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PRESBYTERIANISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN URBAN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

Based on a qualitative study on the new development of Presbyterianism in China, this thesis explores the urban and rational side of Chinese Christianity, so as to open an empirical window on meso-level social change in urban China. From an empirical perspective, although the organizational form of the Presbyterian Church in China and its scope are still in the fledging stage, the discursive practices and the institutional and coalition building of Chinese Presbyterians fit into the profile of a social movement. This preliminary data collected so far examines the emerging Protestant elites and their role in the precarious civil society of today's China. On the normative side, these Chinese Presbyterians articulate a strong political theology that blends the Anabaptist and the reformed theologies. In addition, the institutional and the missional tension of this movement is also under examination. In the end, this project is an experiment that tests the commensurability between theology and social sciences, especially the viability of theologically engaged ethnography.

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Presbyterianism and Social Change in Urban China

Introduction

If as Richard Madsen has argued that various forms of fundamentalist and, especially, Pentecostal Christianity have become the dominant forms of Protestantism in China,¹ the development of the Calvinist and Reformed wing of China's urban registered churches represents a new trend in Chinese Christianity.² In fact, in recent years a nascent network of urban unregistered churches has adopted a denominational identity and structure. Interestingly, as Brent Fulton has observed, "the strongest denominational advocates to date have been those church leaders in China who subscribe to the Reformed tradition."³ Ian Johnson has provided an account of how a handful of churches in Chengdu, West China, became reformed and Presbyterian. According to Johnson, the ecstatic appeal of charismatic Christianity faded as Protestantism in China became more urbanized. Christian urbanites, Johnson argues, wanted some standards and structures for congregational life. Calvinism has provided the movement with a holistic worldview, plausible enough to replace the Communist ideology. Puritanism, on the other hand, has

¹ See Richard Madsen, "Signs and Wonders: Christianity and Hybrid Modernity in China," in *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-cultural Perspectives*, ed. Francis Khok Gee Lim (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29. Both the "fundamentalist" and the "Pentecostal" are contested categories, depending on their context of usage; however, both terms would be valid if they mean that Chinese Christianity is characterized by strong Biblicism and supernaturalism. Moreover, even though studies on these forms of Chinese Christianity dominate current sociological and anthropological scholarship, it can be argued whether these are indeed the dominant forms of Chinese Christianity.

² The unregistered church, also known as the underground church or the house church, refers to Protestant churches that exist outside the state-approved Three-self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) which seeks to co-opt Protestant clergies and believers into the national building project of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

³ Brent Fulton, *China's Urban Christians: A Light that Cannot be Hidden* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 122.

provided the framework guiding their political actions.⁴

However, the development of Chinese Presbyterianism is not merely an isolated case of rationalization and urbanization.⁵ Since 2013, several urban churches in Chengdu have been taking the lead in the rapid development of Presbyterianism in China. Among the movement's decisive actions was the formation of the Western China Presbytery (WCP)—the first organizationally fully-fledged presbytery in China—as well as the creation of Christian day schools, a seminary, and a liberal arts college.⁶ All these actions are intentionally defiant of the Chinese Communist Party. The Western China Presbytery has also been assisting churches in six other urban centers with the aim of establishing Presbyterianism. These steps culminated in the formation of the preparatory national assembly of the Presbyterian Church in China (PCC), which had its first meeting in July 2017.

Such rapid pace of institutional development and coalition building defies simple explanation. This paper seeks to explain the development of the PCC on both institutional

⁴ See Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao* (New York: Pantheon, 2017).

⁵ PCC stands out in its level of organization and range of affiliation among the various forms of Presbyterianism in China. The only other formally organized Presbyterian church in China is the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). Directly planted by RPCNA, it adopts the practices and structures of RPCNA wholesale, such as singing Psalms without instruments, and having a synod instead of a general assembly as the supreme governing body. The other types of Presbyterianism in China are either too loosely connected or led by one authoritarian figure rather than a multiplicity of presbyters. PCC pastors tend to think some more authoritarian Presbyterians as more fundamentalist, while the latter would think them as not truly reformed.

⁶ Western China Theological Seminary boasts an overall enrollment over 300. According to a most recent brochure, Western China Covenant College has an overall enrollment of 208, including 26 graduate students, 20 in their teachers' education program, 150 in the certificate program, 12 undergraduate students, with 3 full-time faculty, 30 adjunct faculty, and 4 full-time staff. Tuition income only supplies a third of the operating cost, with the remainder expected to come from donation of individuals and Presbyterian churches across China and around the world.

and social movement levels drawing on insights from Bourdieusian field theory and strategic action fields (SAFs) theory. Accordingly, the objective of this paper is two-fold: to provide empirical data on this new area of research and to help advance field theories. This paper is organized as such. It begins with an overview of the historical background of the PCC, followed by a section on methodological and theoretical considerations. It then applies some concepts developed from Bourdieusian field theory to discuss the subjective elements of the PCC as a social movement. The next section addresses the role of the overarching state in the institutional configuration and social movement dynamics of the PCC. The following section applies a modified version of the “incumbent-challenger” model to argue that the PCC challenges existing form of urban house church and alternative Christian education on doxical and organizational levels to contend for moral authority rather than any privileged position or practical advantage. The last section provides a theological critique of this movement in light of the missional church conversation. Hopefully, the data and analysis in this paper will provide an empirical window on social change at the meso-level in urban China and a case of theologically engaged anthropology.

Historical Background of the PCC

While PCC advocates often evoke the history of Presbyterian missions to China, in reality the recent development of Presbyterianism has no connection to previous missionary activity in the country. However, the recent surge of Presbyterianism in China could not have taken place in the absence of a transnational network of Chinese Calvinists. Moreover, in order to better understand this religious trend, it is necessary to

keep in mind the difference between what is global and what is transnational. According to Michael Peter Smith, the distinction between transnational and global dynamics cannot be found exclusively in differences of scope, scale, or “reach.” Rather, the divide is to be located in key assumptions “about the role of the state in the production of meaning, identity and social outcomes.”⁷ As will be seen in this paper, the state has an important role in the transnational reconfiguration of Presbyterianism.

The appeal of reformed theology is one of the most common reasons that those participating in this study cite for joining the PCC. Since the late 1990s, access to the internet, printing, and media duplication technologies have become common in China. Indeed, some responders admitted they played a crucial role in the dissemination of reformed theology. In particular, this is one of the ways in which “pirated” recordings of sermons by the Indonesian preacher Stephen Tong (1940–), as well as translations of reformed books by Charles Chao (1916–2010) have circulated in the country.⁸ In other words, the prior spread of reformed theology was instrumental for the development of the PCC. Nevertheless, this paper seeks to draw a picture of new Chinese Presbyterianism without dipping into the finer points of reformed theology. Instead, the argument presented here pursues a vision that does not “consider theology as a practice in the abstract but asks what sort of different institutions are sites for the production of theology

⁷ Michael Peter Smith, *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 3.

⁸ Both Tong and Chao have strong connection to Westminster Theology Seminary in Philadelphia. Tong and Chao were very deliberate in correcting the anti-intellectual (theological) bias of Chinese churches world-wide, Tong through his preaching, Chao through his translation work. Both happily “endorse” the pirating of their sermons and translation works in China.

and further ask what effects funding, communication technologies, and nodes of intellectual and material redistribution have.”⁹ Tracing these dynamics is especially important given the Chinese government’s restriction on legally printing and distributing theological materials.

The rise of reformed theology has largely occurred “in urban locations with many intellectuals of international background.”¹⁰ Wang Yi, a former writer, college teacher, public intellectual, and human rights lawyer, currently serves as the senior pastor of Early Rain Reformed Church. He has played a critical role as the main architect of the PCC. He has shaped the denomination by translating and revising Presbyterian polity documents. Wang Yi came under the influence of the reformed movement after reading publications by Stephen Tong and Charles Chao on a trip to Taiwan in 2005. He also studied reformed theology and church order by researching books online. According to Wang Yi, the PCC constitution and by-laws were mainly based on the Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), with additional stipulations adapted from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), the Dutch Reformed Church, and the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan. In my interview with him on October 25th, 2017, he said that “you can become a Reformed Presbyterian by reading some online articles and free books, but you cannot become a Charismatic Christian in the same way.”

Although Tong and Chao are the precursors of those who claim the reformed

⁹ See Jon Bialecki, “Anthropology, Theology, and the Problem of Incommensurability” in *Anthropology, Theology, and the Challenge of Immanence*, ed. J. Derrick Lemons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in press).

¹⁰ China Source China Advisory Group, telephone conversation, September 5, 2017.

tradition in China, promoting Presbyterianism in China was never on their agenda.¹¹ A younger generation of Chinese American pastors were also instrumental in the development of the PCC.¹² Most of them received their theological training from reformed evangelical seminaries in the US. Moreover, some have pastored Chinese PCA churches. Greater access to theological education is an important outgrowth of this process. In fact, several seminaries have been created with the support of several Chinese PCA churches. For example, True Word Training Center has been a gathering place for many of these reformed pastors and theological educators.¹³ Unfortunately, many Chinese American theological educators affiliated with this training center have more recently been denied visas to enter mainland China. A couple of pastors from the OPC, another American evangelical Presbyterian denomination, are also very involved in the spread of Presbyterianism in China. For example, Luke P. Y. Lu, a more doctrinaire and militant Presbyterian pastor, has tried to promote “biblical Presbyterianism” as opposed to what he calls “arbitrary forms of Presbyterianism.”¹⁴ His hardline approach has

¹¹ In fact, Tong’s network of reformed churches, called the Reformed Evangelical Church is not Presbyterian and intentionally restrains from setting the office of an elder.

¹² Chloë Starr, in her textual study of the urban house-church movement, also notes the interconnectedness of house church leaders like Wang Yi with overseas Chinese and overseas Chinese churches. See Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology Text and Context* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 264. However, the data presented in this section is mainly based on oral history interviews the author conducted since July 2017. Real names are used unless the interviewee request anonymity or pseudonyms.

¹³ The person in charge of this seminary said in a conference in Hong Kong during September 12-15, 2017 that twenty-eight ordained pastors of four major Presbyterian denominations in China are graduates of this seminary.

¹⁴ See Luke P. Y. Lu, “Why Chinese Churches Need Biblical Presbyterianism,” in *China’s Reforming Churches: Mission, Polity, and Ministry in the Next Christendom*, ed. Bruce P. Baugus (Grand Rapids; MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014).

increasingly alienated himself from the PCC network. Another OPC pastor, Pastor Jiang (pseudonym) is more winsome in his approach to spreading Presbyterianism in China. He has written two books on Presbyterian church government as well as on the ordination process. These books have circulated widely in China. As the chairman of the PCC examination committee, he has also been deeply involved in the ordination of many PCC pastors across the country.

The growth of the PCC to a national movement was somewhat fortuitous. Chengdu Early Rain Reformed Church (previously called Early Rain Fellowship) formally organized itself in 2009 as a stand-alone primordially Presbyterian church, electing elders and deacons and establishing a membership system. The first fully organized presbytery came into existence in Chengdu in 2013, initially having three member churches. Chengdu style Presbyterianism would remain local if it were not for the Grace to City network. Modeling itself after Redeemer City to City, Grace to City is a ministry that promotes gospel renewal and church planting among China's urban churches.¹⁵ In 2010, China Partnership, a mission agency closely associated with the PCA, sponsored some Chinese pastors to visit Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City.¹⁶ In 2012, it gave birth to Grace to City. The majority of the over 400 urban churches in its network are theologically reformed and the current board of trustees is

¹⁵ Redeemer City to City is the ministry of high-profile PCA pastor Timothy Keller who has pastored Redeemer Presbyterian Church New York city for almost 30 years. This ministry emphasizes church planting in global cities and the renewing power of the Christian gospel.

¹⁶ The high publicity of the successful ministry of Redeemer, a PCA church in a global city, fuels the imagination of many PCC pastors and leaves the impression that Presbyterianism represents the best of the reformed movement.

made up exclusively of Presbyterian pastors. Grace to City facilitated networking among PCC churches and it played a crucial role in the coordination of the PCC's preparatory national assembly.

The PCC, like the PCA and Grace to City, promotes urban church planting. Before the formation of the Western China Presbytery (WCP), these Chengdu unregistered churches supported missions through a local coalition of evangelical churches, but since they formed the presbytery, urban church planting became their sole focus. Chengdu Presbyterians explicitly trace their urban church planting focus to the influence of Redeemer. Not surprisingly, assisting churches in other urban centers to establish Presbyterianism has become a high priority on their agenda. Interestingly, with the exception of WCP, all the other six provisional Presbyteries are spread across east China. Some of them have a longer house church tradition and a more globalized condition than WCP.¹⁷

Methodological Considerations

The data for this study has been gathered over a period of four months (July to October 2017). A variety of methods have been used in data collection, which mainly involved oral history interviews and semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted either online or in person (with 36 transcribed and analyzed). The data have also been supplemented by itinerant fieldwork including participant observation in congregations

¹⁷ Unregistered churches are also called house churches because they used to meet secretly in private homes, thus deriving their name "house churches." However, the name "house churches" has become somewhat misleading. It is said that today over half of the urban registered churches meet in public or semi-public places such as office building instead of private homes. This name is still significant, as it distinguishes from the state-registered churches referenced in footnote 2.

and conferences, ethnographic interviews, and analysis of written sources. The research obtained IRB approval from Boston University. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, unless permission was granted to disclose identifiable information. With the exception of Chengdu, all other cities in which interviews and fieldwork were conducted are identified by geographical proximity instead of actual names. The decision not to disclose this and other information is predicated upon security concerns and the sensitivity of religious issues in mainland China.

The new development of Presbyterianism in China has caught my attention because I did a literature review on globalization and transnationalism, especially as it relates to the transnational turn of Chinese Christianity. Specifically, I wanted to find out how Chinese Christianity is embedded in the transnational process and how this embeddedness bears on the identity formation of Chinese Christians and their sense of agency. While looking for a case, I zoomed in on the transnational reconfiguration of Presbyterianism. Regardless of one's theoretical orientation or methodological choice, casing is unavoidable in conducting empirical research, because it belongs to the basics of any research design, and forbids an ethnographer to get the fullest data on a substantive area without well-defined purpose for sampling. According to Charles C. Ragin, "a case may be theoretical or empirical or both; it may be a relatively bounded object or a process; and it may be generic and universal or specific in some way."¹⁸ In

¹⁸ Charles C. Ragin, "Introduction: Cases of 'What is a case?'" in *What is a Case: Exploring the foundations of social inquiry*, ed. Charles C. Ragin & Howard S. Becker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

establishing a frame of reference, the construction and boundaries of cases are always theory-dependent: any qualitative research first tries to answer the question of “what is the study a case of?” Typically, one’s particular way of casing determines the breadth and width of a fieldworker’s theoretical sampling. The sampling process for this project has been guided by the Grounded Theory (GT) approach. GT, though treats the case as something generated in the field, samples data for theoretical relevance, with or without a preconceived research design.¹⁹

I have identified a substantive area by reading published and on-line information on this growing phenomenon. I started sampling by doing semi-structured in-depth interviews and oral history interviews to learn broadly about the new development of Presbyterianism in China. My preconceived casing takes the PCC as a case of globalization. However, after eight interviews, the most salient data from my preliminary sampling did not indicate transnational processes and networks as the driving force behind the PCC. Instead, the data pointed to cultural changes within these urban registered churches as well as broader social change in Chinese society. Therefore, I looked into the literature in that field. I started sampling on the periphery of the PCC, because at that point I did not have access to Western China Presbytery. Yet, gathering data from the periphery of a movement allowed me to see actions on the ground. Not only did I interview advocates of the PCC, but in some cases reluctant followers and outspoken critics. The data began to saturate after I had done over twenty interviews.

¹⁹ Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, 1999), 58.

Later during September and October 2017, I was able to conduct some itinerant fieldwork in congregations and conferences in the PCC network to situate and clarify the interview data in actual settings. Besides Chengdu in the west, my fieldwork took place in other locations including a northern city, an eastern city, and a southern city within China. I also did fieldwork in Hong Kong and the US, where I attended three conferences where Chinese Presbyterians gathered. Although geographical spread is not as essential to field theories as social diffusion, sampling interviewees and selecting field sites in light of the geographical spread of PCC helps map Presbyterianism as well as broader social change in urban China.

Literature Review

Philip Gorski and various contributors in a volume on Bourdieu have demonstrated that that studying social change from a Bourdieusian perspective is both possible and fruitful.²⁰ In fact, theorizing in both Bourdieusian field theory and strategic action fields (SAFs) theory take into account both the objective (groups, hierarchies, institutions) and subjective elements (norms, values, identity) in the genesis and development of a given field or several interconnected fields, especially on meso-level social orders.

Fligstein and McAdam define SAFs this way:

A strategic action field is a meso-level social order where actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules.

²⁰ Philip S. Gorski, ed., *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

In fact, there is great theoretical affinity between the Bourdieusian and SAFs field theories. However, in contrast to Bourdieusian field theory, SAFs theory takes into account collective actors as well as individual actors.²¹ SAFs also pay attention to how one particular field interact with larger political, social, and economic fields. In this way, SAFs look similar to Russian matryoshka dolls: “open up an SAF and it contains a number of other SAFs.”²² Problematizing the exclusively “challenger-incumbent model” of SAFs theory advanced by Fligstein and McAdam, Goldstone and Useem emphasize the difference between actors of various fields and the importance of norms and values, so that SAFs could include “purposive actors, organized groups, and their competition and multiple interactions under condition of hierarchy and overarching states.”²³ Therefore, in light of field theories in the Bourdieusian tradition and SAFs, perceiving the fledgling PCC as emerging field could bridge its institutional and social movement aspects, as well as the role of the state and other interconnected fields in its formation and development. Later analysis in this paper will apply several concepts from Gorski’s advance of Bourdieusian field theory and SAFs theory for analytical framing. The theoretical objective of this paper is to bridge the gap between institutional and social movement literatures through hybrid theorizing.

²¹ However, later in the paper, you can see Gorski’s advancement of field theory in the Bourdieusian tradition is not necessarily individualistic, but covers collective actors as well.

²² Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, “Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields,” *Sociological Theory* 29, no. 1 (March 1, 2011): 1-26, 3.

²³ Jack A. Goldstone and Bert Useem, “Putting Values and Institutions Back into the Theory of Strategic Action Fields,” *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 37–47, 46. However, Fligstein and McAdam have not failed to see the different dynamics between fields, as Goldstone and Useem have pointed out. Therefore, Goldstone and Useem’s contention against them is not entirely valid.

Sociodices and Mythologies in an Emerging Religious Field

Theorizing on the emergence of a new field, Philip Gorski calls attention to the articulation of a new discourse of “ultimate value.” According to Gorski, a discourse of ultimate value is “a discourse which asserts that some family or social practices is not only inherently and relatively valuable, but also ultimately more valuable than all others, so that it can potentially provide an ultima ratio for individual and collective life.”²⁴ He further categorizes such discourses into two basic forms: the sociodices and the mythologies. By sociodices, Gorski means “systematic and explicit theories about the general conditions of social order and the essential character of human flourishing, be it neoclassical economics, evangelical Christian theology or the Hindu caste system.”²⁵ Organizationally speaking, only WCP is a fully-fledged Presbytery, with a handful of particular churches formed according to strict Presbyterian polity.²⁶ All the other PCC churches are at the preparatory and provisional stage until fully establishing Presbyterian governance. However, the republican ideal embodied in the PCC church government is both controversial and attractive among urban unregistered churches across China.

²⁴ See Philip Gorski, “Maps, Mechanisms, and Methods” in *Bourdieu and Historical Analysis*, ed. Philip Gorski (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 334.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ According to Presbyterian polity, each congregation must have at least three elders to become a particular church, regardless of the number of congregants. The Presbyterian church government entails the multiplicity of elders on congregational, regional, national, and even international levels. Therefore, the church governance model adopted by PCC consists of sessions, presbyteries, and general assembly on congregational, regional, and national scales. With equal authority, ruling elders and teaching elders (pastors) divided their responsibilities on the congregational level, representing their church on the regional level in the presbytery. However, only teaching elders participate in the general assembly on the national level.

According to a 2011 interview, Wang Yi attributed the high publicity of Protestantism in China to the fact that its leaders are intellectuals who hold the “microphone” in the public sphere.²⁷ Elites and clearly articulated ideological discourses of “ultimate value” mark the emergence of a new field. In the words of Gorski, “a field exists if, and to the degree that, it has an autonomous elite and an autonomous logic.”²⁸

Presbyterianism epitomizes a republican ideal for PCC advocates. An authority structure based on plurality and hierarchy, according to my informants, would provide accountability so as to prevent strongman leadership and apostasy. Against the patriarchal and authoritarian leadership structure of traditional unregistered churches, the multiplicity of elders could be corrective to strongman leadership. On the other hand, a clearly defined authority structure based on demanding ordination processes offers a corrective to populism, represented by the loose congregational structure and lax church discipline of most urban unregistered churches. However, the new discourse of “ultimate value” does not remain on the ecclesial level. Despite the current minority status of Presbyterianism, some well-known PCC pastors believe it could potentially provide a model for the Chinese state and the broader society. PCC’s major critique against the state is its lack of rule of law, the source of injustice. The year before the formation of WCP, a Chengdu pastor interviewed by Johnson stated that: “For the party, laws were tools to rule the country, not a framework for guiding society or for conferring rights on

²⁷ See Yu Jie 余杰, 萬縷神恩眷此生 [*Abundant Grace into My Life*] (Taipei: Christian Arts Press, 2011).

²⁸ Gorski, “Maps, Mechanisms, and Methods,” 329.

citizens. This was one of the stumbling blocks for political reform in China: Some people were above the law. Laws and rights were not God given; they were created by the Communist Party. But here, in these Reformed churches, was an effort to create something based on higher loyalties.”²⁹ In this sense, republicanism and rule of law function as the sociodices in the PCC as an emerging field.

In terms of hierarchical and doxical relations, the figure below shows the shape of PCC as an emerging field with other interconnected fields, such as the Party-state and the mainstream unregistered churches in China:

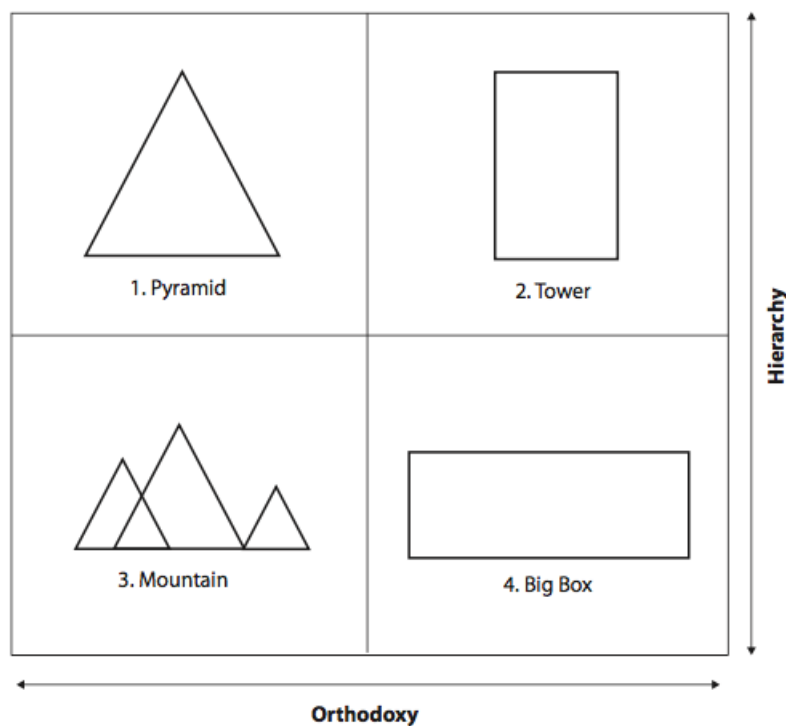


Figure 1. Field types³⁰

²⁹ See Johnson, *The Souls of China*, Kindle Locations 4894-4897.

³⁰ The figure is reproduced with the same title from Gorski, “Maps, Mechanisms, and Methods,” 333.

For example, in light of the two dimensions of variation yields, the Party-state would take a pyramid shape. Having high degrees of orthodoxy and hierarchy, it tries to pose its control over everything in China, including religion. The broader religious field of Chinese Protestantism would resemble the big box shape with low degrees of hierarchy and low degrees of orthodoxy (in term of doctrines, not moral authority). The PCC field would take the mountain shape, as it has lower degrees of hierarchy but higher degrees of orthodoxy. In this way, it demarcates itself from both the traditional unregistered churches and the broadly evangelical churches in urban China.

Admittedly, there is a fine line between the sociodices and the mythologies, especially when sociodices become slogans and go through dramatic rendition. As Gorski argues, sociodices and mythologies can be complementary and mixed. The mythologies are defined as “popular narratives of heroism and martyrdom that serve to inspire defense of the value.”³¹ Stories of heroism and martyrdom will be told later in exploring the interconnectedness of PCC field and the overarching state. For now, this section will focus on how republicanism is rendered as both sociodices and mythologies. During my fieldwork in Chengdu in October 2017, Covenant Drama Society of Early Rain Reformed Church was rehearsing a new drama titled “Crown.” This play is based on the political philosophy class taught by Wang Yi. “Crown” is introduced as such:

This drama explores the construction of human community based on Christian civilization. In an Expressionist mode and through a spiritual lens, this play interrogates monarchism, republicanism, and democracy as typologies of the eternal crown and kingdom.³²

³¹ Ibid., 335.

³² This line is literally translated from the introduction to the drama as written in the script.

In this play, various characters aspire to live in a city-state called the Fairy Mountain Kingdom. It is a utopia where everyone, elites and masses, live under law and contract; it is a place where freedom and love flows. It is said that the person who finds the crown will become the king. The king must be an able person who rules by law drafted by a wise person and whose reign is also checked by a good person. Eventually, Zhang (one of the eight characters) finds the crown and is made the king by the people. However, without much regard for the law and welfare of the people, Zhang turns a tyrant and does whatever pleases himself. Increasingly, the masses feel dissatisfied with his rule and want to overthrow him. When confrontation happens, the king wants to execute the rebellious, and the people want to execute the king and his advisors. In the end, the people win. However, this is just another vicious cycle where either the tyrants or the people get to win and kill. The moral is that the perfect rule is neither monarchy nor populism, but republicanism based on contract and representation, checked by a watchman from God. This kind of dramatic rendition of republicanism is crystal clear from the following lines articulated by various characters in the play:

- “The perfect kingdom is ruled by a plurality of leaders, not by a tyrant or the people.”
- “Who gets this crown will rule this city state on behalf of God.”
- “In Fairy Mountain Kingdom, we are free; in Fairy Mountain Kingdom, we also live by contracts.”
- “Check and balance is two directional, bonding both the people and the government.”
- “There is constitution between the king and the people. The king keeps the order, but the key is who should be the king?”

- “A king must be elected and recognized by the people and be accountable to someone.”

Here are some revealing lines after things go south between the king and the people:

- “We want to live our own life. We will make the laws invalid.”
- “You want republicanism, but now you become the tyrant.”
- “This is the power of the people, a mob spoiled by democracy.”
- “The crown and the God who gives the crown is trampled underfoot. People are made God.”
- “When stopping beholding the face of God, everyone will become a tyrant.”

The play ends this way:

Sometimes we are killed by monarchs, and sometimes we are killed by people, but watchmen will always rise. And then a new generation of kings and people will kill each other. Yet the nations remain till now. Generations of watchmen go to the other side, to the depth of the Fairy Mountain Kingdom.

According to this dramatic rendition, not only is republicanism presented as a perfect political system based on rule of law and plurality of rulers, it also needs to be carried out with a watchman who makes the law and represents God. One would wonder who can be the watchman other than a wise pastor or the church personified. At least, this drama indicates the popular reception of Wang Yi’s sociodices.

Sloganezed saying constitutes another form of mythologies in the emerging field of PCC. In the in-depth interview with Wang Yi of October 25th, 2017, he seems to have a nuanced understanding of church history, especially the different forms of church government. For example, he acknowledges that episcopal church government has been

and is still the dominant form of church government in global Christianity. However, there is a great difference between his nuanced understanding of Presbyterianism and what he communicates to the public. Echoing Wang Yi's articulation of Presbyterianism, many of my informants simplistically equate episcopalianism with dictatorship, congregationalism with populism, and Presbyterianism with republicanism. Wang Yi also discloses in the interview that the younger generation of reformed urban churches in big cities prefer reformed Baptist polity, as they are more influenced by democratic ideas. However, church leaders of his generation or those slightly older favor Presbyterianism because it has confessions, hierarchy, a system of ordination, and constitution. Transitioning to Presbyterianism would be easier for those churches already having authoritarian structures, but directly switching to congregational rule would be difficult.

With Wang Yi's permission, I obtained the manuscript of a book that he hopes to publish later in Hong Kong with the possible title "*Gospel Revolution: Reflections on Reformation.*" This book consists of excerpts from his sermons and on-line articles, ranging in length from 20 words to 150 words. All these excerpts are numbered and reflect his thinking in recent years, which are hardly coherent at all times. Without complex and nuanced arguments, whether a particular saying sounds more like a sociodice or mythology becomes hard to discern. Here are some snapshots of these slogan-like provocative sayings as it relates to church government:

The Spirit of Reformation does not mean that only Presbyterianism is the lawful form of church government, but that all church governance must reflect the kingship of Christ... If "solus Christus" means that the church is a monarchy, then 'sola scriptura' means the church is ruled by law... This means that the church must be governed by constitutionalism... It all boils down to this: a covenant theology entails a covenant governance... In a word, the secret of Presbyterianism

is not congressional governance, but a mixed governance. (excerpts 304, 306, 309)

Wang Yi also draws on his understanding of western political philosophy to articulate his ideal for Presbyterianism, which seems to be a mixed form of elitism and populism.

Surprisingly, Christianity has basically adopted the political governance models from ancient Greece. Thomas Aquinas is a total Aristotelian when he says that “the best governing model is a mix of monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and tyranny.” During the Reformation, John Calvin adopts this idea entirely. He unequivocally says that “the best governance model is a mixed model.” The continuity of this type of governance, from ancient Greece to the universal church, becomes the spirit of Presbyterianism.’ (excerpt 312)

In fact, the secret of the Presbyterianism is republicanism. Republicanism is a mixed governance, not simply in congressional form.” (excerpt 314)

After the split of Early Rain that transpired in 2017, Wang Yi’s stance on Presbyterianism clearly seems to have departed from his original understanding, at least from the PCA ideal of equal authority shared by all elders. Led by Pastor Watson, the associate pastor of Early Rain who openly problematizes Wang Yi’s preaching and ministry practices, one third of the members who are mostly local and joined Early during its formative stage, have become reluctant to follow Wang Yi’s leadership. Since then, Wang Yi’s public discourse shifted in order to emphasize the monarch-like status of the senior pastor, which is hardly consistent with his earlier articulation.³³ Since the split, he has tried to work out a system in which a church can only have assistant pastors who do not belong to the session, the board of elders on the congregational level.

³³ Wang Zhiyong, a PCA pastor based in Virginia, has tried to debate with Wang Yi on his departure from the Presbyterian ideal of equal authority among elders, and help work out the relationship between Wang Yi and his associate pastor, Pastor Watson.

The spirit of the Presbyterian church is constitutional monarchism, or a constitutional monarchy with a congress. Therefore, the senior pastor represents some form of episcopal governance... The autonomy of the clergy means that a monarch cannot rise from election... the plurality of elders means that the elders are collective monarchy, with the senior pastor being the first among equals... However, the fact that a pastor must be called by a congregation also reflects electoral democracy. (excerpt 318)

The sociodices articulated by Wang Yi goes beyond church governance. Before Wang Yi's conversion, he was a classical liberal, which means that he is an admirer of free market, the rule of law, and human rights. Since his conversion, he increasingly turned to a type of Christian communitarianism and political conservatism in contrast to western individualism and the conservative politics of American evangelicals. He even borrowed the culture war narrative but disentangled it from evangelical politics.

- The confluence of Christianity and constitutionalism has made American Christianity the minimal form of Christendom, i.e. part of the national religion or civil religion. From James Madison to Donald Trump, American Christianity has become adherent of a national religion rather than the true heir of the Reformation. (excerpt 32)
- How have we been softening our critique of modernity after the Enlightenment? Should we be responsible for the mess of the world today? What I mean is while conservative Christians oppose homosexuality, abortion, public education, pornography, and decline of mores, taxation increase, and the expansion of the government, etc., should we not regard the Protestant spirit as essentially the same with the spirit of modernity? Should those who started the Reformation be responsible for all the mess before God's judgment seat? ... Should Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon be responsible for the appearance of Karl Marx and Adolf Hitler? (excerpts 60 and 61)
- One time, I was on a flight in the US. Accidentally, my elbow touched the passenger sitting beside me, and the passenger felt greatly offended as if he suffered a massacre. For someone from China who is used to living in a crowded world, I was shocked by his reaction. This is not cultural shock, or simply the culture difference between the West and the East. In fact, it is the cultural difference between the classical Christian culture and the modern consumerist culture. (excerpt 173)

Again, Wang Yi's articulation of sociodices and mythologies is hardly coherent, because he said he would support Trump:

- What I mean is this: Donald Trump is not a conservative in the sense of the old gospel, but a conservative in the sense of American civil religion. However, between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, if I were an American citizen, I would definitely vote for Trump...God is doing a great thing, that is to separate the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Gospel of America. (excerpt 192)

However, his discourses against the nation-state are always consistent. That is, the state has neither legal nor moral authority over the church.

- The political nature of the church means that the visible church represents the invisible kingdom of God. In that sense, the church is the only true and lawful government on earth...since the Middle Ages, the church has helped form the constitutional structure of society, meaning the swordless church can check on the government who hold the sword according to the constitution. (excerpt 31)
- Without exaggeration, the nation-state is only the adopted son of the Reformation...This gospel revolution (the Reformation) has birthed 'the sovereign nation' in Europe, which is historically unprecedented...Just as Martin Luther is regarded as the father of Germany, Jan Hus as the father of Czech, John Knox as the father of Scotland, John Calvin, can be reckoned as the father of United States in a remote sense. (excerpts 33 and 34)
- Now five centuries after the Reformation, the landscape of the world has changed: nations have been usurping the role of the church...the constitutionalism of the modern state has elevated the government with the sword above the church without a sword, subjugating the church under its constitution. (excerpts 35 and 36)

Concerning the size of a field, Gorski argues that "the absolute and relative size of a field could be measured in terms of the absolute and relative number of people possessing some familiarity with (as opposed to complete mastery of) these concepts."³⁴ However, from my fieldwork and interviews, I have learned that PCC advocates are driving their

³⁴ Gorski, "Maps, Mechanisms, and Methods," 336.

followers for mastery of Presbyterian doctrine and polity, not just familiarity. For example, prospective PCC pastors organize study groups to learn about church constitutions and by-laws of the PCC. They also hold classes to inculcate their members about Presbyterian church government. Chinese Presbyterians often echo what Wang Yi says, “Presbyterianism in China has documents but no models.” However, for two years in a row, Western China Presbytery in Chengdu has hosted annual training camps for prospective PCC elders, inviting PCA and OPC elders from America to train Chinese Presbyterians on Presbyterian governance. Still, polity documents are extremely constitutive for the formation of the PCC. Moreover, in contrast to mainstream Chinese Protestantism, PCC churches are highly confessional, which they believe demarcates them from broader evangelicalism. Interestingly, confessional statements, while waning in importance in Presbyterian churches in many parts of the world, are very important in the PCC. In a typical PCA church, a person may only have to study reformed catechism until he prepares to be a deacon. But in PCC churches, systematic learning of catechism and various confessional documents has become a general requirement for average church members. When I told Pastor Jiang (pseudonym), the chairman of the PCC examination committee for ordination, that Early Rain uses the Westminster Catechism both in their liturgy and Sunday School, and teaches the Canons of Dort during a mid-week Bible study, even he feels it might be too much that three things are going on at the same time. What I observed in Early Rain Reformed Church is typical not only of other churches in Western China Presbytery, but also in PCC churches across China. In a northern PCC provisional presbytery and a southern preparatory presbytery that I sampled, studying confessions and

catechism has become a regular part of their church life. Even in an eastern provisional presbytery which models itself more after the PCA, studying Westminster catechism has become a requirement for all new members.

Western China Covenant Theological Seminary (WCCTS) also facilitates the emergence of PCC in addition to the discursive scope of sociodices and mythologies and the constitutive agency of polity documents and confessional statements. WCCTS now ranks among the four most well-known unauthorized Reformed seminaries in China, increasingly drawing theological educators of reformed background.³⁵ Although this seminary is independent, its symbiotic relationship with Early Rain Reformed Church and Western Reformed Presbytery has both contributed to its enrollment and reduced interference from the government. Increasingly, the publicity of this seminary has been drawing people of reformed leaning to Presbyterianism. As I learned from the dean of the seminary, some students decided to get additional training at WCCTS, an unauthorized and unaccredited seminary, after having graduated from seminaries in Hong Kong or Southeast Asian countries. This is because they believe WCCTS offers a contextualized reformed education in China. An older couple I met on one of the conferences in Hong Kong lead a church in a northern province. They have their son enrolled in Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia while putting their daughter and son-in-law at WCCTS. They have not chosen seminaries for their children simply because of reformed

³⁵ Like the urban unregistered churches, the unauthorized seminaries are off the grid, operating outside the legal boundaries of Chinese laws regulating religions. All faculty at Western Reformed Theological Seminary must consent to the Westminster Standard or the Three Forms of Unity (Dutch Reformed) as their confessional statement.

faith, but because of the publicity of these seminaries. According to a critical observer of the PCC, it is no surprise the Presbyterianism has been growing so fast in China: they have publications and seminaries.

In conclusion, the reformed tradition offers rich resources for Chinese Presbyterians to draw from. It not only provides discourses of ultimate value and a church governance model, but other resources for Chinese Protestantism on its way to become a public religion.

The Overarching State

As indicated in the figure on page 13, the Party-state, like a pyramid shaped field, always tries to impose its orthodoxy and hierarchy on many non-state fields. However, the process can also work in the opposite direction when actors in an emerging field attempt to sabotage the agenda set by various state actors.³⁶ In both Wang Yi's former life as an activist and his current career as an urban intellectual pastor, the overarching state looms large. As he was converting to Christianity during 2004-2005, Wang Yi served as the defendant lawyer for some unregistered churches charged with conducting illegal religious activities. During the investigation on behalf of these house churches, he felt appalled by the secretive status and problematic authority structure of these churches. In the process of representing these churches, he came across China Ministries International, the organizational legacy of Charles Chao's son, Jonathan Chao (1938–

³⁶ As Fligstein and McAdam explains, the overarching state is represented by various state actors, instead of one abstract entity named the state. See Neil Fligstein and Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 174.

2004). It was then that he came to know Jonathan Chao's writing on the religious policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Jonathan Chao's "three-fold vision," namely, "the evangelization of China, the kingdomization of the church, the Christianization of culture." Inspired by the "three-fold vision," Wang Yi has taken it as his life goal to engage the state on behalf of house churches and to pursue a public vision for Chinese Protestantism since his baptism in 2005. In a highly heroic public prayer circulated on his social media recently as the state tightens its control on him, his public vision for the church has only augmented, to the extent that as if he is courting persecution:

Lord, entrust the future Chinese society to your church; otherwise, take me home to be with you.

Lord, please send revival to your church in China; otherwise, may my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth.

Lord, raise up a generation of servants faithful to your kingdom and reign, so that we can face a new wave of persecution; otherwise, let their congregations be scattered and let them lose their high positions in their congregations.

Lord, send countless missionaries, church planters, and evangelists; let them preach the Word in cities and towns, until the gospel is heard in every prison and detention center in China; otherwise, take away our real estate, our academic degrees, and our middle-class lifestyle, lest these are what we only have when we meet you."

In an in-depth interview with Wang Yi on October 25th, 2017, he says that "the development of Early Rain all these years could not have happened if were not for external pressure from the government. Every incident of government interference has advanced the church's development." The first incident of government interference dates back to October 2006, after which they had to move their worship place because police visited and pressured the landlord. Later in May 2008, police interrupted a retreat

meeting of Early Rain in a resort place. When asked who were in charge of this church, Wang Yi and two others stepped forward. It was after that incident that Early Rain believers started to say that “God has ordained these three leaders of Early Rain before the police.”

Another notable event after Wang Yi’s conversion was his visit to White House on May 8th, 2006 to meet with President Bush, along with some Chinese Christian human rights activists and political dissidents.³⁷ Since that meeting, Wang Yi has publically shifted his field from secular human rights movement to activism for Chinese house churches. In a sense, Wang Yi’s shift in fields indicates the permeability of two proximate fields: the field of political activism and the religious fields of China.³⁸ The controversies surrounding the White House meeting among the Chinese pro-democracy activists appeared more noteworthy than the meeting itself, for it is said that Wang Yi, and his fellow Christian human rights activists Yu Jie and Bob Fu intentionally excluded a non-Christian pro-democracy activist, Guo Feixiong from joining this meeting. The contentions centered on whether President Bush just wanted to meet with Chinese house church Christians like Wang Yi and Yu Jie to discuss religious freedom in China, or Wang and Yu intentionally excluded Fan to make it such a meeting. Despite the

³⁷ A first-person account of this meeting can be found here. See Baiguang Li, “Meeting President Bush at the White House,” ChinaAid, May 15, 2006. Accessed November 21, 2017, http://www.chinaaid.net/2006/05/blog-post_15.html.

³⁸ Gorski discusses two basic forms of boundary change between fields in terms of location and permeability. This shift of boundary seems one-directional in Wang Yi’s case, as he has shifted from a priestly intellectual and political activist to an urban intellectual pastor and church-based activists. See Gorski, “Maps, Mechanisms, and Methods,” 331-332.

unresolved confusion surrounding this controversy, one thing was clear: Wang Yi no longer wanted to be associated with the pro-democracy activists in general; instead, he rejected the unequal yoke between the secular human rights movement and the Christian mission and cultural mandate. In his own words: “Today, Christians’ efforts to gain religious freedom are akin to the conservative wing of human rights activism in China (similar to the Civil Rights Movement in the US), and it should not be part of the resistance movement.”³⁹

Since Wang Yi’s return from the White House visit, the Chinese Party-State increasingly imposed pressure on him. The university where he used to be a lecturer has suspended his job, paying him only 200 RMB⁴⁰ per month. With his shrinking space among public intellectuals and secular human rights activists, this has almost left him no choice but to become a house church pastor. In 2008, Wang Yi committed himself to work in his church full time. He has also strengthened his tie with the transnational Chinese Christian network. On December 8th, 2008, hundreds of Christian leaders in the Chinese-speaking world, including Wang Yi and many theologically reformed pastors, drafted and signed the San Francisco Consensus.⁴¹ Other than a basic doctrinal statement, the bulk of this document contained their observation of the rapid transformation taking place in mainland China and of the role of Chinese churches in this transformation. Very

³⁹ The accusation, defense, and clarification of those involved in this controversy can be found here. See Jacky Peng, “Yu Jie, Wang Yi, and the White House Incident,” May 23, 2006. Accessed December 13, 2016, <http://www.jackypeng.com/blog/2006/05/yu-wang-white-house-incident/>.

⁴⁰ According to the 2008 exchange rate, 200 RMB was the rough equivalence of \$ 30.

⁴¹ Early Rain blog, “The San Francisco Consensus,” December 17 2018. Accessed December 13, 2016 <http://earlyrain.bokee.com/6845511.html>

few of these Christian leaders are based in mainland China to implement this kind of vision on the ground. Without Wang Yi's church based activism, such a public vision for the Chinese church would still remain on the discourse level.

However, since his conversion and call to ministry, Wang Yi's engagement with the Party-state is not confined to religious matters, though his activism has become mainly church-based. For example, each year on June 4th, he still commemorates the 1989 Tiananmen Square pro-democracy demonstration and massacre, which invariably led the police to detain him for a couple of days. In addition, every year on June 1st, the International Children's Day, he would mobilize his church to do an anti-abortion campaign on the streets in Chengdu, which would be publicized on-line to rally support from other like-minded Christians or churches in China. Early Rain also has a strong social justice orientation, as it intentionally draws many prisoners of conscience into its fold. Many people became prisoners of conscience because they petitioned to upper level government for the injustice they suffered. In the process of seeking justice by petitioning, they suffered further abuse and imprisonment. During a Sunday service that I attended at Early Rain in October 2017, I saw an old man with a hat that had the following words, "Done with Chinese Communist Party." Although the percentage of Christians is not high in Chengdu, Early Rain has gained high publicity not only among Protestants in China but also among Chengdu residents.

The growing PCC represents a milestone in the public turn of urban unregistered churches. This did not happen overnight. During 2009-10, urban house churches in Beijing, Chengdu, Guangzhou, and Shanghai all held outdoor worship services to protest

against the government's action to restrict their use of leased or purchased worship space. Early Rain in Chengdu was the only exception that successfully upheld their "right" to worship as a single large congregation in a more public space. Carsten Vala explains the varying outcomes in terms of the internal characteristics of church leadership and organization.⁴² This is true to certain extent, as other Chengdu PCC pastors acknowledged that only Early Rain has the resources to openly engage with the government and push the limit. Early Rain has many lawyers and former political activists in the congregation.

Inspired by the earlier success of Early Rain, Wang Yi continued to advocate for the vision of house churches going public so that the evangelization could "go from retail to wholesale." The Chengdu Presbytery's vision for a public faith does not stop at meeting in a more public space. They want to further raise publicity through social media. The Western China Presbytery benefitted greatly from their rising publicity, doubling and even tripling their membership in the past three years. Based on their initial success, they later created other institutions off the grid. However, their initial success seems hard to sustain as the government tightens its control. Emphasizing the role of the overarching state in the emergence the PCC field does not necessarily suggest a domination-resistance model in church-state relations on a macro-level. In a 2011

⁴² See Carsten T. Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God above Party?* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 157. However, Vala did acknowledge explanations based on local variation in an author-meet-critics session on this book at the 2017 Society for Scientific Study of Religion annual meeting. He explained that the outcomes of such protests would be different depending whether such an event happened in Shanghai or Beijing; in Beijing, it is more likely to escalate to an international spectacle because of the number of foreign reporters in Beijing.

interview, Wang Yi shared his understanding of church-state relationship in terms of local dynamics:

On the other hand, although religious persecution has not ended, it has irreversibly come to its end. In the past 10 years, the church has changed considerably, so have law enforcement. In my view, many official and police have taken on a positive and even sympathetic view towards the church. It has become very rare for them to conceive the church as their enemies and the gospel as a threat to their rule. Institutionally, they will still resist the gospel out of their interest as incumbents of the system. But the anti-church and anti-Christianity ideology has collapsed inside the government.⁴³



Photo 1, Sunday service at Early Rain ⁴⁴

⁴³ See Yu Jie, *Abundant Grace into My Life*.

⁴⁴ Photo 1, taken on October 22nd, 2017, shows the congregation who follow Wang Yi after the split of Early Rain. Over 500 people attend the Sunday service. They have also bought and rented several other units in the same office building for their grade school, seminary, and college. The various locations is clearly indicated in the directory in the lobby, with nothing to hide.

Since 2014, the PCC's engagement of state actors centers on the Chinafication⁴⁵ of Christianity. In August 2015, in the same style of Martin Luther's 95 Theses, Wang Yi penned the 95 Theses for Chinese Reformed Church, signed by all the other six elders of Early Rain and circulated on-line.⁴⁶ In broad strokes, this document analyzes church-state relationship in China, rejects the Chinafication of Christianity, and criticizes the compromise of the state-registered churches. Wang Yi and his followers frame their high profile public engagement with the state in terms of spiritual warfare, a fight with the Leviathan. Wang Yi claims that by taking the lead to push the limits, Early Rain might help the PCC and unregistered churches across China gain more public space. However, as Wang's engagement with the state becomes increasingly heated, it has alienated an increasing number of Early Rain members who wanted to stand back from such highly politicized public gestures. In fact, a significant reason for the split of Early Rain in 2017 was that four out of the seven elders (including the associate pastor) and one third of the church members did not want to go in the overly politicized direction that Wang Yi is leading Early Rain. They believed Wang Yi has departed from what a proper church should be involved with. Interestingly, those who followed Wang Yi after the split were mostly religious and educational migrants from other parts of China, most in the 20-30s age range. Those who chose not to follow Wang Yi belonged to an older generation in the 40-50s age range who are more middle class and local. Interview with another

⁴⁵ Alexander Chow, a public theologian on Chinese Christianity, uses Chinafication instead of Sinification to emphasize the political connotation of CCP's religious policy. From his handouts and presentation on Nov.18 at 2017 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting.

⁴⁶ Early Rain Reformed Church, "The 95 Theses of China's House Churches," October 5th 2016. See <https://www.cclife.org/View/Article/4248>, last accessed December 13, 2016.

Chengdu pastor also revealed that some urban unregistered churches in Chengdu did not want to be associated with WCP so as not to get undue attention from the government.

Nothing seems to deter Wang Yi from pursuing his public vision for China's Reformed church. He has adopted the "three-fold vision" as the vision of his church. Up to 2017, China Ministries International has hosted four "three-fold vision" annual conferences in Hong Kong. Although apolitical in character, the "three-fold vision" has alarmed Chinese government which has been trying to sabotage the annual conferences held in Hong Kong and even coopted the Hong Kong branch of China Ministries International. In 2015, the Chinese government has hacked the registration system of the conference and therefore, several times more people showed up at the conference than the organizer could possibly accommodate. In 2017, the government has tried to block conference speakers and to intimidate Christians from attending this conference. One responder I interviewed in the eastern city said the police have explicitly told him not to go to the "three-fold" vision conference. My first scheduled interview with Wang Yi in September didn't materialize because he was detained at Chengdu airport so that he and his associates could not attend the "three-fold vision" conference in Hong Kong. This event, as any of his confrontation with state actors, was highly publicized in social media. The general assumption for this incident was that he just spoke against the new religious regulation, and the government was extremely wary of the "three-fold vision."

In early September 2017, in his typical style of denouncement, Wang Yi spoke against the newly passed religious regulation,⁴⁷ declaring it constitutionally illegal and politically stupid. One stipulation of this new religious regulation is that Chinese citizens cannot engage in religious activities overseas. Soon Wang Yi became a test case before this law went into effect. In September, October, and November of 2017, Wang Yi was held three times at airports so that he could not speak at Christian conferences overseas. For the first two times, he was held at Chengdu Airport. In the most recent incident, he was allowed to travel from Chengdu to Xiamen, but was held at Xiamen Airport when he was trying to travel to Indonesia in order to speak at a conference hosted by Stephen Tong. Similar instances also happened to other PCC pastors when they tried to go to Hong Kong or Indonesia to speak at international Christian conferences. Even some members of Early Rain either were placed under house arrest before attempting to go to Christian conferences overseas. Some suffered more severe security checks as they returned from such conferences. It is clear that the state actors have tried to impose a containment strategy on the PCC so that it would not go transnational.

However, neither Wang Yi himself nor his close associates perceive their engagement with the state as driven by any political agenda, though it is expressed in political terms. One of Wang Yi's close associates wrote the following in a recent on-line article concerning the confrontation of Wang Yi with the state:

Pastor Wang Yi's recent actions with the state are fundamentally ecclesiastical, not political. They are political articulations derived from his ecclesiology. Behind all these articulations, there is a dynamic, dialectic, and relatively holistic

⁴⁷ Signed by the Prime Minister, this new religious regulation has been publicized on September 3rd 2017 and is going to effect by February 1st 2018

thinking centered on ecclesiology, covering topics such as the kingdom of heaven and the church, the universal invisible church and the visible church, the church and clergy, the church and believers, the church and pastoral care, the church and church buildings, etc.

If Wang Yi's confrontations with the state is not based on any political agenda, what are the purpose of all that struggle? His answer is as a form of witness.

Alternatively, it could be argued that his activism is to strive for moral authority. This is another excerpt from his "Reflections on the Reformation:"

The spirit of the Reformation means that in modern culture, the church can only become the mainstream by being the marginal, become political by being apolitical. The gospel must be present, which makes us different from all fundamentalists. The reason to be present is not for politics but for witness; not to change the mainstream society, nor be changed by it. (excerpt 190)

Institutional Entrepreneurs and Isomorphism

It is both reasonable and fruitful to conceptualize the PCC as an emerging field instead of fully fledged institution (denomination in this case) or social movement.

Fligstein and McAdam have been working hard to bring the concept of change to institutional theory. However, their conception of Bourdieusian field theory as "a theory of social stability not change" is misconstrued in light of Gorski's advancing of Bourdieusian field theory.⁴⁸ Using concepts such as institutional entrepreneurs and isomorphism, this section tries to understand the institutional aspect of the PCC.

Traditional institutional theory is helpful to the extent that it helps to explain how conformity happens. For instance, not all PCC pastors are thoughtful and deliberate in

⁴⁸ Fligstein and McAdam, "Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields," 20.

their adoption of Presbyterianism. Most equate institutionalization with denomination, and adopt a denomination out of their felt need for a model of church governance. Even the pastor of the third church that joined the WCP felt attracted to Presbyterianism before all the leaders embraced reformed theology wholesale, because they were struggling with some issues with leadership and church governance. This is a classic case of memetic isomorphism resulting from standard responses to uncertainty.⁴⁹ As one of my key responders said, adopting institutionalization and a denomination is the way educated urban pastors solve the problem of church governance. Based on the neo-institutional approach to organizational field, Fligstein and McAdam propose an institutional theory with a theory of change: power and agency work at the moment when institutional entrepreneurs come up with innovative ideas and manage to enlist others to join them.⁵⁰

The concept of institutional entrepreneur provides a useful analytical tool to see how institutional change happened in the development of Presbyterianism. Ian Johnson identifies Wang Yi, Zha, and Peng as the triumvirate of Chengdu unregistered church pastors.⁵¹ Johnson especially highlights the power of Wang Yi's personality to draw crowds to Early Rain. However, charisma alone cannot explain the role of PCC advocates represented by Wang Yi in the emergent field of PCC. Nor is it helpful to characterize urban pastors like the Chengdu triumvirate as "Confucian literati who no longer hold

⁴⁹ Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 2 (1983): 147–60, 151.

⁵⁰ Fligstein and McAdam, "Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields," 21.

⁵¹ See Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China*.

positions in government but who hold positions as scholar-pastors.”⁵² Pastor Zha’s explanation about the development of Presbyterianism in Chengdu based on its rational appeal is perhaps only partially revealing:

This is how I look at this: sociologically speaking, Wang Yi, Peng and including myself, we are all intellectuals. Intellectuals like rationality. Wang Yi’s preference for Reformed Presbyterianism has something to do with his legal training. For him, Presbyterianism could be a rational expression of power relations in society. As for Peng, it has to do with his previous experience in publishing. He always had to deal with contracts and agreement to publish books. This resembles the covenant theology underneath Presbyterianism. For me, I think Chinese culture lacks such rationality, which I believe Presbyterianism can provide.

Rationality cannot adequately explain the rapid development of Presbyterianism in Chengdu either. My fieldwork in Chengdu and interviews with the Chengdu triumvirate reveals some organizational dynamics behind the rise of the PCC: the role of institutional entrepreneurs is indispensable. For example, Zha claimed that he was the first one to bring back the polity documents and was very early in drafting a church constitution. Yet for a long time, his blueprint remains on paper. When he finally tried to implement his blueprint, he found that half of his church, including some of his associates, refused to accept it on his terms. Eventually, it ended up in a split with half of his congregation gone. In fact, his church was the smallest (less than 50) and the last to join WCP. On the other hand, in an entrepreneur style, Wang Yi took decisive actions to organize Early Rain into a standalone Presbyterian church, and then persuaded three other church to form the WCP. From the beginning, Wang Yi emerged as an action-

⁵² This is based on the same CS CAG conversation referenced earlier.

oriented entrepreneur as well as a self-reflexive actor. In an in-depth interview with Wang Yi, he shared his reasoning for favoring Presbyterianism.

Chinese churches overseas would not think in terms of a model for church governance, because they have already assimilated into American culture, which is more established. In other words, they are consumers of American (organizational) culture. But we don't have anything to consume from Chinese culture. It is corrupted to the core and has no sound paradigm to offer. They only have negative examples. Traditional Chinese house church has not yet come up with a good governing model either in their process of organizational change. At this point, Presbyterianism attracts everybody's attention, whether they decide to follow it or not.

An interview with a transnational Presbyterian in Chengdu echoes similar reasoning:

In America, Chinese Christians know how they should manage their church, because they know from their education and professional life how an organization is supposed to work. Even those who hold reformed theology do not necessarily seek Presbyterian church government. But in China, the case is entirely different. Unable to find such social resources, Christians in China have to look into the Bible and church history for resources.

Speaking of institutional change, some PCC pastors even liken their role to Chiang Ching-Kuo, the authoritarian leader who paved the way for political liberalization in Taiwan. In other words, PCC advocates conceive their role as agents of change in the institutional transformation of urban unregistered churches. However, the recent split of Early Rain reveals the republican fragility of Presbyterianism. Wang Yi, the architect of PCC, often asserts his authority as the senior pastor and tries to push his agenda through his charisma and personal influence, overstepping in many cases the Robert's Rules of Order, the standard Presbyterian procedural protocol for conducting business meetings. Despite the vote of four against three to prevent split as a way to manage the conflict

between Wang Yi and his associate pastor Watson, Wang Yi still decides to go his own way.

My interviews and field observation in Chengdu attest to the entrepreneur logic at work in the daily operation of some WCP churches. At a co-worker meeting I observed at Early Rain on October 24th, 2017, I was expecting to see the elders and deacons of Early Rain. Instead, I saw Wang Yi and his capable team of seminarians and active lay leaders who take orders readily from him. Wang Yi was not only a winsome speaker, but also a capable executive who gave very specific directives on what to do. For example, to deal with some malfunction with audio equipment on Sunday, Wang Yi made a rule that the person in charge of audio should come in 15 minutes early before the prayer meeting to check the equipment because there was no break between the Sunday morning prayer meeting and the worship service. To get ready for a Reformation 500 special service, Wang Yi told the unofficial staff to prepare wine instead of grape juice for Communion. To avoid potential problem of drinking and driving, he gave very specific directives about how to make announcement so as to inform everyone about not driving to church. Whenever he has the floor, he would ask people how they have applied his Sunday sermon. Pastor Peng, pastor of the second church that joined WCP, also admitted that they had to apply this kind of executive model in the daily operation of his church to move things fast. Although this kind of entrepreneur logic is common in American evangelical churches and the Chinese business world, it is definitely new for China's urban churches where most people work on a voluntary basis and do not drive for

efficiency as such. Therefore, it is possible to conceive this as another form of isomorphism at work in the development of the PCC.

Institutionally, Presbyterianism has to adapt to China's varying urban condition. In the words of one responder, "instead of making [blank] city another Geneva, 'Geneva' is made into [blank] city." For instance, a city with more educated middle-class professionals in a more globalized condition generally fares better with Presbyterianism. One of the bottleneck issues for many PCC churches is the lack of lay elders. The eastern provisional Presbytery, however, is an exception. Because of its high level of professionalization, this eastern city is not short of bi-vocational ruling elders. They also tend to bring elements they directly learn from Presbyterian churches in the US, rather than from those in Chengdu. Pastors in this location tend to have higher levels of English proficiency and many receive their theological training from the US. One key informant even said that this eastern city will eventually overtake Chengdu in the leadership of the PCC. On the other hand, one informant from a declining northern industrial city complained that because many of their church members work for state-owned companies and public universities, they are either bound to their work-units or deeply influenced by atomistic individualism, falling short of his ideal for a Presbyterian faith community.

Incumbents and Challengers

Goldstone and Useem problematizes Fligstein and McAdam's SAFs model for undertheorizing institutions and resembling too much "the challenger-incumbent model

of social movements writ large.”⁵³ However, as mentioned earlier in this paper, this criticism is not entirely fair, especially in light of Fligstein and McAdam’s contribution to institutional theory. This section of the paper, drawing insights from the “incumbent-challenger” model based on social movement literature, will focus on two proximate fields of the PCC: the religious field of Chinese Protestantism and the field of alternative education. However, the argument here is that the goal of contention for these challengers is not to gain any practical advantage or privileged position but moral authority.

When several PCC informants say that the Chinese house church is the largest non-government social organization in China, one has to be critical both empirically and conceptually. However, overall Chinese Protestantism has indeed constituted a large religious field. China’s Reformed churches, represented by the development of the PCC, have been contending for moral authority in this vast field. Bruce Baugus, a china observers, calls the new development of reformed faith in China “a second wave of house church development.” In the same article that cites Baugus, Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra characterizes it as “a newborn colt attempting that first walk—eager, stumbling, up and down and up again. And hopefully, growing stronger and more stable with time.”⁵⁴ As Wang Yi often says, “Presbyterianism may remain a minority in China, but it will function as an important minority.” He remains hopeful for “the indigenous Reformed

⁵³ Goldstone and Useem, “Putting Values and Institutions Back into the Theory of Strategic Action Fields,” 37.

⁵⁴ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Young, Restless, and Reformed in China,” *The Gospel Coalition*, March 27, 2017, accessed November 7th, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/young-restless-and-reformed-in-china/>

Church” in his “Reflections on Reformation,” as he contends for moral authority against traditional house churches, charismatic churches, and the “militant Reformed” churches:

- The indigenous Reformed Church in China has, in the past twenty years, undergone what the Reformed Church in North America has gone through in one hundred years. (excerpt 81)
- There is an anti-Reformation movement both in the fundamentalist traditional house churches and in the newly arising ‘militant Reformed’ churches. Too many people are willing to die for a list of non-essentials, but not for the gospel itself. (excerpt 85)
- The Reformation teaches us that the true mark of the Holy Spirit’s presence is not a heated discussion of the Holy Spirit, but more discussion on Christ. (excerpt 24)

However, in the effort of PCC advocates to contend for moral authority, they do not want to stand outside in the succession of house church tradition. They pitch themselves as the second generation of reformers in the house church movement.

In certain sense, the first generation of China’s house churches are like Martin Luther in the collective sense... Today, Reformed Theology has spread across China, enabling the church to think through doctrine, ecclesiology, and governance. This seems to suggest that with the rediscovery of the gospel, there arises a generation of reformers like John Calvin. (excerpt 294)

However, their efforts to claim heritage from the house church tradition do not always pay off. In order to claim the house church heritage, Pastor Peng from WCP has worked hard to get an older generation house church pastor on a panel to discuss house church tradition at the Reformation 500 Conference hosted by Grace to City in May 2017 in Hong Kong attended by over 3,000 house church leaders. With great reluctance, this older pastor agreed, but did not exactly follow the interview guidelines set by Peng. Another incident was that on the evening of May 25th, when Wang Yi asked those attending the conference to kneel and pray, the associate pastor of Early Rain, Pastor

Watson, forbid those around to comply. This was but one publicized incident of his conflict with Wang Yi already transpired within Early Rain, for Pastor Watson tended to fault Wang Yi for hypocrisy and theatrical display of piety. Their animosity appeared more complicated than personal conflict. Almost 20 years senior to Wang Yi, Pastor Watson belonged to the older generation house church leader. Wang Yi sometimes dubbed him a fundamentalist. According to an interview with Watson on October 26th, 2017, he said his approach to church ministry was more Biblicist and Scripturally based, and he also aligned more closely with some of the “militant Reformed” pastors that Wang Yi often criticized. Even though Watson was often faulted for splitting Early Rain, it was in fact Wang Yi who insisted on splitting the church to stop their contention at Early Rain. More than contention for position or vain glory, the split symbolizes the struggle for moral authority. Other than faulting Wang Yi’s preaching and ministry practices, some of the Early Rain members even believed his gesture to court persecution was merely theatrics, as he never truly suffered from imprisonment. Viewed from the history of house churches in China, the most well-known leaders seem to derive their moral authority not from exceptional preaching or intellectual sophistication, but from faithfully enduring suffering and imprisonment as Christians. In fact, very few of older house church leaders were formally ordained or theologically savvy.⁵⁵ However, the development of the PCC promotes theological sophistication and formal ordination in their striving for moral authority in the house church tradition. They especially

⁵⁵ See David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2006).

problematize the literal understanding of Scripture and moralistic teaching of traditional house churches. Pastor Watson also shared that WCP would not have anyone ordained outside the reformed tradition to speak at their pulpits. This is how they perceive the fundamentalist tradition of China's house churches:

With Fundamentalist Christianity, “Sola Scriptura” has become the dead tradition of the living men...A church becomes a true heir of the Reformation when it is both Biblicist and Christ-centered. Then it becomes the living tradition from the dead men. (excerpts 27 and 28)

In his effort to claim heritage from the house church tradition and contend for moral authority, Wang Yi seems to find resources in the theology of the cross. Early Rain now has a special hymn collection consisting exclusively of such hymns. Since this year, Wang Yi has highly elevated the theology of the cross and “the indigenous Reformed Church” as the true heir to claim it.

- The cross is the beginning and end of theology, the basic principle for believers to judge and understand all theologies. According to a familiar expression in the house church tradition, a person's life is more important than his viewpoint. (excerpt 65)
- The theology of the cross is the thesis, and the theology of God's sovereignty is the antithesis. Only when the two converge would it become a complete thesis...In the past five hundred years since the Reformation, there are three periods when these two theses converge: American Puritanism, the revival of New Calvinism in the past few decades, and what is happening now in China. The way of the cross of China's house churches is converging with the theology of Sovereignty in the reformed tradition. (excerpts 72-74)

Early Rain is by no means the pioneer of Christian grade schools in China, which dates back to 2005. Early Rain only started their church-based grade school in 2011. The Christian grade school movement is only one among many who seek alternative education for children, because Confucian schools and Buddhist schools also abound in

China. However, in recent years, Chengdu has become an attraction for religious and educational migrants from other parts of China. Many moved to Chengdu to join Early Rain so that their children could attend its church-based grade school. There are three grade schools under the Western China Presbytery that also draw church transfers locally and educational migrants from across China. Different from the 200-300 Christian grade schools in other parts of China, WCP schools only accept students who are children of church members of the WCP and the church subsidizes up to 40% of the tuition. They frame the heavy subsidy of children's education in terms of covenant theology: a reformed church has the responsibility to educate their children, not only in religious matters, but also in academic subjects free from atheist and Communist influence.⁵⁶ Not only did it become the model for the Christian grade schools in Chengdu, many Christian educators subscribing to the reformed tradition in other parts of China also followed suit.

Not only do the Chengdu Presbyterians advocate for church subsidy of Christian education, they also promote an educational philosophy and teaching model called the Classical Christian Education (CCE) that highly emphasizes the Trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. It seemed only by accident that Early Rain discovered Douglas Wilson's Christian Classical Education developed in the past two decades. Disillusioned by the modern education provided and monitored by the Communist state, Chengdu Presbyterians now think that they have found an antidote to the ills of state-run education.

⁵⁶ At certain point, 40% of Early Rain's budget goes to this category. However, after the split, the congregation under the former associate pastor decide to gradually withdraw financial support for the grade school and let it become an independent Christian school.

The beginning of a liberal arts college was also fortuitous.⁵⁷ Yet, its later development has gained strong institutional and ideological strength. Soon Western China Covenant College became a gathering point for theologically reformed Christian scholars capable of teaching one aspect of Christianity, such as Christianity and world history, or Christianity and philosophy. Not only does the liberal arts college offer electives for theological students, it also offers certificate programs and graduate degree programs for Christian school teachers across China. In fall 2017, Western China Covenant welcomed the first undergraduate class. The undergraduate program is also based on Christian Classical Education. Even though a college curriculum solely based on humanities is unheard of in China, Wang Yi and his followers believe that like Presbyterianism, it should function as an important minority in China. This could be another gesture to contend for moral authority in Chinese culture, especially in the field of alternative education. However, up to this day, the CCE curriculum for both the grade school and the college remain incomplete.

Like his “Reflections on the Reformation,” Wang Yi also has a collection of short sayings called “Reflection on Education.” For Wang Yi, anything he wants to advocate becomes a natural ally to Presbyterianism.

We can put it this way: liberal education derives from the tradition of Republicanism and classical education is an indispensable part of Republicanism... Why did Presbyterians become the main task force of Christian education? This is because Presbyterianism is in essence Republican. (excerpt 72)

⁵⁷ Early Rain’s associate pastor, seeing the lack of general education among the students at Western China Covenant Theological Seminary, such as some students’ ignorance of Shakespeare’s home country, suggested establishing a liberal arts college to make up this kind of knowledge gap for theological students.

Like his “Reflections on the Reformation,” Wang Yi’s “Reflections on Education” is also broad sweeping and often self-contradictory:

- What is classical education? Someone puts it this way: classical education is what remains after you forget everything. (excerpt 3)
- The philosophy of Christian Classical Education is to read useless books so that students would become useful people. (excerpt 53)
- Since the sixteenth century, the consequence of the Reformation in education is two-fold: Bible has become the foundation of education and the Holy Spirit has become the god of education. (excerpt 17)
- In the entire Christendom till Martin Luther, the state has never been the educator, the state is the one being educated. It is being educated by the church, by the monks, and by the universities. It has always been the non-state who educates the state, the prophets who educate the monarch. However, since Martin Luther, the state has become our educator. We must oppose the state to claim the right to educate us. (excerpt 20)

English-based curriculums imported from the US has been widely used in the Christian school movement in China. Wang Yi and many CCE advocates have been asserting their moral authority over this model:

If a Christian school (in China) uses an English curriculum, it is not Christian Classical Education, but a pragmatic modern education through and through. According to the gospel, it is desertion of your own nation in the most cruel way. (excerpt 9)

As challengers in two interconnected fields, the PCC strive for moral authority over the current incumbents. Again, sociodices and mythologies play an important role. However, how successful the PCC can be in institutional and field building remains unclear as the Party-state tightens its control over the religious field. It also depends on whether the entrepreneur logic in their church expansion could pick up the same kind of momentum.

Bringing in the Missional Church Conversation

Instead of resorting to a distinctively theological ethnographic method, I believe in instances where the sociological or anthropological ethnographic methods can better lay the ground for theological normative work.⁵⁸ This is because despite the disparate disciplinary concerns and discursive traditions between theology and social sciences, foregrounding theological questions too early would interfere with pursuing an objective picture of what is going on with the PCC. On the other hand, based on naturalistic methods, close ethnographic attention to the development of the PCC helps avoid setting up a strawman for normative work. In this case, the descriptive work based on naturalistic inquiry and social scientific framing lays the ground for missiological critique in this section.

Here it would be necessary to introduce the missional church conversation as the starting point for such normative work for its relevance to denominationalism and institutional church. The missional church conversation is particularly indebted to Leslie Newbigin's cultural critique of establishment thinking in an already pluralistic society. Developed from the emphasis of *missio Dei*, the missional church conversation is, first of all, a theological reorientation: "a shift from an *ecclesioncentric* (church-centered) view

⁵⁸ Theologians attempting to do theological ethnography include Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Nicholas M. Healy, Christian Scharen, Aana Marie Vigen, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, etc. Having been trained in ethnographic methods mostly under social scientists with no religious faith, I have always tried to bridge naturalistic methods with theological inquiries. While recognizing the tension in using sociological or anthropological ethnographic methods for theological research, I still reckon the inadequacy of theological ethnographic methods as the best mode of inquiry in all cases, given their lack of analytical categories such as denominationalism, the subject of study for this paper.

of mission to a *theocentric* (God-centered) one.”⁵⁹ The whole re-orientation resulted from the incompatibility of Christendom thinking with post-Christian society since WWII.

The missional church conversation appropriated in North America, as “a theologically informed social imagination,”⁶⁰ is as much a cultural critique⁶¹ as it is a theological reconceptualization. It is part of the ongoing critique of the American church’s establishment thinking and accommodation with the dominant culture, with symptoms such as coercive political engagement, captivity to capitalism, and problematic congregational life. The missional church as we know it represents a form of cultural critique as it constructs a theologically informed self-understanding of the nature and identify of the church in God. For example, missiologist Greg Van Gelder asserts that in relation to the western culture, the U.S. church must “engage a substantive critique of the deep cultural narratives that frame our existence and shape our lives.”⁶² Ethnographic data on missional church in North America provided by social scientists concur with theologians in this aspect. For example, anthropologist James S. Bielo, in his ethnographic studies of younger evangelicals in Cincinnati, Ohio whom he identifies as emerging and missional defines their effort to plant new churches as a cultural critique of

⁵⁹ Darrell L. Guder and George R. Hunsberger, eds., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 81.

⁶⁰ Craig Van Gelder, Dwight J. Zscheile, and Alan Roxburgh, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 67.

⁶¹ It should be clarified that the main reference framework and focus of this cultural critique is not the contemporary culture per se, but the established or mainstream church.

⁶² Darrell L. Guder and Dwight Zscheile, "Participating in God's Mission: A Missiology for the U.S.," (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 228.

mainstream evangelicalism.⁶³ In a sense, the cultural critique aspect of the missional church provides strong continuity for this fluid conversation, whether it is approached from an overtly missiological perspective or predominantly social-scientific one.

Strong parallels exist between the development of missional church in North America and denominational church in China, with the paradox that the development of some denominational churches, such as the PCC, tries to be simultaneously institutional and missional. In a sense, the new development of the PCC serves as a cultural critique against mainstream Protestantism in China, the registered churches and traditional unregistered churches alike. For the registered churches, the critique is leveled against their accommodation with the state, which compromised their integrity as the true church. Against the traditional unregistered churches, the critique concerns their leadership structure, their emphasis of piety over theology and of morality over grace. Meanwhile, as they become denominational, they seek to gain more space from the state without compromising their integrity, and to inherit a theology of the cross and suffering from traditional unregistered church without strongman leadership and moralistic teaching. On the other hand, while the development of the PCC seeks to correct the anti-intellectual and anti-institutional bias of mainstream Chinese Christianity, it may fall into the traps of intellectualism and institutionalism.

With regard to political engagement, there also exist some continuity between the missional church conversation in North America and the denominational church

⁶³ See James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

conversation in China. Newbigin describes the Constantinian settlement as “the first great attempt to translate the universal claim of Christ into political terms.”⁶⁴ In the missional church conversation, Constantinianism is identified with the Christendom mentality. Although the official historical Christendom ended in eighteenth century Europe with the Enlightenment and the revolutions, today a functional Christendom is evident in how the American churches “Christianize” their ideals of social order through legislation and electoral politics. The rise of conservative politics since the mid-1970s has created the cultural conditions that the missional church conversation has commonly critiqued. Inheriting the strong social and political concerns from the reformed tradition, reformed churches in China also articulate their vision to “Christianize” China. However, they are not unaware of the perils of the Christendom error. Surprisingly, during a conference held during September 12-15, 2017, in Hong Kong, Wang Yi preached on cultural mandate and concluded, perhaps unknowingly, with an Anabaptist theology of culture: let the church be the church. Here is another point of interesting parallel with the missional church conversation in North America. As noted by Michael W. Goheen, the missional church reflection “has moved in a more Anabaptist direction than Newbigin.”⁶⁵ James D. Hunter, while concurring with the Anabaptist theologians that ecclesiology is the form by which engagement with the world takes place, remains skeptical of separatist tendencies

⁶⁴ Leslie Newbigin, *Your Kingdom Come: Reflections on the Theme of the Melbourne Conference on World Mission and Evangelism* (Leeds: John Paul the Preacher Press, 1980), 47.

⁶⁵ Michael W. Goheen, “‘As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You’: Lesslie Newbigin’s Missionary Ecclesiology,” *International Review of Mission* 91, no. 362 (July 2002): 354–69, 367.

of the Anabaptist tradition.⁶⁶ In a similar note, the PCC seeks to go public as they overcome the separatist tendency of traditional unregistered churches. Many of my informants concur that the current foci of reformed theology are indeed on ecclesiology. However, how to move forward to formulate a coherent ecclesiology in light of the Chinese context poses challenges to the PCC advocates. Tension still exists between the Christendom and Anabaptist tendencies from the various spectrum of the PCC. While still inchoate, a missional ecclesiology is being constructed under way.

The emphasis of many PCC churches on theology rather than therapeutic messages and church practices reflects their rejection of consumerist capitalism, which in a way strikes the same note among American missional churches. For example, sociologist Will Samson characterizes the new monasticism arising among missional churches as a cultural critique against “the therapeutic deism (to use the term by Christian Smith) that pervades American evangelicalism” and “the individualistic, entertainment-based mentality of the megachurches.”⁶⁷ However, some PCC churches with more educated members, by solely emphasizing theology or the study of theology, would slip into intellectualism and what Richard H. Niebuhr critiqued as middle-class syndrome.⁶⁸ My ethnographic data indicates urban unregistered churches already adopted PCC style

⁶⁶ See James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶⁷ Will Samson, “The New Monasticism,” in *The New Evangelical Social Engagement*, eds. Brian Steensland and Philip Goff, *The New Evangelical Social Engagement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁶⁸ See H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1957).

Presbyterianism or eager to embrace the PCC mostly consist of members who are middle-class professionals or want to target at middle class professionals; there also exists the disjunction in terms of the aspiration for the church between intellectual and entrepreneurial reformed pastors and their average congregants. PCC churches tend to have a tighter membership system than their American counterparts in order to deal with consumerism resulted from church transfers.

Having broadly sketched the parallels between the appropriation of the missional church conversation in North America and that in China, this section examines how the PCC consciously adapts the missional church conversation in the Chinese context. This would include both their noble attempts and glaring failures. Several notable PCC pastors do consciously borrow from the missional church language in their own pastoral ministry and their effort in assisting other churches to establish and advance Presbyterianism. They have two primary concerns for the emerging Presbyterianism that they hope to counter by becoming intentionally missional. One is to maintain balance between the institutional and the organic. The other concerns how to balance the oversight of the clergy and the fulfilment of the laity.

A common theme running through my interviews with PCC advocates is their desire to establish order in their church, which they hope to achieve by establishing Presbyterian church government. Indeed, the rigorous polity and demanding ordination process of the PCC serve this purpose well. However, establishing a hierarchical system also has its drawbacks. For one, formally organizing a church in strictly Presbyterian form takes a long time and is often accompanied by conflicts and splits. Even previously

ordained ministers or formally seminary-trained candidates feel it difficult to get ordained in the PCC system. A pastor from a southern city was turned down for ordination because he was not yet thirty years old, even though he has effectively pastored a church for several years and obtained formal theological training. However, Wang Yi, the architect of the PCC, got ordained only six years after having become a Christian, because he was older then. This clearly contradicts the biblical teaching of not ordaining a recent convert (1 Timothy 3:6). For another, it is even more difficult to form a presbytery with several like-minded churches in the same region. Even one church in a church becomes reformed and Presbyterian, it does not make sense to call itself a Presbyterian church if there is no presbytery. Therefore, based on the PCC model, many standalone Presbyterian churches cannot participate in whatever the PCC has to offer because they are not legitimately Presbyterian. The form structure of the PCC brings notable changes on the congregational level as well. For example, the title of pastor or elder was rarely used to address those in pastoral leaders in the pre-PCC era. Instead, those in leadership was addressed simply as brothers or sisters. The spread of PCC style Presbyterianism has expedited the process of professionalization among urban unregistered churches. With hierarchy comes distance between the clergy and the laity. Any initiative taken up by average members in the congregations has to obtain consent from formally ordained leadership to gain legitimacy. This indeed poses challenges to the vitality of PCC as a movement, because the exponential growth of Chinese Protestantism in post-Mao era has significant correlation with lay participation. If the laity feel

constrained too much by ordained leadership, they may feel unfulfilled in their capacity of serving the church.

Pastor Peng, the second best-known person in the PCC network, consciously uses the missional church language. As acknowledged by Peng, emphasizing theological correctness and ministry consistency is likely to deter lay initiatives. However, he counter argues that the church's oversight of ministry operation is for long-term equipment of the saints (laity). He gives several examples. One is that several members of his church want to start a drama society like that of Early Rain. Yet he and the elders board do not think they have enough talented people for such a ministry. Therefore, the initiative is laid aside from the beginning. He gives another example of an aborted young adults ministry. Despite their great initiative, the attendance of this ministry dwindles to the point that they can no longer sustain this ministry. According to Pastor Peng, the first is a good example, whereas the second is a bad one. If the church allots budget to an unsuccessful ministry as such, it would be a wasteful of their resources. His argument does not seem strong enough to justify the overarching role of ordained leadership to suppress lay initiatives. In Early Rain, the articulation of the censorship role of the church is even stronger. Laity cannot start any teaching ministry, such as home Bible study, without the prior approval from the church. Despite their ostensible use of missional church conversation, WCP still prioritizes the oversight of the church. For them, the way to move organization forward is through clearly articulating and implementing the visions of church leadership, not by voluntary lay initiatives.

Gender role is another area of contention. According my interviews, one of the first actions on the way to become properly Presbyterian is to depose women leaders. Based on the complementarian understanding of gender role, men and women are equal in status but complementary in their roles in the household and the church. That is to say, women need to submit to male leadership in the home and the church. Like their American counterparts, they strictly forbid women preaching and the ordaining women for ministry. Historically, women have played an important role in the house church tradition.⁶⁹ Even to this day, the majority of church attendance are women, with a good proportion still in leadership positions. Depositing their leadership following the practice of some American evangelicals could potentially disempower women. A critic of the PCC posts this on his social media account. In the denomination that he used to affiliate, an Anglican communion in North America, the bishops, while still opposing to ordaining women to pastoral ministry, express deep repentance for their failure to empower women for church ministry. To this day, some of my female interviewees still feel hurt by the heavy-handed action of PCC pastors to strip them of leadership roles, even though they now acknowledge the rationale behind these actions as biblical.

As mentioned earlier, studying catechisms and confessions has become an indispensable part of liturgy and church life. As the PCC becomes increasingly theological heavy, their worship style also takes on more traditional flavor. Even Pastor Jiang, an OPC minister heavily involved in the development of the PCC, expressed his amazement how these PCC churches almost exclusively sing traditional hymns, and

⁶⁹ See Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*.

sometimes even Psalters. Except for Wang Yi's scanty reference to *The Canaan Hymns*,⁷⁰ the over one thousand folk style praise songs composed by the prolific rural house church song writer Lü Xiaomin, rarely do PCC advocates speak highly of such folksy music. It seems that they have adopted a western tradition at the expense of valuable house church tradition. Nor is contemporary Christian music used much in these PCC churches.

PCC advocates tend to be reticent about the role of the Holy Spirit in their theology and practice. In an interview of Pastor Peng, he concedes to the Pentecostal and Charismatic criticism of the Presbyterian trinity: Father, Son, and the Bible. However, he defends that the loci of the Holy Spirit in the reformed and Puritan tradition lie in the conscience of believers, and its manifestation is in ordinary means rather than any ostensible forms. Wang Yi says in the interview that the work of the Holy Spirit cannot overstep the Scripture and the church. Pastor Enoch (pseudonym) subjects the discussion of the Holy Spirit entirely under soteriology. He dismisses the missional language appropriated by his associates but instead uses a creational paradigm as it relates to kingdom to portray what God is doing through the PCC. The typical missional church language in the original sense emphasizes on the missionary Trinity as the prime agent in the holistic renewal of all things. The PCC, on the other hand, by its sole emphasis on the gospel and the work of Christ, does not seem to have its "trinity" capitalized. A pastor's

⁷⁰ This hymn collection is nothing short of legendary, especially considering that Lü Xiaomin dropped out of junior high school because of illness and never had training in music composition (or hardly any music training for that matter). Mostly collected in *The Canaan Hymns*, her songs have been widely adopted by house churches and TSPM churches across China, some even circulating in Chinese diaspora churches around the world. Besides typical biblical themes such as suffering, *The Canaan Hymns* also highlight themes such as eschatology, Christ, election, the Holy Spirit. Wang Yi seems to like the theme of suffering articulated by Xiaomin's songs.

wife that I interviewed seems to locate the work of the Holy Spirit in the experience of believers who lack understanding, and to understand the salvific work of Christ only in terms of conversion, and the role of the father in terms of a deeper theological knowledge. In a word, the missional church conversation as appropriated by the PCC seems to have departed from the *missio dei* emphasis of the Triune God as agent in church renewal.

Related to the above-mentioned discussion on Trinity is their emphasis of covenant theology as a hermeneutic standard and Christ-centered preaching as a homiletical rule. For example, their emphasis on covenant is very much a legal framing of church government and practice. Instead of tracing their particular church polity to western Roman canon law, my informants tie it to covenant theology represented as a hermeneutical standard that emphasizes the continuity between the Old and New Testaments. The collection of actions such as practicing infant baptism, establishing church-based grade schools, joining church membership become corollaries of this hermeneutical standard, whereas in the American context such actions are generally practiced as part of the reformed tradition or disavowed as part of such tradition. For example, establishing Christian day schools are mostly practiced by the more fundamentalist wing of American evangelicalism; yet in the PCC, all these practices are packaged in one bundle under Presbyterianism. Additionally, gospel theology, presented through Christ-centered preaching, a homiletical standard that emphasizes grace, acts as both a restricting force and revitalizing one among unregistered churches: those who do not practice this homiletical standard are categorized as moralistic and pietistic while

practicing it becomes a way of renewing congregational life. On one hand, it seems that the emphasis on gospel renewal does help some pastors reduce legalistic tendencies. On the negative side, their emphasis of Christ-centered preaching has increasingly become a gimmick to assert superiority over traditional house churches and broad evangelical churches. On many occasions, I hear PCC advocates criticize traditional house church preachers as being too moralistic and devotional rather than historical-redemptive and theological. Their criticism seems to be solely based on this homiletical standard.

One glaring fact concerning the growth of the PCC is that many of its membership growth does not come from evangelism, but from church transfers. This pattern of growth is not unique to churches in the WCP. A southern city that I sampled from indicates the same pattern of growth. Pastor Ben (pseudonym), an American Chinese⁷¹ pastor also expresses the concern that such pattern of church growth is not the right kind and is very likely to stretch pastoral care. He articulates three phases in the development of Presbyterianism: the prophet phase where theology precedes action, the king phase where church government is foremost, and the priest phase where pastoral care is the most essential. In order to solve the problems posed by church transfers, Pastor Peng has tightened their requirement on joining membership. Besides the difficulty of shepherding the transfers, intense political pressure also poses problem for pastoral care. A good case in point of this crisis is that some of Wang Yi's members, those followed

⁷¹ Shehong Chen uses the term "American Chinese" to refer to the historical first-generation Chinese immigrants in the United States to differentiate them from U.S.-born Chinese Americans. See Shehong Chen, "Republicanism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Capitalism in American Chinese Ideology," in *Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People, Resources, and Ideas between China and America During the Exclusion Era*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 174.

him after the split of Early Rain, complain that the intense engagement with the state has been draining their spirit, making them unable to get adequate pastoral care. Wang Yi simply replies this kind of suffering is the best spiritual exercise. As a result, some members go back to join Pastor Watson's congregation. A recent gesture on the part of Wang Yi to soften his anti-statist tone is that he now blames the Religious Affairs Bureau for hijacking the religious policy of the government.

A seemingly accidental development out of Presbyterianism is church-based grade schools. As mentioned earlier, this type of school is simply Christian schools run by the church, but church-based public schools that only accept members' children and are heavily subsidized by church budget. The kind of covenant theology referenced earlier becomes the ideological basis for this kind of school. Buttressed by strong ideological articulation and institutional support, the church-based grade schools are spawning in PCC churches. However, how does this kind of school help the church become missional when they drain church finances and do not even accept children of non-members, let alone those of non-Christians? Wang Yi and his associates argue that their simple existence is kind of witnessing to the unbelieving world. While this Noah's ark kind of argument may sound noble, it is not even gaining consensus within PCC network. For example, Wang Yi's former associate pastor, Watson, is taking steps to withdraw church support to underwrite the operating cost for their school. After the split, he and the leadership of that congregation want to gradually let the school become an independent Christian school.

As has been elaborated above, although some PCC advocates try to appropriate

the missional church language, their actions mostly belie their sense of anticipated crisis. Perhaps Michael Goheen's insight to the missional church could shed some appreciative light on the PCC's effort to be missional. Understanding missional church as "a pioneer effort and not a definitive ecclesiology," Goheen calls for "a new model that creatively integrate the scriptural emphases of the Anabaptist and Reformed ecclesiologies while avoiding their corresponding weaknesses."⁷² Indeed, the PCC advocates do make ample effort to develop a coherent and missional ecclesiology.

Conclusion

The development of Presbyterianism in urban China represents much more than the evolution of a small denomination. Presenting its nascent development shows how the educated, urban, middle-class Christians experiment with models for governance and construct their version of Chinese civil society. In their discursive practice and institutional building, PCC advocates contend for moral authority over the overarching state and the incumbents in other interconnected fields. The class location, intellectual background, and action strategies of these new rising urban churches make them a good case for studying social change in urban China. Conceptualizing the newly rising Presbyterianism in terms of institutional transformation and social movement based on field theories could help advance theorizing in new directions. Concepts such as sociodices, mythologies, isomorphism, institutional entrepreneurs, incumbent and challengers all help bridge the divide between institutional and social movement theories,

⁷² Michael W. Goheen, "The Missional Church: Ecclesiological Discussion in the Gospel and Our Culture Network in North America," *Missiology: An International Review*, 30, no. 4 (2002): 479-490, 488.

taking into account both the objective (groups, hierarchies, institutions) and subjective elements (norms, values, identity).

The descriptive work in the preceding sections has laid ground for normative work in the last section. In light of the parallels between the missional church conversation in North America and in China, the PCC's effort to be missional is still laudable. Just as Wang Yi says, "the indigenous Reformed Church in China has, in the past twenty years, undergone what the Reformed Church in North America has gone through in one hundred years." Though still stumbling and trying to find its way, the reformed church in China seems on track of a promising path.

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