how they might share presence, or what presence might even mean as an addition to their separate natures.

In Michael Taussig's (1993) terminology, I have claimed that followers of Ni and Li 'mimetically' reproduce an aspect of life itself in reproducing the 'alterity' of the church, as a oneness unto itself, other to Christianity, through exercises of organic responsiveness. Problematising presence, on the other hand, reverses the process. It is alterity that takes precedence, that is, between humanity and the divine, and thus mimesis, the kinds of difference-in-repetition that characterise life in and beyond 'the churchlife', becomes superfluous, even threatening, as we saw with the evangelical critiques of church chanting in West Coast America.

The organic has rarely been understood as the operations of primary presence, but that is what I am suggesting. It is curious that the opposition of the organic and the mechanical, despite it being so deeply characteristic of the post-Enlightenment period within which anthropology was born (Hui 2020; Kang 2012; Tresch 2012), has rarely featured, explicitly, in anthropological theories of religion, or of anything else for that matter. *Sublime Sociality*, I suggest, might be a first step in remedying this.

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Index

A

a priori gaps 10
Abel, Andrew 58, 59
aesthetic formation and style 115–18
affect theory 116
Ah-tsang 59, 60
Ah-yi 59
Aiguo, brother 36, 55–57, 90–92, 101, 201
  experiences marginalisation and migration 181–82
  limited response to Buddhist meditation 163–64
Aiguo, gatekeeper 107, 115
All Is One 133
all-inclusive spirit (*baoluo wanyou de ling*) 35
Ames, R.T. 141–42
Anaheim 168
ancestral obligation 148–50
anti-cult researchers, influence of 187
anxious transcendence 2
Assembly Hall (*jidutu huisuo*) 40
atheism 93, 107
atmospheric attunement 50
autocracy 99

B

bangtong danfu 114
Barber, Margaret E. 5, 145, 146, 147, 151, 177, 178, 179
Barnard, G. William 125
Bays, Daniel 4, 194
being in the soul 9, 10, 114, 115
Bergson, Henri 82, 101, 158
  Bergsonian anthropology 109–10
  children's education 123–27
  dynamic versus static religion 118–19
  laughter in the church 127–29
Bialecki, J. 119
Biblical references
  Acts 9:4 114
  Exodus 16:32–33 81
  Ezekiel 2:8c 83
  Ezekiel 3:4 83
  Galatians 2:20 114
  Leviticus 2:1–16 53
  Matthew 15 85
  Matthew 19:30 86
  Matthew 20:16 86
  Matthew 25:1–13 124
  1 Peter 2:4-5 54
  Romans 8:26 114
  Titus 1:6-9 101
big family (*womendou shi jiaren*) 38
Blake, C. Fred 148
blended brothers 45, 50, 51, 52, 90, 99, 107, 192
blending (*xiangtiao*) 16, 18, 19, 25, 48, 51, 53, 61–64, 85, 169
Body of Christ 9, 16, 40, 62, 72, 90, 91, 93, 129, 147, 171
body principle 99
Bodylife *see* churchlife (*zhaohui shenghuo*)
Bourdieu, Pierre 78
Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) 146, 155
Boylston, Tom 2
brainwashing 186
Breen, Gareth 25–29
Bregnbæk, Susan 58, 59
Bride of Christ 173, 179
broken vessel 123–24
Brown, Kerry 62
Bu, sister 16
burdens (*fudan*) 89, 99–100
burning incense (*fen xiang*), meetings as 96
Byzantineness 116–17

C

calling on the Lord 14, 15, 21, 75
Catholicism
  anthropologists of 118
  as Counter Reformational 2
  migration and 2
Chang, Paul 4, 12–13, 136, 145
Change of Diet to the Heavenly Christ as the Unique Food for God's People, The 81
Chau, Adam 86, 154
Chen, Yi 78
children's and young people's meetings 48–49
Chin, K.P. 136

Chinese and English Bible translations, comparability of 112–14
Chinese Imperial cosmology 144
Chinese masculinities 174–75
Choi, S.Y.-P. 178
Christ Versus Religion 63
Chu, brother 14
church friends 72, 94, 98
church halls 42
church in Taipei 26, 33, 35, 37, 40–42, 44, 46, 60, 63, 72, 74, 75, 79, 83, 124, 168, 173
  see also group 5 of hall 34
church localities 8, 9, 26, 28
Church of the Almighty God *see* Eastern Lightning
churchlife (*zhaohui shenghuo*) 13, 17, 18, 21, 24, 36, 42, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 61, 62, 63, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 77, 79, 84, 87, 92, 93, 94, 95, 98, 101, 102, 112, 114, 123, 126, 127, 129, 135, 164, 169, 202, 204
  didactics in 124
  differentiating 36–40
  metaphor of eating 80
church-owned real estate 43
conformity vii, 8, 10, 13, 20, 22, 28, 34, 62, 135, 143, 144, 192, 193, 202, 203
Confucian democracy 99
Confucianism 135
  see also Neo-Confucianism
Confucius 84, 135, 153, 161–62
conscience (*liangxin*) 10
continuity thinking 159, 160
continuity thinking 2.0 160
conundra space, Chinese Christianity as 194–95
conundrum of coherence
  coordination and control 89–92
  life versus knowledge 120–23
conundrums of coherence 4, 195, 199, 202, 203
  blending (*xiangtiao*)
  dealing with the outside 92–95
  differentiation versus diversity 35–36
  exercise and practice 18–19
  mediation and flow 22–25
  (non)attunement to place 55–57
  oneness versus presence 13–16
  oneness versus the organic 12–13
  the organic, the organisational 75–77
  particularistic organicism 60–61
  repetition and repetitiousness 75–77
  transnationality 16–18
conversions, church 126–27
coordination and control 89–92
coordination meetings 48
corporate femininity 170–71, 172
corporate Godman (*tuanti shenren*) 3, 10, 77
corporate-feminine 174, 179
corporate-masculine 179
Creative Evolution 110
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly 24, 79, 82, 83
cult in culture 191–94
cultural difference 63
culture 47–53, 109
cycle of yang 149
cynical reason 100

D

Daoism 84, 135–36, 142
Darby, John Nelson 5, 145
Dawley 176
deadness (*siji, siqi chenchen, si chen*) 36
deconversion, in the UK and the US 190
Deep China 189
Deleuze, Gilles 110
democracy 99
denigration of the feminine 180
denominationalism 2, 7, 8, 39, 40, 47, 53, 76, 111, 134, 151, 168
depression 188
Descola, Phillipe 187
diasporic Chinese Christian masculinities 176
differentiations 34
  Chineseness of 57–60
  versus diversity 33, 35–36, 38, 39, 47, 53, 64
  infrastructures of 40–47
  wall and galaxy 53–55
Dikotter, Frank 156
discernment of the spirit 20, 24, 121, 139, 140
discontinuity thinking 160
dis-enclosure 39, 165
diverse city 36–40
diversity 34, 37, 48
  of modern life 48
  rejection of 40, 56
  versus differentiation 33, 35–36, 38, 39, 47, 53, 64

divine and mystical culture 47–53
divine feminine 176, 180
  and masculinity 171–72
divine romance 170, 178
division (*fenlie*) 36
Dora Yu 145
durée 101, 110, 122
Durham, Elizabeth 64
Durkheimian dialectics 107–08
dynamic versus static religion 118–19

E

Eastern Lightning 177, 194–95
Eckhart, Meister 119, 133
Ecuadorian Amazon 64
Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference 9
effortless action, of Daoism 135–36
Eilberg-Schwartz 174
elders as toddlers 100–01
Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, The 108, 109
Elsie, sister 15
emotions 10, 92
End Times, The (play) 190
Engelke, Matthew 22
entifications 182–83
ethical principles 109
Ethiopian Orthodox Christians 2
Eucharist meetings 51
European Young People's Conference 92
evangelicalism 8
Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 109
exercise versus practice 18–19
exercises 36
exercises of spirit 18

F

false oneness 9, 10, 134
Farquhar, Judith 191
feet washing 39
Fei Xiatong 62
fellowship (*jiaotong*) 10, 15, 20, 24, 53
Fengjia village 97
Fesenmeyer, Leslie 176
Feuchtwang, Stephan 125, 144, 154–55
Fibonacci series 98
filtration 64
flow (*liu*) 3, 8, 10, 13, 16, 19, 20, 21, 22–25, 47, 76, 202
  blocking the 19, 93
  as freedom 82
  as nourishing 82
  of the real 110–12
  as revelation 112–15
    see also truth of the spirit
  rhythm and 79–87
  social flow 87–89, 108
Flow of Gifts, The 58
  flowing Dao 135
  food/eating 83
  see also Morning Nourishment
Fred, Morris 124, 125
Friday 'Love Feasts' 48, 51
Fu, Yan 128
full-time training centres 8, 26, 90
full-time Training in Anaheim (FTTA) 53
full-time Training in Taipei (FTTT) 62
Fuzhou six group 145, 151

G

Galatians, book of 114
gatekeepers 107
gender dilemmas in Chinese Christianity 28
  Chinese masculinities 174–75
  diasporic masculinities 176
  God's gender 174
  impact of 178–79
  indigenising women 176–78
  meta-masculinity and migration 180–82
  reactive masculinity 170–73, 178–79
gender dysmorphia 173
God's dispensing (*shen de fenci*) 35
God's economy (*shen de jinglun*) 52
God's gender 174
God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism 174
Godmen (*shenren*) 3
God-Men, The 187
gospel friends (*fuyin pengyou*) 94
gospel marches 7, 17, 95
Gospel meetings 49
gospelising (*fuyinhua*) 38
Goss, K.A. 60
Graeber, David 102
Granet, Marcel 79
Grosz, Elizabeth 109
group 5 of hall 34 35, 37, 45, 46, 60, 63, 72, 74, 83, 173
guanxi 57–60, 86
Gunn, J. Alexander 110
Guyon, Madame 5, 145, 177, 178

H

Hakka Taiwanese 41
Hall, D.L. 141–42
Hall, E.T. 78
Hamilton, Gary 137–38, 143
Han dynasty, Warring States period 142
Handman, Courtney 2
Hao, Cheng 138
Heping, Lin 144–45
hidden organ (*yincang de qiguan*) 18
high peak truth 121, 169
Hodges, Matt 110
Hoklo Taiwanese 41
home-based church 'localities' 7
house churches 8, 50–51, 58, 193
How Great Though Art 85
Hsu, Francis 148
Hu, Jiayin 87, 90
Huang, brother 1, 16
Huangshi, Qin 142
Hui, Yuj 133, 141, 142, 154
Hui, Yuk 128

I

imperial cosmological 192
imperial missionary Christianity 8, 9, 148, 151, 177
indigenisation of Christianity 4, 8, 130, 135, 146, 150, 151, 155, 168, 176
indigenised Chinese Christianity 135, 168, 176
  Jesus Family 155
  Little Flock 155–57
  reciprocity 151–52
  True Jesus Church 155
  women in 176–78
individualisation 58
individualism 186–87
Ingold, Tim 111–12
institutionalised Christianity 168
intellect 110
International Chinese-Speaking Conference (2015) 47
*inter*related versus *intra*related oneness 9
intuition (*zhijue*) 10, 24, 110–11
Irigaray, L. 174
Ivanhoe, Phillip 134

J

James, William 119
Jehovah's Witnesses 85
Jesuit missionaries 137–38
Jesus Family 155
Jesus People Movement (JPM) 168
Jiazhi, brother 46, 47, 75, 76, 80, 81, 84
Jim, brother 14, 15, 62
Jin, brother 14, 16, 62
Jingmei neighbourhood 26, 33, 35, 36–40, 45, 48, 71, 74, 89, 95, 127
Jingyi, Cheng 9
joy of life 129–30
Jullien, Francois 42

K

Kai-Shek, Chiang 6, 16
Kaohsiung 42, 168
Keane, Webb 15, 22, 109
Kinnear, Angus 157
Kipnis, Andrew 58, 97
Kleinman, Arthur 188–89
knowledge
  versus life 120–23
  and spirit 121
Kohn, Eduardo 64

L

Langer, Susan 78
Laozi 135, 153
Latour, Bruno 110
laughter in the church 127–29
Le Rire ('Laughter') 127–28
Levenson, Joseph 142
Li, Witness 1, 4, 25–29, 42, 50, 61, 62, 71, 72, 73, 74, 80, 85, 86, 88, 109, 113, 121, 122, 125, 127, 134, 144, 156, 157, 158, 164, 167, 169, 170, 172, 203
  about his eldership 90
  accusations 158
  and Ah-tsang 59
  on autocracy and democracy 99
  blending concept 16, 61
    see also blending
  on body–soul–spirit 10
  Christ Versus Religion 63
  on church as body of God 49
  on churchlife 47, 62, 63
  daughter of 72
  as exemplary of Chinese Christianity 4–5
  on flow *see* flow
  gender and 179

God as subjective reality 85
God's economy 52
and *guanxi* 59
high peak truth 169
investment in real estate 43
logic of proselytism 98
migration to US 43
mother of 95
new way 42
on oneness 9, 20
organisational world-building activities of 161
on outer darkness 124
outings 73
power of 158, 193
Recovery Version Bible 15, 35, 41, 112
rhythm and 71
on sharing from morning revival 97
on soul 10
on spirit and atmosphere 49–50
spiritual breathing 76
as static religionist 160
understanding the Bible 120
wife of 47
Li, X. 174
Li's ministry *see* Ni and Li's ministry
Lian, Xi 152, 156, 157
life
differentiation and 34
versus knowledge 120–23
qualities of 64–65
life education course (*shengming jiaoyu*) 42
life-force 42
see also vitality
Lily, sister 53–54, 55, 57, 138, 187
Lin, Jennifer 147
linguistic ideology 118
Link, Perry 79, 82
Little Flock 26, 88, 128, 155–57, 178, 195
Liu Yi 4
Liu, sister 74
Living Stream Ministry 7
Local Church(es) 40, 50
conversion 185–86
'Shouters' 187, 194
logophagy 80, 83, 96
Lord's Table (*zhu de zhuozi*) 40, 96, 97
Louie, Kam 175
love cheer (*ai de guli*) 94
love for the Lord 167–68
Luehrmann, Sonja 116–17
Lung-kee, Sun 58
Lushi Qunqiu 140

M

Madsen, R. 4
mainlanders (*waishengren*) 6, 16, 17, 41
Maitreyan Buddhists 155
Master and His Emissary, The 203
Matthew, book of 124
Mauss, Marcel 58
May, Gracie 147
May Fourth Movement 147
Mazu goddess 154
McGilchrist, Iain 203–04
meaninglessness (*meiyou shenme yisi*) 36
mediation 3, 12, 20, 94, 98, 164, 180, 204
failures in 25
and flow 22–25
Meirong 39, 64
Mencius 135
Meng, J. 137
Mengzi 153
meta-masculinity and migration 180–82
metaphors from the Bible 121–22
meta-sense 78
Meyer, Birgit 116
midweek meetings 87–89
migrants 57
mimesis 204
mind/thinking 10, 26, 92, 101, 109, 146, 164, 190
Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays 112
Mindmenders: A Look at Current Cults, The 185–86
mingling of Spirit with spirit 52, 76
see also blending
Miraculous Response 154
Mormons 85
Morning Nourishment 79–87
morning revival vii, 21, 42, 75, 76, 77, 80, 88, 89, 96, 97, 98, 167, 183
Morton, Timothy 82
multi-cultural churches 48

N

Nancy, Jean-Luc 39
Nanggang Arena 129
Napolitano, Valentina 2
Nationalist government 6, 41
native anthropologists 27

Needham, Joseph 133, 142–43
Neo-Confucianism 137
Neurasthenia 188
new way (*xin lu*) 8, 42, 62
newcomers (*xinren/xinlaide*) 94
Ni, Watchman 1, 23, 25–29, 61, 72, 109, 113, 121, 122, 128, 134, 144, 148, 150, 156, 157, 158, 167, 169, 170, 203
  Christian life of 144–46
  and Confucian classics 42
  on differentiations 40–47
  as exemplary of Chinese Christianity 4–5
  followers and eucharist experience of 146–48
  followers escaping ancestral obligation 149–50
  gender and 179, 180
  high peak truth 169
  imprisonment of 193
  indigenisation of Christianity 151
  life of 18
  nephew of 6, 7
  organisational world-building activities of 161
  power of 158
  responsiveness 150
  rituals of responsivity 152
  on soul 10, 133
  Spiritual Man, The 145–46
  as static religionist 160
Ni and Li's ministry 1, 3, 12, 13, 15, 17, 19, 37, 63, 88, 90, 93, 117, 176, 190, 194, 197, 204
  and Bergsonian ontology 110
  critiques of Christian denominationalism 111
  as cult 187, 188
  followers as godman vessels 10
  and food 85
  gender and 177
  history of 5–9
  Mingled Spirit 110
  and mysticism 133
  oneness and 'Body' 139–40
    see also oneness; organic oneness
  organic spontaneity 21
  organisation for followers 9
  release of God 19
  replicating work culture in Taipei 77
  revelation of spirit 10
  and spirit 18
  sublime sociality 24
(non)attunement to place 55–57
North American Catholics 2

O

oneness 1–4, 9
  versus the organic 12–13
  to organic shift 168–70
  versus presence 13–16
  zoepolitics 189–91
  see also organic oneness
oneness hypothesis (Ivanhoe) 134
Open Windows 37
optimal experience 23, 24
organic oneness 9–10, 34, 39, 62, 63, 72, 75, 89, 92, 101, 108, 111, 116, 117, 118, 133–35, 144
  beating heart of Chinese Christianity 193–94
  Christianising 144
  churchlife and 49, 57, 75, 95
  conundrums of coherence *see* conundrums of coherence
  cultural discontinuity in Christian conversion 158–61
  difference and 36, 64
  genealogy of 135
  versus oneness 12–13
  and the real 201–03
  rhythm and 79
  sociopolitical 140
  source of life-like differentiation 36
  treated as style, objections to 117–18
  vision and 62
  see also indigenised Chinese Christianity
organic oneness, genealogy of
  Daoism 135–36
  God of Bible and Dao of Daoism, comparison of 140
  Jesuit missionaries 137–38
  Neo-Confucianism 137
  Ni and Li's Ministry 139–40
  sociopolitical 140–44
organisational association 57
Orsi, Robert 2
Orthodox Christianity 116, 118
Ortner, Sherry 130
Ots, Thomas 191
outside, dealing with 92–95

P

Papua New Guinea 2, 159–60
particularism 57

particularistic organicism 60–61
patrilineage 174–75
Penn-Lewis, Jesse 5, 145, 146, 156, 177, 178
personhood 62, 153, 190, 203
Peruvian-Amazonian Urarina ritual 83
Pines, Yuri 133
Plymouth Brethren 168
porous closure 64
post-Reformation Catholics 138
power 28
  subjecting ourselves to 101–02
practice versus exercise 18–19
prayer meetings 48, 87
prayers 12
pray-reading 22, 80–82, 87, 124, 125
presence 1–2, 4, 10, 94, 101, 204
  versus oneness 13–16
priesthood 35
proselytising 59, 97–100
Protestantism 116, 152, 197
  anthropologists of 118
  converts to 59
  indigenisation of 176
psy fever 58
Puett, Michael 141, 142
Pusey, James 128
Putnam, R.D. 60

Q

Qin dynasty, Warring States period 142
Qing dynasty 160
Qu, Ray 191

R

Rea, Chris 128
reactive masculinity 170–73, 178–79
recovery (*huifu*), of Christianity 34
Recovery Version Bible 15, 35, 41, 112, 113, 114
Remme, Jon Henrik Ziegler 2
repaired responsiveness
  in Chinese life and history 151–55
  escaping ancestral obligation 148–50
  recovering realm of 144–48
  theorisation of 150–51
  see also organic oneness, genealogy of
repetition and repetitiousness 75–77, 93
repetition in church 125–26
resident church participants 42
Revelation, book of 124
rhythm 93, 94, 97
  flow and 79–87
  morning rhythm 75
  as relative freedom 77–80
ritual (*yishi*) 34
Robbins, Joel 130, 159–60
routine vii, 49, 93, 94, 97, 126, 144
Rubinstein, Murray 4, 157

S

saints (*shengtu*) 15, 16, 17, 41, 45, 47, 51, 55, 60, 72, 164
sameness 10, 20, 22, 34, 138
Sangren, Steven 146, 148–49, 174, 178
Schrödinger, Erwin 64
seekers 93, 168–69
self (*ziji*) 10, 21, 82
  environment and, feedback loop between 82
self-differentiations 33–34
semiotic ideology 22, 23, 64, 109, 118
seven annual feasts (*yan*) 3, 8, 50, 88
Shanghai Gospel Bookroom 6
Shouters (*huhan pai*) 75
Shue, Vivienne 192–93
Siegler, E. 4
sincerity 15, 22, 85, 152, 197
Singh, Bhrigupati 64
Sinosphere 175
Slingerland, Edward 135–36, 153
Sloterdijk, Peter 100
social entitihood 182–83
social flow 87–89, 108
somatisation (Kleinman) 188–89
soul 10, 16, 75, 121, 193
  being in the 9, 10, 93, 114
  components of 92, 108, 120, 122, 136, 146
  denominationalism *see* denominationalism
  organisational mode 75
  practices of 24
  presence of 23
  refining 139
  and spirit, distinction between 167
Sparks, J. 186
speaking brothers 15, 17, 18, 51, 88, 89, 92, 107, 128
spirit 10, 76
  all-inclusive spirit (*baoluo wanyou de ling*) 35
  discernment of 20, 24, 121, 139, 140
  entering the 115–16

spirit *(continued)*
exercises of 18, 24
flow of 20, 53, 120, 187
-infused differentiations 46
mingling with Spirit 52, 76
releasing the 18
revelation *see* truth of the spirit
and soul, distinction between 167
see also blending
Spiritual Man, The 145–46, 156
spontaneity 20, 21, 22, 23, 62, 79, 80, 87, 88, 101, 115, 126, 136, 141, 144, 193, 202, 203
spontaneous (*zifade*) interactivity 42
Stafford, Charles 62
static religion versus dynamic religion 118–19
Strathern, Marilyn 182
structure–agency balance 78, 79
Sui, brother 45
Sun, sister 74
Sundays 96–97, 127

T

Taiwan Gospel Bookroom 40, 42, 61, 107
Taussig, Michale 204
testimonies (*jianzheng*) 13, 14, 15, 36, 49, 77, 94, 122, 124, 163, 179
thinking *see* mind/thinking
Thornton, B.J. 176
Tien, David 138–39
Time and Free Will (*TFW*) 125
To the Lord We're as a Garden 86
total social phenomenon 58
totalisation 28, 192
Touching the Atmosphere of the Meeting 49
Touching the Spirit of the Meeting 49
transnationalism 16–18, 25, 28, 116, 134, 146, 168, 201
True Jesus Church 155
truth of the spirit
aesthetic formation and style 115–18
Bergsonian anthropology 109–10
children's education 123–27
Durkheimian dialectics 107–08
dynamic versus static religion 118–19
flow as revelation 112–15
flow of the real 110–12
laughter in the church 127–29
life versus knowledge 120–23
truthising (*zhenlihua*) 38, 89
Two Sources of Morality and Religion, The 109, 119

U

Urapmin, cultural discontinuity in 159–60
urban difference 36–40
urban immanence 34

V

vertical time 96–97
vessel of God 123
vision (*yixiang*) 62
vital groups (*huoli pai*) 42
vitalism (Bergson) 109
vitality 28, 34, 36, 42, 50, 64–65, 70, 202

W

Waley-Cohen, Joan 143–44
Walker, Harry 83
Walker-Bynum, C. 174, 176
Wang, brother 42
Wang, Mingming 141
Wang–Xu family 39
Warner, Marina 174
Warring States period (475–221 BC) 133, 140–42
Confucianism during 142–43
Daoism during 142
Han dynasty 142
Qin dynasty 142
Washington 168
Weiming, Tu 193
welcoming ritual 94
Western mode of association 57–60
White Terror 6
will (*yizhi*) 10, 92
Williamson, Benjamin Wayne 168
Wolf, Arthur 171
Wolf, Margery 175
Wong, Mag 175
Woodbridge, D. 168

X

Xi, Jinping 192–93
Xi, Zhu 137
Xiaotong, Fei 57, 138, 153
Xie, sister 16
Xinhai Revolution 144
Xinji Building ('Believe/Trust Christ Building') 40

Xiuquan, Hong 1
Xunzi 153

Y

Yan, Yunxiang 58
Yang, Lien-Sheng 152, 153
Yang, Mayfair 57, 58
Yang, Shang 142
Yang, uncle 18, 45, 49, 52, 60, 61, 78, 80, 89, 126, 127
Yangming, Wang 137, 138, 139–40
Yiguandao ('the Way of Unity') 93
yinyang cosmology 86
You, Haili 79
Yu, co-worker 98

Z

Zai, Zhan 137
Zhang, Li 58
Zhang, Qicheng 191
Zhao, Dingzxn 142
Zhou, brother 54–55, 85
  God and Dao, comparing 140
Zhu, brother 107
  aesthetic formation and style 115–18
  in Bible translations 112–14
Zhuangzi 141, 153
Zimmerman-Liu, Teresa 59, 60, 84, 187
Zito, Angela 153
zoepolitics 189–91

Sublime Sociality: An (Auto)Ethnographic Theory of Chinese Christianity is the first book-length ethnographic depiction of life within the world's largest 'house church'. This deeply influential, nameless, group, a transnational, Sino-Taiwanese community of followers of Witness Li, is one of the first indigenous Chinese Christian movements of the 20th century, and the only one to become a globalised phenomenon in the 21st.

In this book, anthropologist Gareth Breen asks what is 'Chinese' about 'Chinese Christianity'? and suggests an answer that goes beyond both ethnicity and geography. He argues its distinctiveness is found in its pursuit of what followers of Li call 'organic oneness', described by Breen as a form of 'sublime sociality', which combines spontaneous social interaction with contrary tendencies to conformity and routine.

This social form, Breen argues, has a deep history in China but is also rooted in a universal human capacity for 'flow'. However, given the global reach of Chinese Christianity, successful social harmony is not always guaranteed. This book therefore also explores in vivid ethnographic details all the transnational tensions and everyday conundrums involved in creating a cohesive community in the face of societal rupture and lines of difference – of gender, status, generation, culture, language, politics, and history.

By examining how unity is maintained in the daily rhythms of church life, through meetings, daily prayers, communal meals, and social groups, Breen offers a penetrating portrait and compelling analysis of Chinese Christianity, and introduces a vital new perspective to the anthropology of religion.

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