Article

Contextualizing Transnational Chinese Christianity: A Relational Approach

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Abstract: In recent years, the number of Chinese Christian organizations in Europe has grown considerably compared to other overseas Chinese community organizations. They can mobilize transnational networks and resources to expand religious space in host societies and form a highly visible social force. Although the rise of early Christianity in the Western world has been considered an outcome of inherent religious strength, especially in terms of its central doctrines and religious ethics, this article suggests that in the diasporic Chinese world where Christianity constitutes a non-indigenous religious tradition, social relatedness based on native place, family, and kinship ties provides a more useful context for understanding its dynamic expansion and cross-regional transmission. Drawing on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Europe among overseas Chinese Christian traders and entrepreneurs, this research seeks an alternative framework for understanding the religious-cultural dynamics of Chinese Christianity in the context of transnational migration.

Keywords: Chinese Christianity; social relations; transnational migration; migrant adaptation; Europe

1. Introduction

Historians of Sino-Western interaction in modern times have tended to prioritize the agency and mobility of Western missionary groups. Early Western Christianity first followed missionaries to the southeastern coastal provinces of China, and this foreign religion was adopted and localized by Chinese agents (Cao 2010; Chow 2021; Dunch 2001; Lee 2003; Liu 2022). Historically, Chinese Christians' contributions to the world Christian mission have been limited, and the Chinese mainland has been a "harvest field" (*hechang*) and recipient of the missionary activities of overseas churches and church organizations. Overseas Chinese diaspora communities, compared with communities within China, tended to be more receptive and agentive in dealing with Christianity (Cao 2013; Yang 1999; Zhang 2018; Zhu 2009). This religious-cultural phenomenon is more pronounced in Southeast Asia. The Chinese congregations and Christians have long sought to express the faith in a culturally "Chinese" way in Southeast Asian societies where Christianity is not mainstream (DeBernardi 2020; Liu 2021; Su 2010; Zhang 2018). Although traditional religions based on Confucianism and folk beliefs still dominate the Chinese religious landscape, the proportion of followers of traditional Chinese religions has shown a downward trend, while the proportion of Chinese Christians has increased rapidly (Zhang 2015).

This research seeks to put the current rapid development of Chinese Christianity in Europe into a social relational context by focusing on its role in negotiating a sense of place and a moral discourse on family, marriage, and social relations in the Chinese diaspora. Unlike the traditional theological approach that takes contextualization mainly as a mission strategy and views contextualized Christianity as a desired outcome of the evangelical process (see Wang 2007), we understand contextualized Christianity as lived religious experience and practice. This article relies primarily on oral narratives, and the data

collected consists of two parts. From 2014 to 2019, we conducted in-person field research in Europe, mainly focusing on Chinese Christian diasporic communities in France and Italy. Field research involves participant observation on Chinese Christians' religious practices in church settings and in their everyday lives. In addition, we conducted informal interviews, both with church leaders and members, to understand their immigrant experience and religious interpretations in specific social contexts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the church activities moved online, which enabled us to observe from a distance how Chinese Christians in Europe understood and responded to the global health crisis.

This study finds that Chinese (Protestant) Christianity has taken root in contemporary Europe, and its relatively autonomous religious space has only limited intersection with local churches and Christians in Europe. According to various estimates from insiders of Chinese immigrant churches, there are about three hundred Chinese churches in Europe. Chinese churches in France are mainly composed of Wenzhou immigrants, and are concentrated in Paris, a commercial center. There are twenty Chinese churches in the greater Paris area, with tens of thousands of believers who are mainly ethnic Wenzhou immigrants. Chinese churches in Italy are dominated by migrants of Wenzhou and Qingtian origin. Counting circa thirty to forty thousand believers, Chinese Christians in Italy have opened over eighty congregations, ranking first in Europe. In Rome alone, about ten percent of the forty thousand Chinese people in the city are Christians. One of the most significant differences between these Chinese Christians in Europe and in North America is that most of them are not new converts but were already believers before arriving from China. While there are similarities and differences in the adaptation strategies of Chinese Christians in France and Italy, tensions exist between them and secular European society. This study sets out to explore the transnational and trans-local dynamics of Chinese Christianity in Europe and hopes to shed light on the multiple Chinese expressions of Christianity in the diaspora.

The case of Chinese Christianity in Europe has important theoretical significance for understanding both the propagation mechanism and local adaptation of global Christianity. The rapid development of early Christianity is often considered an outcome of the superiority of its religiosity, mainly reflecting in its central doctrines and religious ethics (Stark 1996). As Rodney Stark states, "I believe that it was the religion's particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most sweeping and successful revitalization movements in history. And it was the way these doctrines took on actual flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity" (Stark 1996, p. 211). Along this line of historical explanation, the revival of Christianity in post-Mao China has been understood as primarily a liberating force amid a stifling political atmosphere, owing to the unique advantage of this non-traditional religion (Yang 2005). However, this emphasis on inherent religious strength might not always necessarily apply to the study of Chinese communities where Christianity constitutes a non-indigenous religious tradition. This investigation draws on anthropological fieldwork conducted in Europe among overseas Chinese entrepreneurs to seek an alternative conceptual framework for understanding the transnational spread of Chinese Christianity.

2. Place-Based Networks in Congregational Spaces

Migration and sojourning were essential means of economic success for coastal Chinese people during the reform period. In the age of global migration, diasporic Wenzhou Christian merchants and traders have cultivated trans-local connections between their ethnic communities in Europe and their hometown in China. They have also built transnational ties between China and the European continent as well as among the European countries where they reside, conduct business, and practice their religion. Today, Wenzhou businesspeople are almost the best-known group of Chinese merchants in the world, running family-owned businesses such as garment factories, restaurants, and cafes, and retailing or distributing businesses of low-end light industrial products such as clothing, shoes, hats, fabrics, glasses, and lighters between China and Europe, as well as throughout the European continent. Almost all the lay church leaders we met during our fieldwork in

Europe had family businesses, and some business elites traveled back and forth between Europe and China to engage in international trade.

For Chinese Christian merchants, their economic and religious lives intersect in the context of secularity in Europe. Kim-Kwong Chan (2012) has vividly described the combination of faith and local business practices in the Wenzhou Christian merchant community in Europe:

> The Wenzhou merchants dominate the merchant groups in Europe, and the churches among this group are established more by Wenzhouese with roots in China than by mission agencies overseas. They convert their fellow merchants who share similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Their church model is almost the exact replica of what it is like in their home churches in Wenzhou. Hymn books and Bibles are brought from China. Even though they may live at or next to historical or contemporary centers of Christianity, their church life and activities seem to be thousands of miles and hundreds of years apart from their fellow Christians in their host countries. These churches seem to be more a global extension of the Wenzhounese church in China than a local expression of Christian faith by migrant Chinese.

We have made similar field observations. Chinese churches, especially those in France and Italy, resemble Zhejiang churches in China in the aspects of their atmosphere and congregational model. Zhejiang-style cuisine, for example, is usually served after the Sunday services, including pigskin jelly, braised duck head, and braised duck tongue. God's word is shared either in dialect form or in Mandarin Chinese, especially among the first generation of Christians. Church Christmas celebrations are full of Chinese elements. Lanterns, oil-paper umbrellas, ancient fans, and traditional ethnic costumes, bought and transported from China, are used in Christmas performance programs. These similarities intensify their place identity by constructing an imaginary homeland for these uprooted overseas Chinese Christians.

Chinese Christians in Europe live in an acquaintance society like that in China. Being brothers and sisters in the family of Jesus Christ, along with the networks built on kinship and geographic ties, they have close connections and become each other's support in their economic practices. Wenzhou people seldom raise business funds through bank loans. Instead, well-developed private lending systems, established based on acquaintances, are popular among Wenzhou people. After migrating to Europe, they maintain this same way of raising business funds in the diaspora. Young Chinese immigrants receive their first business start-up funds from wedding cash gifts (*hongbao*). Hosting a wedding is not just a ceremony but also an opportunity to raise funds in the acquaintance society. The cash gifts received by a new couple will be returned with the same amount or more when the gift-giver or one of their family members gets married. With such a "borrow-return" process, wedding cash gifts therefore become a transformed way of private lending. Before their wedding, a new Chinese Christian couple will usually drive to places across the immigrant-receiving country to send their wedding invitations in person. They believe their place-based acquaintance networks are broader and more robust than those of non-Christian Chinese immigrants because their networks are not just constructed through geographical ties but also through their same religious affiliation.

These Christian merchants apply the same principle of reciprocity when doing business as they do when doing religion in the diaspora, which is especially reflected in the way of raising funds to purchase church properties. It is not uncommon to see several Chinese churches in Italy raise money to help another Chinese church purchase a church property, and this church later raises money to help those churches back when they need money for purchasing new church property. For the first generation of immigrants who do not have enough capital accumulation, such mutual help among co-ethnic Christians makes it possible to establish as many immigrant churches as possible in the diaspora in a relatively short time.

Sharing pastoral resources is another important aspect of mutual help in religious practice among European Chinese Christians. When a Chinese pastor or a Chinese Christian celebrity from abroad is invited to a Chinese church in Europe to preach, Chinese Christians in other churches are invited to attend, and this invited pastor or Christian celebrity will usually go to several Chinese Christian churches in Europe to preach to as many people as possible. It is worth noting that although invited Chinese pastors may come from China, North America, and Southeast Asia, many Chinese Christians in overseas Wenzhou/Zhejiang churches admit that they prefer someone who has a background from Wenzhou or Zhejiang, either having served in a Wenzhou/Zhejiang church before or having knowledge of how a Wenzhou/Zhejiang church looks like and operates, since there is a consensus that overseas Wenzhou/Zhejiang churches in Europe are different from other overseas Chinese churches. Local pastoral resources are also shared among Chinese churches in immigrant host countries. Part-time preachers take turns preaching in different Chinese churches in Italy, making it possible for first-generation immigrants, who are busy with their secular businesses, to have enough pastoral resources to establish churches even in a place without any pastoral resources.

With the development of communication tools, Chinese Christians in Europe extended physical congregational spaces to virtual congregations to expand their transnational and trans-local networks. WeChat, a popular messaging, and social media app among Chinese people, is widely used among overseas Chinese immigrants. Chinese Christians in Europe establish church WeChat groups as extensions of their congregations to conduct religious practices in their everyday lives. Almost every Chinese church in Europe has its own WeChat group, in which members sing hymns, read scriptures, share Christian resources and personal testimonies, and even deliver audio sermons on non-Sunday days. It is a common scene that Chinese Christians listen to hymns sung by church members via WeChat while working in shops and factories. The religious connections between church members are not limited to the church activities organized in physical congregational spaces but are also strengthened and expanded in their everyday interactions in WeChat groups.

Virtual congregations are not only based on each physical congregation but also across borders to link Chinese Christians worldwide through their geographical ties in China. Weiping, a Christian from the small village of YS in Zhejiang province, participates in a WeChat group called "YS church online group." He says,

> Most of the people in YS have migrated to Europe, such as Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The participants in the YS church online group were in the same church in China before migration. After migrating to Europe, we devote ourselves to business, and it's hard for some of us to participate in church activities. There are no Chinese churches in some places in Europe. That's why some of us didn't go to churches for more than ten years. Several years ago, we started to organize this WeChat church group for YS immigrants. Some YS people in China also participate in it.

In the YS church online group, in addition to individuals' prayers and worship, there are organized Sunday services no different from those in physical congregations. For each Sunday service, they clearly list the worship hymns, the name of the preacher, the topic and outline of the sermon, and the responsive prayers in the weekly schedule. The time of Sunday services—5 p.m. Chinese time, 10 a.m. European time (for most European countries), and 9 a.m. Portuguese time—is written in the WeChat group notice, reflecting the transnational religious virtual networks constructed through geographical ties across borders.

In addition to WeChat church groups, Chinese Christians in Europe also like to share their "spiritual gains" on their WeChat Moments to connect to other Christians, especially Christians from Zhejiang province around the world. They post photos and videos of their local churches' activities along with words of worshiping God, displaying their Christian identity in public and communicating with other Zhejiang Christians without geographical restrictions. Around Christmas, WeChat moments of overseas Chinese Christians are filled

with photos and videos of church Christmas celebration activities from Christian friends, relatives, and fellow-townsmen around Europe and even across the world, evoking a sense of "sharing the moment though being miles apart" (*tianya gong ci shi*). Junjie, a Chinese Christian from Wenzhou in Italy, told us that almost all his WeChat friends are Christians. He likes using WeChat Moments because "it allows us to communicate with (Chinese) pastors and Christians around the world. Sometimes we start chatting below a post of WeChat Moments, knowing each other's recent situation and spiritual gains." The church communities established through WeChat meet the social needs of Chinese Christians in Europe and fulfill their religious needs in daily life, providing an intimate social network for them to integrate their Christian faith with their connections to their homeland, especially with their hometowns in China.

3. At Home in Diaspora: Family Ties and Cultural Belonging

The remarkable development of Chinese Christianity in an increasingly secular Europe is closely related to its trans-local and transnational ties to hometowns and the home country. This point needs to be examined in the framework of the contrast between Chinese and Western civilizations with regard to the relative importance of the family. As Robert Bellah (1970, p. 78) pointed out, the family occupies a central place in Chinese civilization; in contrast, contemporary Western societies, based on traditional Christian civilization, are the most distant from the family among known social formations. Chinese sociologist and anthropologist Xiaotong Fei (1992, pp. 60–70) used the concepts of "differential mode of association" and "organizational mode of association" to express the difference between Chinese and Western social relationship models and emphasizes the central position of the family in Chinese social relationship circles and moral systems. C. K. Yang (1970) made a more detailed distinction between Chinese and Western views of civilization and religion by highlighting the sanctified traditional Chinese notions of state and family. Yang defined the form of religion in Chinese society as a decentralized or diffused religion, distinguishing it from the institutional religions in Western society. Yang also pointed out that the function of diffused religion operates through the family system and the imperial political system of Chinese society. At the family level, every traditional Chinese family is seen as a religious altar. This diffused form of religiosity, which permeates China's indigenous cultural tradition, subtly shapes the beliefs and social practices of Chinese Christians today.

Confronted with the common assumption of "one more Christian, one less Chinese", Chinese Christians often understand the diffuse practices of faith and customs in Chinese tradition (marriages and funerals, ancestor sacrifice, feng shui practice, etc.) through rationalization and de-religionization, so as to achieve the integration of the Christian soul with the Chinese spirit and ensure that Chinese identity does not conflict with the principles of Christian faith (Constable 1994). The boundaries between Chinese tradition and Christianity are not definite or fixed. Theologian Alexander Chow (2018) argues that Confucian understandings of filial piety have the potential to construct a public theology that engages the family and the church in a way that underscores mutuality and reciprocity. Therefore, Chinese family and kinship cultures may also constitute part of the central doctrines and religious ethics of Christianity.

In real-life situations, the reconciling of the contradictions of the two beliefs and cultural systems is often seen among Chinese Christians in Europe. For instance, Lifen, a Chinese Christian in Italy, changed to use the Gregorian calendar rather than the Lunar calendar to celebrate her birthday after migration. She told us,

> Right on the day of my Gregorian birthday, I had a dream in which I saw a creature with the face of a lion, the nose of a dragon, and the body of a human, similar to the statue that we usually put in front of a palace and temple in China. It challenged me and asked me why I changed to use the Gregorian calendar. I know it's Satan. I said, because we use the Gregorian calendar to celebrate Jesus

Christ's birthday too. I also sang a hymn to glorify how powerful Jesus Christ is, and then the creature disappeared.

Although it seems to reveal a compromise of Chinese culture to Christianity in Life's story, a sinicized "religious vision" indicates the integration of the two symbolic systems. This integration is also reflected in the willingness to accommodate one culture to another. Take funeral rituals as an example. In Christianity, the body is in an inferior position to the soul. Once the body is dead, the soul leaves the flesh—the temporary dwelling place—to be together with God. A coffin, therefore, is usually put in a corner of a church during a funeral. Different from this practice, Chinese Christians in Europe attach importance to the body, considering the dead as the most honorable (*sizhe wei da*) according to traditional Chinese culture. They put the coffin in the middle of the church during a funeral. However, red colors, including red flowers and red ribbons, are used to decorate the coffin. This is at odds with traditional Chinese funeral customs, in which a red color is never used, since it symbolizes joy and auspiciousness. Given that death is deemed going back home to be with the Lord, Chinese Christians in Europe use red colors in funerals to indicate their understanding of Christian doctrines.

Christian belief also helps overseas Chinese Christians justify why they preserve certain Chinese traditions when it comes to mate selection, marriage, and family relations. Not a few Chinese Christians in Europe follow the Chinese tradition of "parental orders and matchmaker's words" (*fumu zhi min, meishuo zhi yan*) in the selection of a marriage partner. By paralleling God preparing Eve for Adam, Chinese Christians in Europe often believe such an "assigned" partner is the best choice for them. They believe self-selected partners are not always ideal from a Christian perspective, given the high divorce rate and cohabitation rate in Europe.

Chinese Christians in Europe value their Chinese identity and promote the traditional Chinese values that are consistent with Christian doctrines. For example, respecting parents, as a principle of filial piety in Confucianism, is in line with the teachings of the Bible. The Missionary Center of the Chinese Christian church in Italy, as a result, prints the sentence "Respecting parents leads to longevity" (*xiaojing fumu de changshou*) together with "Believe in Jesus to receive eternal life" (*xin yesu de yongsheng*), "The end of the age is drawing nearer" (*mori geng jin*), and "The Second Coming of Christ is soon" (*yesu kuai zai lai*) on a van that they use to evangelize their faith.

Chinese Christian identity is often passed down from generation to generation in highly controlled community and family environments. Chinese Christian parents in Europe attach great importance to their children's Mandarin learning. Sunday school is always conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Churches find ways to transport Bibles with *pinyin* from China and urge younger generations to learn the Christian faith in the Chinese language. Some churches run Chinese language schools, in which they use the same textbooks in elementary schools and middle schools that they would in China and hire Chinese language teachers from China, providing the younger generation the opportunity to be educated in a Chinese way. Although some Chinese Christian youth in Italy are more fluent in Italian, they prefer using Mandarin in prayer, since Chinese churches, according to them, are a place where people use Mandarin to share God's words, and Christian belief is narrated in Mandarin most of the time both in churches and families. Languages can be a decisive factor in constructing identity among immigrants. The preference for the use of Mandarin, in this case, contributes to shaping a diasporic imagination and strengthening cultural belonging among Chinese Christians in Europe.

A preacher in Rome, when talking about the Chinese language school run by the church, was proud of his Chinese identity and linked the pride of being Chinese back to the development of China:

My feeling of being an immigrant for thirty years is, if our motherland is not powerful, no matter how rich an immigrant is, he/she is always looked down upon by others. Our overseas Chinese immigrants will be empowered only if China is powerful. See, since several years ago, there have been Chinese signs

here and there at train stations and airports in Italy. Only Chinese immigrants sent their kids to our Chinese language school, but now, a lot of Italian people send their kids here to learn Chinese too! I believe in the future, with the development of China, Chinese will be a world language like English. At that time, our younger generations will be able to use Chinese to preach to people all around the world.

Chinese Churches in Europe are immigrant organizations that develop as a unit of individual Chinese merchant families and that often shapes the church's evolvement on a household-by-household basis. This "home" is not only an overall metaphor but also a solid node with real socio-economic functions and social mobilization capabilities embedded in a transnational Chinese ethnic enclave economy. This structural feature also determines its global adaptability, complementing the entrepreneurial spirit of the Wenzhou people. Wenzhou people's migration chains are based on family and kinship ties. Thus, family is the basic driver of their lives in Europe both when conducting business and running churches. The operation and development of Chinese Christianity in Europe borrows from the Chinese immigrant family and family business model, while family businesses provide the necessary material to support the various functions of the churches.

Chinese church networks often spread throughout many EU countries as people migrated and their individual businesses expanded. To a certain extent, Chinese immigrant churches are like the many overseas Chinese chambers of commerce and native-place groups, expressing the unique cultural identity of their home country and strengthening its emotional and institutional ties with the motherland. However, Chinese churches play a role as a civil society organization with more mobilization and integration capabilities in the diasporic community at this stage, and its cross-regional social integration ability appears to surpass that of other clan organizations or hometown associations. It is not unusual to hear about chaos reported by the media and overseas Chinese communities, such as the establishment of more than a dozen vice presidents of an overseas chamber of commerce, which has led to severe infighting among Chinese voluntary organizations. Chinese immigrant churches offer another possibility—a community full of mutual trust that seeks to integrate faith and migrant life. This congregational structure allows for better integration of groups that had left their homes in pursuit of economic interests. They encourage charity and altruism. Church leadership is expected not only to give back to their communities of origin but also to organize frequent religious and social activities that reflect all-round care for the diasporic Chinese community.

In European Chinese communities, lay Christian immigrant leaders can control and mobilize a large amount of socio-economic and human resources. They have lived in Europe for decades and have economic strength and a good social reputation in overseas Chinese communities. Their churches serve as a bridge for the Chinese immigrants to adapt into the host society, shaping the development trajectory and future of transnational Chinese Christianity. Such church leaders are enthusiastic about philanthropy and are committed to establishing positive working relationships with Chinese embassies and consulates as well as with other Chinese official institutions abroad. Immigrant Chinese church leaders have been quite visible in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction activities after earthquakes and floods affected China. Some leaders organized their churches to transfer funds and relief materials through Chinese embassies and consulates to disaster areas, reflecting their close emotional, social, and economic ties with China and a strong desire to gain official recognition from the Chinese state.

Immigrants face much greater socio-economic life and work pressures than ordinary locals. Chinese churches in Europe provide newcomers with moral authority and emotional support, compensating for the psychological vacuum that immigrants face and strengthening immigrants' indigenous homegrown Christian faith. Chinese churches express their strong desire to integrate into the new society in a Chinese way, rather than being wholly assimilated or Westernized by the culture of the host society. They often deliberately distance themselves from the mainstream Western church systems to maintain their unique identity. This commitment to Chinese place identity is particularly prevalent

among the first generation of immigrants. For most Chinese immigrants, Europe is a place to do business, while their notion of home and emotional belonging remains connected to China. Chinese Christians, too, pay great attention to consolidating their independence from mainstream European society. They are keen to acquire places for church meetings in Europe to have a spiritual "home" in a foreign land. Although they are on the cultural fringes of European society, they always have a sense of self-confidence based on the culture and beliefs regarding their origin and keep a certain distance from the prevailing secular European culture. The "home" of the church provides a safe and supportive social space for immigrant Chinese Christians. The extensive networks of Chinese churches and church organizations throughout Europe enable these highly mobile immigrants to quickly gain a sense of belonging and identity at home in the diaspora.

4. Moralizing about Marriage, Family, and Social Relations in Diaspora

While maintaining their own national, regional, and local cultural uniqueness, diaspora Chinese immigrants also strive to consolidate and legitimize their existence and economic interests in foreign lands at the socio-cultural level. The majority of Chinese people in Europe are first-generation immigrants. They have a stronger sense of identity with the motherland than overseas Chinese in other regions do (e.g., Southeast Asia or North America), maintaining closer transnational economic, trade, emotional, cultural, religious, and charitable ties with China. Although religious belief is not a prerequisite for joining overseas Chinese business groups, transnational business circles formed based on a network of common beliefs and trust enable group members to obtain various advantages and privileges in trading, financing, and credit accounting. The conservative Christian faith can provide a set of moral discourse and order that restricts social behavior, reduces the risk of untrustworthiness, and continues a family economic model with "small commodities, big wholesale market" as the main characteristics in its global dispersion by strengthening the bond between immigrant individuals and their families and communities (Fei 1986). Christianity thus morally facilitates the embedding of the traditional Chinese family economy in the global market economy by effectively resisting the cultural influences of secular European societies that immigrants regard as morally corrupt.

Under the profoundly conservative Christian family models, second-generation immigrants are emotionally and morally tied to their diaspora communities (Cao 2013). This is especially the case for young women. Few female immigrants from Wenzhou intermarry with non-Chinese people. Many prefer a spouse originally from their hometown. Chinese churches place great emphasis on marriage and family stability, without which one can hardly start individual entrepreneurial initiatives. Only church members who have no premarital sex are allowed to perform wedding ceremonies in church. Divorce is considered highly immoral, and even remarriage after divorce is considered adultery. One Wenzhou woman in Italy told us that she left the Chinese church since she was not allowed to receive Holy Communion after remarriage. This Christian conservatism manifests the patriarchal morality of Chinese immigrant families and becomes embedded in male-dominated Wenzhou immigrant churches. Members of immigrant churches often lash out at the sexual laxity of European society and European Christianity's tolerance of divorce, abortion, and homosexuality. This is particularly evident in France, where second-generation Chinese, influenced by their conservative Christian parents, often become hostile to mainstream social and cultural values expressed in the secular French education system.

The conservative attitude is also reflected in the way through which they organize church services. A gender-separated seating arrangement during church services is a taken-for-granted practice in Wenzhou churches (Cao 2010). Wenzhou immigrants brought this tradition to Europe and have kept it in their church services. They explain it as the practice of Sinicization of Christianity. Traditional Chinese culture promotes a conservative idea of opposing intimacy between men and women—"men and women should not touch each other when giving or receiving an object" (*nan nü shou shou bu qin*). A gender-separated seating arrangement practice, in line with the Chinese tradition, reduced local hostility

toward Western religion when Christianity was first introduced to China. Though the perceptions of gender relations are much more open in contemporary China, avoiding intimate contact between men and women (if they are not relatives or couples) is still considered a way to maintain marriage and family stability. Wenzhou immigrants, as a result, keep such a gender-separated practice in church to distance themselves from secularized Europe.

As Fei Xiaotong commented on Chinese traditional rural society: "Talking, laughing, and showing emotion and affection openly occur only in groups composed of people of the same sex and age. Men get together only with men, women with other women, and children with other children. Except for matters of work and reproduction, people of different sexes and ages maintain considerable distance" (Fei 1992, p. 86). Work and reproduction are closely intertwined among Zhejiang immigrants in Europe due to the family/kinship-based migration chain and business model. Ethnic churches are the essential public space outside the family and work for Chinese Christians to express their emotion and affection in public. The distance between men and women, as well as conservative Chinese gender ideology, are embedded in this public space and strengthened by repetitive religious activities and rituals.

The conservative view of gender and sexuality can be found in Chinese Christians' business practices in Europe. Chinese Christians usually claim that their economic practices to be not so different from those of non-Christians. Both Christians and non-Christians are keen to seize profitable opportunities. However, providing massage services, which is one of the popular jobs among non-skilled new Asian immigrants, is not encouraged and even forbidden among Chinese Christians in Italy. Both traditional Chinese culture and Christian morality contribute to a conservative ideology on gender and sexuality among Chinese Christians, shaping their moral rules in economic practice. Skin-to-skin touch, which is unavoidable in massage services, has sexual implications and is deemed taboo in Chinese Christians' economic practice.

Furthermore, Chinese Christians' critique of the secularization of European society extends to their understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic. Chinese church leaders often start with the secularization of Europe, which they feel more personally, to understand the reasons why Europe has been hit hard by the pandemic and the high mortality rates suffered by Europeans. This is in line with their long-standing understanding of Europe's need for a spiritual revival to counter its secularizing trend.

On the other hand, due to their common merchant background and maintaining a certain spatial distance from their home country, they rarely make critical remarks on the current situation in China. Rather, they often regard the rapid development of China's economy as "God's work" to achieve a different direction that allows them to go to the world to preach the gospel (Cao 2012). Many of them no longer expect to permanently return to China in the future but only express "long-distance nationalism" in the diverse places they have taken root (Anderson 1998). Engaging in church charity in the host society is an essential way for Chinese believers in Europe to demonstrate their sense of community, moral identity, and social mobilization.

At the height of the pandemic in Europe, Chinese churches took practical actions to practice their faith and help improve the international image of overseas Chinese people, especially of Chinese businesspeople. When the whole nation of Italy lacked masks and other epidemic prevention materials, many ethnic Chinese churches began to donate masks, medical clothing, gloves, and so on to police stations, medical personnel, and those in need. In the words of some Chinese believers, their own "modest strength can transmit great love and salvation to European society," and "the church's donation is attached to the divine love from Christ." These philanthropic outreach efforts carried out during the pandemic have gradually weakened the ethnic enclave model of Chinese churches and developed into a more inclusive cosmopolitan style of global religion.

In this process of adaptation and inculturation, the second generation of bilingual Chinese act as a bridge between the Chinese church and mainstream European society.

Every summer, Chinese Christian churches in Italy organize the younger generation to participate in Christian short-term missions both in China and Italy, aiming to tell "the good news of the Gospel" to more people and to strengthen the religious commitment of the youth. They have traveled to small villages in Yunnan, southwest China, where they can apply cultural intimacy to share the gospel with their peers in China. They have also been to Matera, the filming place of the movie "The Passion of the Christ," sitting in front of an Italian church in groups to sing beautiful hymns in Chinese and Italian, giving Christian-themed souvenirs to local Italian people and tourists from all around the world.

For these immigrant Christians, long-term and stable church participation allows them to fully build a sense of belonging, mutual trust, and emotional support in transnational migration and movement, as well as a sense of social and material security. This sense of community affiliation is generated by Christian fellowship through creating a faith-based collective life. A faith-based moral community tends to attract and unite ordinary Chinese merchants more effectively than other overseas Chinese organizations do. Folk religious forms, such as Buddhist halls and popular temples, lack a systematic and clearly articulated moral discourse. They thus lack global expansion potential because they are constrained by emotional ties formed around geographically embedded kinship and local knowledge. Business and hometown associations, on the other hand, are prone to developing into an elite "circle culture" (*quanzi wenhua*) full of fierce internal competition for power and fame (Wang 2017, p. 136).

Discussions on immigrant religions in Europe usually take the secularization of Europe into account. Scholars have summarized it as "believing without belonging" (Davie 1994) and "belonging without believing" (Casanova 2006), indicating a decline in both institutional religion and personal religiosity. The tensions between immigrant religious communities and mainstream society are salient. A highly sinicized and localized Christianity provides a moral discourse and value system that is adapted to a globalized market economy for the Chinese diaspora communities. While lamenting the moral degeneration and gradual departure from Christian faith of Europeans, these immigrant churches seek to position themselves as the new center of global Christianity. They gradually developed a unique Chinese understanding and imagination of the Christian civilizing project, as well as a hierarchical spatial-moral relationship.

5. Toward a Relational Approach to Understanding Transnational Chinese Christianity

Christianity does not constitute a universally and inherently homogeneous meaning system as Christian doctrinal narratives often posit. Indeed, the plural form of Christianity denotes the importance of attending to multiple modes of contextualization in time and space. Historical and theological studies of Christianity in China have constructed contextualization as a process of interactions between Western missionaries and local Chinese in showing how Christianity took root in modern China. Such understanding of contextualization tends to assume Christianity as a foreign religion by highlighting "the interaction between the Gospel and the Chinese context, between missionaries and the Chinese converts, between mission strategies and the Chinese response" (Wang 2007, p. 8). By focusing on the rising Chinese Christian presence in contemporary secular Europe, this study not only contributes to recent scholarship that sees Christianity as a Chinese religion but treats Chinese Christianity as a new agent with the potential of remaking Sino-Western relations.

Recently, in continental Europe, the number of overseas Chinese organizations with a Christian background has grown considerably compared to other overseas Chinese voluntary organizations, and they are widely distributed throughout the continent. They can mobilize transnational religious and social resources to hold large-scale public events, expand religious space in the country of residence, and form highly visible social forces. The use of existing cultural and religious resources to recreate place-based ties, networks, and identities overseas and to serve the commercial interests of their own ethnic groups is not unique to Chinese people in Europe. Immigrant religion provides a spiritual and

moral resource for overseas Chinese immigrants' lives and constructs a parallel world to symbolically sustain transnational business practices. Christianity is a viable resource for constructing such community cohesion and trust, and it also provides a highly controlled autonomous space for effectively reconstructing the social ties of the Chinese hometown and strengthening the economic production mode of individual entrepreneurial families. Here, native place-based association and social trust in Chinese society intersect and reinforce each other with the sinicized Christian context. This is in sharp contrast to the generalized social trust pattern under the influence of Western Christianity. In the face of cultural assimilation pressures from secular European societies, conservative Christian morality and values seem to provide an additional layer of sacralization for the social trust network of fellow Chinese people based on geography and kinship.

When talking about the intrinsic cohesion of Chinese Christianity, it is necessary to recognize the existence of power competition in the social circle of Chinese churches in Europe. Some of the differences and conflicts are a continuation of the domestic inter-church or intra-church struggle back in China that predated their arrival in Europe, while others are complex rivalries between overseas Chinese business families. However, most of these disputes and schisms existed only within the first generation of lay leaders in the immigrant churches and, to a large extent, did not affect the extensive religious participation of ordinary laity in the Chinese church. This split in leadership has, in some cases, unexpectedly led to founding and proliferation of churches (Cao 2013, p. 89). While Chinese immigrant churches may have performed a similar social and cultural function to Chinese business organizations and Chinese hometown associations in practice, they constitute a far greater public space for ordinary people than the latter do. Clan associations and hometown associations are premised on having shared blood ties or geographical ties with the same surname, while chambers of commerce and cultural associations mainly accommodate the social needs of overseas Chinese leaders and elites.

Compared with other overseas Chinese community organizations, the cohesion of Chinese Christianity is more reflected in the cross-generational transmission of faith, values, and belonging through immigrant churches' Sunday schools and youth ministry as well as their training and cultivation of youth leaders and workers. By contrast, overseas folk religions and guild-style Buddhist organizations tend to be actively present only among first-generation immigrant groups and are less attractive to second-generation Chinese immigrants. This reflects the lack of cultural metaphors and atmospheres of traditional Chinese families in the organization and the tendency towards religious individualism in larger European society (Lü 2017).

This research also helps us understand the patterns and mechanisms of transnational and trans-local transmission of Christianity, especially the complex reasons for the recent rise of Chinese immigrant Christianity in the Western world and its inherent diversity. In *The Rise of Christianity*, Stark argues that the core doctrines and the accompanying values of religious morality, love, and charity played the ultimately important role in the rise and spread of Christianity in the Western world because "central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations" (Stark 1996, p. 211). This interpretation, based on Western religious norms and historical context, presupposes the "universal moral principles" of a "Western organizational mode of association" (Fei 1992, p. 79) and may not work in traditional non-Western contexts of social relationships.

The rise of transnational Chinese Christianity in Europe provides an opportunity for understanding the contextualization and local adaptation of global Christianity. Unlike the default acceptance of the Christian-centric organizational mode of association in the West, this paper has highlighted the transnational dynamics of localization that inspired the spread of a sinicized Christianity overseas. The sense of hometown and motherland rooted in indigenous cultural traditions, along with the construction of local place identity and moral discourse, fuels the cross-regional spread of overseas Chinese Christianity. This indigenous cultural logic speaks to the differential pattern of trust that runs through the

practice of Chinese sociality in modern times. In a similar vein, the narrative of repaying the "gospel debt" of Europeans, which was popular in Chinese immigrant churches at the beginning of the 21st century, may be understood as the symbolic extension of this differential pattern of sociality outside the Chinese household and society. "Giving back" to Western missionaries to China by way of assuming the responsibility for sinocentric global evangelization reflects, to a certain extent, the establishment and maintenance of reciprocity and mutuality emphasized by traditional Chinese values.

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