

INTRODUCTION

This study arises from a series of interrelated questions about Christianity in the region of Xiamen, in southeastern China.¹ Christianity in Xiamen dates back at least to 1842 and has become a prominent part of the city's social, political, and cultural life. The research explores how people in the Xiamen region engage with Christianity as a way of engaging with both history and modernity, particularly looking at Gulangyu (literally meaning Drum Wave Island, formerly known as Kulangsu or Koolangsu in the West), an islet off the main island of Xiamen, where Christianity has been present since the nineteenth century.

Though an important and prosperous part of China, situated in the economic powerhouse of Fujian Province, Xiamen is much less well known in the West than cities such as Beijing or Shanghai. One of the remarkable points I uncovered in my research is how Christianity in Xiamen has had a profound influence on the region's social and cultural development, as well as influencing society and religion in other parts of the globe, such as Southeast Asia, through the influence of transnational Chinese Christian networks.

Previous studies of Christianity in China have tended to view Christianity in opposition to the state. Yet recently, researchers have begun to attend to the complexities of the relationship between the two, which goes beyond simple antagonism. Christianity has been profoundly implicated in shaping modernity in the Xiamen region, even as the state offers competing

2 visions of what modernization means. The past is important to the people of Xiamen, who view it with an interest and nostalgia that reveals more profound preoccupations with the changes brought about by modernization, and this preoccupation with both history and modernity, and their connections to Christianity, is the central theme of this book.

Some studies have focused on analyzing the growth in the numbers of Christians in China, or the evangelization tactics employed by churches. This research takes a different approach, addressing the relevance of Christianity to ideological negotiations with officially established authority. I explore this topic by asking how history enthusiasts negotiate Christianity-related ideology, reconstructing the Christian past, and reproducing religious histories that redefine local power structures in contemporary China. By taking this tack, I hope to move away from viewing Christianity simply as a religious system and focus on how it has become deeply embedded in and relevant to society as a whole. I employ detailed analyses of different events to unpack the dynamic interactions between different stakeholders and assess what Christianity means to Chinese people. In this sense, it moves beyond a Eurocentric approach to reflect on the acculturation of Christianity in the Chinese context and the place of Chinese Christianity on the global stage.

Understanding World Christianity in the Context of East Asia

For a long time, the predominant theory in the sociology of religion was Peter Berger's idea of secularization, predicting that the significance of religion would continue to decline in modern society.² Time has proved his prognosis untenable. It seems religion is not doomed to disappear; on the contrary, religious revivals are underway around the world. Even Berger himself has frankly admitted the failure of his theory.³ In their more recent research, Berger and his colleagues now point out the importance of attending to regional variations. They note that Europe is a relatively secular part of the world in global terms, in contrast to "religious America."⁴

Elsewhere, as well, religion is shaping the meaning of modernity. Scholars of world religion can no longer elide the differences in religions and religiosities worldwide, and as Brian Stanley reminds us, "No single global narrative of secularization is evident across the century as a whole. . . . Radically divergent patterns of believing and belonging [are] discernible, even within Europe itself."⁵ In this light, the thriving Christian communities in

East Asia are prime examples of how Christianity (or Christianities) can not only thrive in the presence of modernization but become more diverse through complex interactions with their historical, social, and political contexts.

One of the most important changes in global Christianity in the past century has been its rapid rise in the non-Western world. A few distinguished scholars of Christianity, such as Philip Jenkins and Lamin Sanneh, have pointed out the steady southward advance of Christianity into countries in the “Global South” (particularly in Africa, Latin America, and Asia), and the concomitant shift in the balance of religious power between these newly established centers and the old heartland of Christianity in Europe. This trend, described as Christianity’s “southern expansion,” seems set to continue in the foreseeable future. Conversely, this dynamic growth in the Global South has coincided with the twilight of the Western phase of Christianity. In other words, though the Western world dominated Christianity for most of the second millennium, it is now primarily a non-European religion.⁶

The theory of Christianity’s southern shift encompasses a kind of macroview of world Christianity, often looking at demographic growth as a significant factor in this broader shift. Yet the rising importance of the Global South in Christianity worldwide should not be perceived as merely a numbers game. It is crucial to attend to differences in how Christianity is developing in different social contexts. When it comes to Christianity in Asia, in particular, Julius Bautista argues that “there are some specificities about the Asian experience of secularism, nationalism, ethnicity, and statehood that we should take into consideration” to understand its rise and cultural manifestations.⁷

Advocates of the southern shift theory have pointed out that statistically speaking, Africa and Latin America, rather than Asia, will be the new Christian centers. Yet they still tend to be amazed by the booming Christian population and indigenous churches in East Asia, especially South Korea and China. South Korea today is probably one of the most Christianized countries in the non-Western world, where the faithful constitute more than a quarter of the population as a whole.⁸ And since the 1980s, Christianity has been a prominent part of the general resurgence of religion in China.

For part of China’s history, Christianity—along with other religions—was sharply repressed, particularly after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In spite of the state’s atheistic ideology and restrictive regulations, Christianity survived the harshly repressive political

4 movements of the Maoist era (1949–76), going on to see remarkable development in the past few decades.⁹ At present, there are enormous numbers of Christians across the country: while no reliable figures can be found, a well-informed estimate would put their numbers in the tens of millions. As Daniel Bays writes, “Today, on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe.”¹⁰ A number of studies indicate that Christianity has evolved in step with changing local historical and political conditions in China. The most important outcome of this development is that indigenous denominations in modern China unquestionably have their roots in Chinese cultural, social, and political contexts.¹¹

The context of East Asia affords us a good starting point from which to discuss the study of Christianity in the Global South. Many studies of the southern trend tend to overemphasize the diminishing influence of the nation-state. Indeed, the state might be losing influence in some regions where political loyalties are secondary to religious beliefs, as Jenkins has pointed out,¹² but in East Asia, national politics remain a crucial factor in how Christianity is developing and has developed in the past.¹³

This study of East Asian Christianity will not be confined to frameworks such as (de)secularization theory and trends in the Global South but will demonstrate that it is essential to engage in detailed, in-depth study of the cultural context in order to understand the place of Christianity in East Asia and the role of Chinese Christianity worldwide. Furthermore, regional variations are such that even within China, the religion cannot be considered homogeneous or monolithic.

Indeed, although researchers have paid little attention to the phenomenon so far, South-South and even South-North evangelism represent one of the most impressive phenomena in contemporary Christianity.¹⁴ South Korea, a former recipient of Western missionaries, has been a prominent missionary-sending country in the past few decades. In 2018, according to a source from the Seoul-based Korea Research Institute for Mission, there were as many as 21,378 South Korean missionaries working through 154 mission agencies in 146 countries.¹⁵ The United States, whose Protestant missionaries first entered Korea in 1885, has been continuously ranked as one of the top destinations for South Korean missionaries. Since the late 1970s, South Korean missionaries have been dedicated to evangelizing (mostly white) Americans and have achieved considerable success in cross-cultural evangelism, exporting missionaries back to the places from whence they once received them.¹⁶

Although it is prohibited by the socialist state, Chinese Christians now take a more active role in the global missions as well. One example is the “Back to Jerusalem” movement, a mission-oriented project to evangelize all of the nations between China and the Middle East. This movement is generally associated with unregistered churches rather than state-sanctioned churches in China.¹⁷ Many Chinese missionaries are recruited and trained by South Korean mission agencies and then sent to Muslim-majority countries.¹⁸

Mark Mullins’s book *Christianity Made in Japan* focuses on the “native” response rather than Western missionary efforts and intentions. In it, Mullins gives a clear illustration of how world Christianity has become localized in Japan, as it had previously been localized in Europe and America, where it developed into what is now recognized as “Western Christianity.”¹⁹ In a similar vein, inspired by Mullins’s research, Peter Tze Ming Ng argues that in China “what we should be looking for is not ‘what Western missionaries have done in China,’ nor is it simply taking ‘Christianity in China as an unfinished Western project,’ it is rather the ‘Christianity Made in China,’ and indeed, it would turn out to be a new kind of Christianity found in China with Chinese Christians as the proper subject of our study.”²⁰ A point of note, shown in empirical studies of contemporary Chinese Christianity, is that it is mainly Chinese believers rather than foreign missionaries who have revived the faith, and it is people from upwardly mobile social strata (for example, entrepreneurs, migrant workers, and educated youth) who are changing the makeup of today’s Christian population.²¹

For societies that were the recipients of evangelism in the missionary era, the rise of Western discourses of modernity inevitably transformed their religious perceptions of the self, the community, and the state.²² In modern East Asia, rather than being merely a system of belief and practice, Christianity has been an important source of ideas and knowledge for ordinary people, intellectuals, and politicians, helping them negotiate modernity, and giving them meaning when confronted with changing realities, such as when the sovereignty of their countries was under threat from imperialism and colonialism.

The negative discourse about Christianity in relation to Western imperialism emerged through nation-building projects in modern Asia. Kiri Paramore’s book *Ideology and Christianity in Japan* sheds light on the historical development of anti-Christian ideas and their role in the construction of the modern Japanese state in the late nineteenth century.²³ Under Meiji rule, the discursive identification of State Shinto with an essentialized Japanese

6 identity forced Japanese Christians into a struggle about being both Japanese and Christian at the same time.²⁴ Since the latter half of the twentieth century, finding their feet after their humiliation in the aftermath of the Second World War, extreme right-wing nationalist politicians in Japan have been making the case for the rehabilitation of disgraced State Shinto and for its installation as a civil religion.²⁵ As a minority religion in Japanese society, Christianity has always been forced to negotiate its place.

By sharp contrast, South Korea's differing historical experience of colonialism provides a good illustration of how Christianity can play a pivotal positive rather than negative role in national politics. In the early twentieth century, when Korea was under Japanese rule, Korean Christians were at the forefront of resistance against the colonizers' efforts to introduce Shinto. As a result, Christianity was naturally associated with emerging nationalism. In addition to the prestige it had acquired from its role in resistance to Japanese colonialism, postwar Christianity benefited from being the religion of the American liberators, at that time an overwhelming power compared to their Asian neighbors. The place of Christianity in South Korea was further boosted when the nation's postwar leadership was assumed by the Christian elite. These factors have granted Christianity plenty of social space for its development.²⁶ Even today, Christianity in South Korea retains its modernizing image—for example, it is invoked in the state's promotion of cremation, which the state and church see as a way of modernizing death practices.²⁷

In China as well, Christianity has a complex relationship to nationalism and modernization. In some coastal cities, such as Fuzhou and Xiamen, Chinese Christians played a major role in the 1911 Revolution, which overthrew both the Manchu-ruled Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and the system of imperial governance. After the 1911 Revolution, Chinese Christians also played a prominent role in building China's modern Republican state (1912–49 in the mainland) in Fuzhou and Xiamen. Christian individuals and organizations were deeply involved in the social and political life of these two cities during mainland China's late Qing and early Republican eras, playing leading roles in the movements against opium smoking and the abuse of slave girls, as well as being prominent in volunteer associations advocating social reform.²⁸ However, Christianity's contribution to state building was soon overshadowed by anti-Christian movements. As China entered its modern era, Christianity found itself caught in a dilemma. As Sanneh remarks, "Two central issues have defined China's encounter with the Western Christian movement: one was the demand

for indigenous control against missionary domination, and the other was China's role in recent global Marxist movements. Christianity was a target on both fronts: one time as an obstacle to local empowerment, and another as an antagonistic ideology. On both issues Christianity yielded ground; first with respect to China's national interests, and next with respect to China's place in global revolutionary movements.²⁹ This point will be elaborated below.

Thus, although Christianity in China has at times been attacked as a tool of imperialism, it is clear that its success was at least partly due to what we might call its "indigenization" and how it was "mediated and understood" through local cultural and social values, as Albert Park and David Yoo have argued. In East Asia, "Protestant Christianity inspired new forms of subjectivity, visions of society, and conceptions of national identity."³⁰ What is needed is a more nuanced understanding of the state of East Asian Christianity and its role in the overall Christian world, coupled with insights into how Christianity has influenced the political, cultural, and social landscape of the region.

Christianity and the Making of History in China

Beyond the Church-State Dichotomy

The early People's Republic saw several turbulent decades when Christianity was widely attacked under successive political campaigns. Churches and all public activities were shut down under Maoism and did not resume until the late 1970s. All churches are now asked to register with the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement of Protestant Churches (TSPM, Sanzi aiguo yundong). Still, numerous congregations refuse to register and remain in a gray zone without an explicitly legal status. These are widely known in English as "house churches" (*jiating jiaohui*).³¹

Largely because of ongoing friction, scholars of Christianity in China have tended to understand it as being in opposition to the state. Many scholars tend to overemphasize the state's dominance in China, and the ways that churches, through avoidance or defiance, engage in resistance.³² The Three-Self church structure that officially heads Christianity in China tends to be regarded in the literature as a governing tool of an overly restrictive regime.³³ Similarly, the religious revival in reform-era China is often regarded as a response to the repressive measures of the Maoist state.³⁴

8 The prevalence of this model of state versus church owes much to Western theories of civil society. The idea that a civil society was emerging in China aroused widespread debate in the 1990s. Scholars reached a consensus that the concept of “civil society” as it has been applied to the Chinese context presupposed a (false) dichotomy between society and the state,³⁵ yet the theoretical framework of church versus state continued to inform studies of Chinese Christianity.³⁶ Furthermore, the concept of church-state separation in democratic societies has engendered assumptions about individuals needing full religious freedom to be autonomous and religious organizations needing to be independent from the state.

However, the separation of church and state is, in fact, a notion that is culturally situated in the liberal West. It cannot be taken for granted in the context of Chinese society, where, since ancient times, religion has never been independent from the state.³⁷ This has implications for the way we view the actions of religious leaders like Pastor Wen, described in chapter 3, and how they engage with religious affairs authorities. Rather than seeking independence, many Christians in China instead look for ways to maneuver alongside the state, employing networks of contacts as well as a range of licit and illicit means to pursue and expand their religious practice.

Recently, a growing number of scholars have realized that an approach viewing the church and state as fundamentally separate fails to capture the social complexity of religious dynamics in China, oversimplifying the interactions between multiple actors, especially at the local levels. The prevailing paradigm overlooks the fact that religious groups and government enjoy many areas of common interest.³⁸ They are not simply entrenched on opposite sides of religious issues. There is a rising awareness that religion in reform-era China cannot be properly understood unless the dichotomous approach is buttressed with greater local-level analysis. In particular, it is crucial to acknowledge that dominance and resistance are not the only possible positionalities in church-state relations, and while state repression plays an important role, it is only one aspect of the complex dynamics between a range of actors on the local, national, and international levels.³⁹

A few years ago, a watershed moment occurred in church-state relations in contemporary China. In March 2013, the Zhejiang provincial government launched the three-year campaign known as “Three Rectifications, One Demolition” (*San gai yi chai*). Its goal was to renovate or “rectify” old residential neighborhoods, old factory grounds, and villages enclosed in newly urbanized areas, as well as to demolish illegal constructions. In the

course of its implementation, buildings identified as “illegal” would be immediately torn down.

One of the targets of the campaign turned out to be Christian structures deemed to be illegal, leading to conflict with local Christian groups.⁴⁰ The situation escalated after the forced demolition of a church complex that began in March 2014. The Three Rivers Church (Sanjiang tang), a magnificent landmark building, became the focus of attention at home and abroad. Hundreds of Christians gathered spontaneously and organized themselves into human barricades, but the government refused to compromise. As the base of the church was blasted, the 180-foot-high spire collapsed, and it did not take long for the whole Gothic structure to be razed to the ground.⁴¹

What happened to the Wenzhou church in 2014 poses a serious challenge to scholars who privilege the negotiating capability of resourceful Chinese Christians, overlooking state rule and intrachurch politics.⁴² Unexpectedly, the official demolition program did not cease after the Three Rivers event; instead, it has evolved into a widespread movement with a mission to remove crosses across Zhejiang. Although the government received extensive criticism from abroad, it has never compromised; indeed, repressive measures have even intensified. Disobedient pastors and Christian human rights lawyers who opposed the campaign have been arrested.⁴³

It is believed that the Zhejiang movement has damaged church-state relations and forced members to detach themselves from the officially recognized Christian organizations that serve as the liaison with the state apparatus.⁴⁴ The campaign, a potential catalyst for millenarian beliefs within popular Christianity, may have had negative consequences for millions of Christians in Zhejiang and beyond, who interpret these events as “indicating that the ‘Last Days’ are imminent.”⁴⁵

This is by no means the end of the story. Soon afterward, the “rectifications” initiatives spread beyond Zhejiang, extending to Henan Province and elsewhere as well as to other religious institutions. Numerous religious buildings have been demolished; many unregistered churches have been raided and shut down. Some local authorities have exceeded the central government’s expectations in order to demonstrate their loyalty to “socialist civilization.” An extreme case is Gaoyou, a county-level city of Jiangsu Province whose government demolished as many as 5,911 Earth God (Tudi gong) shrines within a single month (March 2019) in the name of constructing “ecological space.”⁴⁶

The Zhejiang campaign has led scholars to look at how local clergy and congregants think of the mistreatment of their churches and, furthermore,

to examine the current church-state relations from the perspective of theology.⁴⁷ Even in this context of high tension, researchers have continued to reflect on the limitations of the church-state binary and explore the negotiations between religion and state agencies at the grassroots.

This research is inspired by Karrie Koesel's recent enlightening research on religious groups under authoritarian governments in Russia and China, which shows how the religion-state nexus can be reconceptualized from an overemphasis on suppression and resistance to a more nuanced understanding that acknowledges a mutual alliance. Koesel's "interest-based theory" of religion-state interaction employs rational choice theory not in analyzing conversion or personal religious beliefs but rather as a framework for understanding the interplay between authorities and religious leaders.⁴⁸

Taking all these points into consideration, this research departs from the notion of a church-state dichotomy, drawing on in-depth ethnography and previous studies of Christianity in China to show the complex dynamics of religion and government at the local level. More importantly, this project opens up a new field of research, exploring grassroots negotiations around Christianity's political history in contemporary China.

Christianity's Political History in China

Christianity has long been at the center of official narratives of "national humiliation" (*guochi*) in China. The discourse is closely related to the building of the modern nation-state and later to affirming the legitimacy of the Communist regime. Before China became a Communist-ruled country, previous political regimes already associated Christianity with imperialist invasion. The most violent attack against foreigners, one explicitly associated with Christian missionary activity, occurred around 1900. With the backing of the Qing government, motivated by protonationalist antiforeign sentiments, members of the Society of the Righteous and Harmonious Fists (Yihequan), generally known in the West as the "Boxers," killed perhaps 30,000 Chinese Catholics and Protestants and 250 foreigners, most of whom were missionaries.⁴⁹

During the Republican period after the 1911 Revolution, large-scale, anti-Christian campaigns were already occurring.⁵⁰ In the twentieth century, patriotic Chinese people made endless references to the "century of humiliation" China had suffered at the hands of foreign imperialism, beginning with the Opium War (1839–42).⁵¹ The British establishment viewed this war as a battle for free trade in general and open access to the Chinese domestic

market in particular. However, the Chinese saw it as a life-and-death struggle to retain their national sovereignty and maintain control over foreign trade in order to remain free of manipulation by Western forces, especially regarding the pernicious import of opium.

The Opium War led to the de facto guarantee that British ships could continue transporting opium to China, “present[ing] the China coast missionaries with something of a moral quandary,” as Daniel Bays notes.⁵² The subsequent series of treaties gave missionaries increasing scope for their activities in China, allowing their influence to grow. Shielded by the guarantee of “missionary freedom,” they were not subject to management or supervision by the Chinese government and enjoyed the protection of their respective governments. As John Fairbank has commented, “The missionary . . . had the chance to preach and innovate in China only because he was part of the Western invasion. Gunfire and the unequal treaties initially gave him his privileged status and opportunity.”⁵³ Irrevocably, the Western missionary endeavor was linked to imperialism and colonialism, heightened by the fact that some missionaries actually participated in negotiating and drafting the treaties.⁵⁴ The first foreign Protestant missionary in Xiamen brought the gospel on a British warship during the Opium War, contributing to the political stigmatization of Christianity in the area.⁵⁵

If the pre-1949 history of Christianity was overshadowed by the specter of imperialism, post-1949 narratives of missionary work were defined by the political authority of Communist leader Mao Zedong (1893–1976). In his 1939 essay “The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party,” Mao wrote, “The imperialist powers have never slackened in their efforts to warp the minds of the Chinese people. It is embodied in their policy of cultural aggression. It is implemented through missionary work, through establishing hospitals and schools, publishing newspapers, and inducing Chinese students to study abroad. Their aim is to train intellectuals who will serve their interests and to deceive the people.”⁵⁶ In another well-known article from 1949, “Friendship or Aggression?,” Mao specifically targets “United States imperialism” in detail and ridicules the role of American missionary enterprise as “spiritual aggression” in the name of “friendship.”⁵⁷

Shortly before victory in the Communist revolution, Mao published “Farewell, John Leighton Stuart,” one of his most widely read articles. In it, Mao fiercely criticizes and satirizes John Leighton Stuart (1876–1962), a former American Presbyterian missionary, the first president of Yenching University in Beijing, and later US ambassador to Republican China. In Mao’s eyes, he is a typical example of Western imperialists working hand

12 in glove with the Christian mission, education, and politics.⁵⁸ To ordinary people in the early People's Republic, Chairman Mao's works were like the word of God to devout Christians. Almost every citizen with basic literacy skills had one or more copies of the *Quotations of Chairman Mao* (commonly known in the West as the *Little Red Book*), and even the illiterate could recite large paragraphs from Mao's works. His judgment set the tone for decades of political discourses on the history of Christianity in modern China.

In the early days of the PRC, the top leaders on multiple occasions expressed their concern about "imperialism under the guise of Christianity" and the Western missionary enterprise that was linked to imperialism and colonialism.⁵⁹ At the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, US imperialism was the greatest target of their ire. The top-down Three-Self Reform Movement (Sanzi gexin yundong) in the early 1950s confronted Western missionaries and the Christian enterprise with unprecedented challenges. Subsequently, a nationwide Accusation Movement (Kongsu yundong) against "American imperialists under the cloak of religion" was launched in Christian communities.⁶⁰

Christianity's role in the "national humiliation," as a significant theme running through modern Chinese history, has redefined and thrown into even sharper relief the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) historical role as a liberator of the people, cast in terms of the shared Chinese struggle against foreign imperialism. The conviction that Christianity is associated with imperialism has prevailed in the writing of history in modern China, led by the CCP. Gu Changsheng's book *Missionaries and Modern China* is the fruit of an official project to record Christian history and represents the mainstream view that Catholic and Protestant missionaries acted as tools of imperialist aggression.⁶¹ This book went through four editions, the latest in 2013, even though Gu himself changed his position, particularly after becoming a citizen of the United States.⁶²

At the turn of the century, government-sanctioned national Christian organizations were still publishing volumes criticizing the disgraceful role of Christianity in the imperialist invasion of China.⁶³ On the other hand, dozens of books have been published recounting the missionaries' contributions to China's modern science, medicine, education, and the like. More recently, a greater number of both translated and original books have become available in China that portray particular missionary figures (for example, John Dudgeon, Samuel Pollard, James Legge, Calvin Wilson Mateer, Peter Park, and William Edward Soothill) instead of missionaries in

the abstract.⁶⁴ Publishing is still subject to strict censorship by the authorities, so without official approval, none of these works could possibly have appeared in China. How could these two situations exist simultaneously? What is the current role of Christian history in maintaining the CCP's political legitimacy?

Since the relevant officials seldom give interviews, the government's intentions can only be inferred, but from the perspective of its citizens, the state restriction on Christian history writing is not set in stone. The cases discussed in this research reveal that the government has begun to concede a broad space for rewriting the history of Chinese Christianity prior to 1949, meaning that the Christian past or particular historical missionaries can now be painted in a positive light. By contrast, the ruling Party is still unwilling to acknowledge its early mistakes, and the suffering of churches, foreign missionaries, and individual Christians at the hands of the Communist regime after 1949 remain a forbidden topic.⁶⁵

The end of the Maoist era saw a turn to "socialism with Chinese characteristics" (*Zhongguo tese shehuizhuyi*) through the "reform and opening-up" policy. In the subsequent decline in Communist ideals, the reform-era state has had to confront a crisis of legitimacy. The events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 triggered tighter ideological control to combat the influence of the so-called "Western bourgeois liberation trend" (*xifang zichanjieji ziyouhua sichao*). There was a revival in patriotism and nationalism as the ruling Party made China's "national humiliation" a central theme in the official production and propagation of history. Patriotic educators "entreat[ed] the young] to 'not forget.'"⁶⁶ As Zheng Wang has described, "The legitimacy-challenged Chinese Communist Party has used history education as an instrument for the glorification of the party, for the consolidation of national identity, and for the justification of the political system of the CCP's one-party rule in the post-Tiananmen and post-Cold War eras."⁶⁷

The Party has perceived religions, particularly Christianity, as competitors for the minds of the next generation. For example, in April 1990 Chen Yun (1905–1995), one of the top Party leaders, told then incumbent President Jiang Zemin that counterrevolutionary activities were being carried out in the name of religion, particularly stressing that they were competing for the youth.⁶⁸ As long as this state of affairs prevails, alternative versions of the Christian past cannot be easily produced.

The shift in the legitimacy of the Chinese state has been a factor not only in the rise of Christianity but also in the revival of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, and popular religions. As Richard Madsen has argued,

Communist rule was legitimized by a Sinicized version of Marxism-Leninism; as Marxism in China lost its former ideological authority, the CCP embarked on a new course, adopting the role of heir and protector of five thousand years of Chinese cultural heritage.⁶⁹ Cultural traditions that the state denounced as “feudalistic” (*fengjian de*) and “backward” (*luohou de*) only a few decades ago have become a new source of legitimacy for Communist rule. In this rediscovery (and reinvention) of China’s roots, Christianity has never been regarded as part of national culture. Instead, it is still seen by some government officials as an “alien species” causing an imbalance in the “religious ecology.” Some even claim to be establishing resistance to Christianity by reviving Chinese popular religions and traditional cultural features, nominally contributing to national security.⁷⁰

Precisely at this same critical juncture, Xi Jinping, the general secretary of the CCP and president of the PRC, and his administration have launched a series of political movements devised to strengthen ideological control and deliberately make the CCP a sacred object of worship as an integral part of a new “communist civil religion,” which features an absolute “dedication to the Party that is specifically religious, yet does not require belief, conviction, or faith in a doctrine.”⁷¹ To a certain extent, the party-state still perceives Christianity as a powerful competitor for ideological authority. Thus, the study of Christianity in China must take into account these broader ideological battles, which are implicated in events like the widespread resistance of government officials and Chinese nationalists to the construction of a magnificent Gothic church in Qufu City, Shandong Province, the birthplace of Confucius,⁷² and in increasingly common bans on celebrating Christmas, a typical “foreign festival,” initiated by local governments and universities.⁷³

The analysis of these events should not be limited to what is happening on the surface. The current political situation has led the public to suppose that the Zhejiang campaign, which so explicitly targets Christianity, actually reflects the intentions of the high leadership. Seeing the central government’s acquiescence in the provincial government’s harshness toward Christianity, some attribute this to the notion that top leaders realized there had been a certain inefficiency in implementing its policies and consequently suspected the grassroots officials’ political loyalty. Thus, the political loyalty of local government officials may be the central government’s underlying concern.⁷⁴

Painful memories of the state repression of Christianity under Maoism have profoundly affected believers’ current religious practices and

interactions with authorities, as shown in numerous studies of both Protestantism and Catholicism in China.⁷⁵ In contemporary Xiamen, some older people are still aware of what happened to foreign missionaries and local Christians during the rule of Mao Zedong. They have a strong sense of historical and cultural purpose to record the as-yet untold past in the hopes that they can pass on their collective memories to a younger generation.

However, younger Christians did not live through Maoism and may evince different ways of interacting with society and the state. In his study of Wenzhou Christianity, Nanlai Cao argues that the older generation of Christians who suffered during Maoist political campaigns are more likely to retain antistate emotions but are now taking a step back from public life. On the other hand, a younger generation of Christians who have not experienced the state's harsh religious repression are actively seeking to play a fuller role in economic and financial affairs.⁷⁶

As I have observed, many Xiamen citizens who are versed in the city's history tend to negotiate alternative narratives around the discourse on modern, advanced societies. Many students of Chinese religion have attempted to discover the affinities between religion, modernity, and the nation-state.⁷⁷ A palpable tension exists between the modernist imagination of the Chinese nation-state, which emphasizes essentialism, territoriality, and fixity, and that of entrepreneurial capitalism, celebrating hybridity, deterritorialization, and fluidity.⁷⁸ People interpret modernity, especially its relationship with Christianity, in their own way. Inspired by Max Weber's notion of the relationship between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, Wenzhou's private entrepreneurs attribute the region's economic success to their Christian belief (although only a rare few have actually read Weber's book).⁷⁹ For many Chinese, saying that one is a Christian is the equivalent of stating that one is Western, modern, and economically successful. Discussing this view, Fenggang Yang writes that many Chinese believe the most advanced societies are "Christian countries" with Christian traditions, and some Chinese converts in the United States express the conviction that "there is a causal connection between Christianity, on the one hand, and modern market economies and political democracy, on the other."⁸⁰ Western modernity is an important ingredient in the attraction Christianity holds for urban believers.

Christians and the post-Mao state actually share many important concepts, values, and aspirations for modernity, even concerns about Chinese society's perceived moral crisis.⁸¹ As Nanlai Cao has argued, "Chinese Christians are not simply victims of the state modernizing project; nor is the

16 post-Mao Christian revival a process of faithful believers resisting state ideology.⁸² The revival of Christianity in China today is better understood as a dynamic process in which emerging socioeconomic groups, embedded in specific historical and cultural contexts, are trying to claim their own space in which to practice a long-established faith under changing economic and political conditions. As Yoshiko Ashiwa has pointed out, “Modernity is not a one-sided project of the state to discipline people’s thoughts but is a reciprocal project of religions and states reshaping themselves and each other.”⁸³

As Bays points out, the Christian church in China is now regarded as a major nongovernmental entity, considering its size, resources, and nationwide activities.⁸⁴ Researchers are fascinated by the consequences Chinese Christianity could have for the future of civil society. Ryan Dunch insists that, despite the ongoing struggle to claim an autonomous space for religious activity in everyday experience, there is no direct correlation between Christian demands for autonomy and political opposition to the government.⁸⁵ Richard Madsen argues that the Catholic Church might prove to be more of a hindrance than a strength in attempts to form a civil society, since the Chinese Catholic Church, historically shaped by its Counter-Reformation theology, tends to be more authoritarian and less tolerant of moral pluralism. Consequently, present-day Catholics have inherited and sustained a way of life—particularism, dependence on vertical hierarchy, and factionalism—that was effective in building a strong communal identity in a preindustrial Chinese society but is not conducive to building a civil society in today’s modernizing China.⁸⁶

Wenzhou Christianity, as Nanlai Cao has argued, is unlikely to become any kind of national civil association contributing to China’s political transformation. The privileged Christian entrepreneurs of Wenzhou are striving to carve out a position as members of the emerging local elite by embracing a rather motley assemblage of evangelical Christianity, rational masculinity, state connections, a freewheeling market, and a Western lifestyle, all at once. In this process of self-creation, having a Christian identity sets someone apart as a person with a claim to higher social status, who can also assert that he or she also holds the moral high ground, thereby honing the distinction between those who are successful and those who are less so.⁸⁷

While I was in the field, I heard the popular term *civil society* employed only once, by an educated young person. In this research, it is not my plan to take up the correlations between cultural reinvention and the development of civil society in detail. The concept of civil society does not seem

to contribute to the understanding of collective motivations in the context of this research.

In Xiamen, the Christian past has become the raw material for the imagining of a modern society. Instead of the theoretically laden concept of “modernity,” my respondents use more colloquial phrases such as “modern” (*xiandai de*) and “advanced” (*fada de*) to refer to their understanding of the past. From their point of view, pre-1949 Xiamen used to be much more modern and advanced than other regions of China as a direct result of the introduction of Christianity and Western civilization in a broad sense.

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History enthusiasts in Xiamen are constructing a shared past of belonging simultaneously to the state-led modernization project and the construction of local pride. In the reproduction of discourses about what is modern and advanced, an inevitable tension arises between national narratives on Christianity’s inglorious role in modern Chinese history and alternative, more positive versions of Christianity’s image in local society. Negotiating mechanisms inevitably form around these contradictory visions.

Rediscovering and Rewriting the Christian Past in Xiamen

People from Xiamen display a particular enthusiasm for the history of Gulangyu, and many are now interested in rediscovering and celebrating the islet’s Christian past. I found this striking because links with the past are so often overlooked in studies of Chinese Christianity. This research shows that without knowing the past of Christianity in a particular context, we cannot fully understand how Christianity became indigenized in Chinese society and how it shaped the social fabric, as well as how Chinese people perceive the role of Christianity in their social life.

Studies of China understandably emphasize official manipulations of social memory, yet they have generally neglected the way people respond to and engage with these manipulated narratives of the past, particularly when it comes to Christianity. While a few scholars have examined the influence of history in Chinese Catholicism,⁸⁸ when it comes to Chinese Protestantism, the uses and values of history remain an understudied topic.⁸⁹

What is fascinating is that people in present-day Xiamen society are precisely now engaged in rediscovering the past. Since Christianity entered the region over 180 years ago, the faith has grown and become rooted in local sociocultural structures. Recently there has been a burgeoning movement in Xiamen to rewrite the Christian past and reconstruct its historical

narratives, as I describe in the following chapters. History enthusiasts, both Christian and non-Christian, are devoting themselves to reinterpreting the legacy of the church and publicly celebrating their connections to the past. This is a civil movement on a local level that questions, even challenges, official historical narratives. The citizens who are involved in this movement are local history experts (*difang wenshi zhuanjia*)—elderly people who, while not possessing any professional training in history, are interested in collecting documents and preserving or publicizing the city's history. Even the local government acknowledges and makes use of church heritage for pragmatic purposes.

The enthusiasm that people from Xiamen now have for reconstructing a glorious Christian past is, to some extent, an expression of present grievances. They lament recent social changes in Gulangyu and the subsequent decline of Christianity on the island. To them, Christianity in Gulangyu is inextricably intertwined with a certain vision of modernity. In the aftermath of China's defeat in the Opium War with Great Britain, Xiamen was forcibly opened up to the outside world as one of the five treaty ports ceded to the British, and Gulangyu was thrust into a Western-led modernization process. As I examine in the following chapters, Christianity, in conjunction with imperialism, played a major role in reshaping the sociocultural context of the island.

Trinity Church (Sanyi tang), built in 1934, bore witness to the heyday of Christianity on this small island. Remarkably, Trinity Church survived the repressive and violent political campaigns against religion during the Maoist era, and it was reopened and revived as a site of worship in 1979. However, the church is now doomed to a decline in numbers and influence because of government-led efforts to commercialize the island in a push to make it more tourist-friendly. When I was invited to the church's eightieth anniversary celebration in October 2014, I witnessed firsthand how church people responded to the state modernization project by reminiscing about its glorious past and grieving over its irreversible fate.

As an essential ingredient of the social fabric in Xiamen, the Christian past has drawn extensive attention from both within and beyond the Xiamen Christian community. When I went to Xiamen at the end of 2013, my respondents repeatedly mentioned a memorial service for an American missionary, John Otte, that had been organized by a non-Christian group several years earlier. Under Maoism, Otte had been denounced as an "imperialist rogue," yet the commemoration countered the charges that had been laid against him and highly commended him for the contributions he

had made to Gulangyu. The ceremony reversed the grassroots discourse on missionaries in a broader sense.

The memorial for Otte to some extent inspired and encouraged local history experts to embark on a study of the Christian history of Xiamen. This was a bold step because the Chinese Communist regime has had a monopoly on the writing of history as a national project since it took power in 1949. Today, all publications on religion in mainland China continue to be published under strict censorship; some are banned from being printed, whereas some have to be revised, in particular those parts referring to religious repression after 1949.

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The official Christian history of Xiamen, as yet unpublished and incomplete, is a prime example of how contentious this history can be. In the late 1980s, the Xiamen Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), a branch of a local government that is in charge of regulating religious organizations, assigned the City's Christian community with the task of writing the history of Christianity in Xiamen. A manuscript was eventually completed in 1993 but failed to satisfy either the government or the church community. The assignment was passed on to several other writers, but so far no acceptable manuscript has been completed. The project apparently cannot reach a satisfactory conclusion. Meanwhile, local history experts have taken matters into their own hands and have translated English-language history books or written their own. Some have succeeded in having their work published through "unofficial" (to some extent "illegal") channels; others have failed. A growing number of people are beginning to narrate the past of their Christian families, including compiling genealogies that trace their families back to the first convert or circulating memoirs of their Christian ancestors.⁹⁰

This phenomenon immediately raises the question: Why does the past of Christianity matter so much to the people of Xiamen? The answers to this are many and varied, but one major reason is that the version of the official narratives endorsed by the state conflicts so deeply with their own understanding of their shared past. Importantly, these unofficial, rather than the official, versions are providing people with an alternative historical knowledge of Christianity.

These negotiations of the Christian past are not only embodied in issues of memory or history; they are also seen in church practices. Trinity Church has sought the involvement of international Christian agencies in its efforts to revive the once thriving Christian movement on Gulangyu. One of the matters investigated in this book is a fellowship established by Chinese American missionaries under the aegis of an officially registered

church. Contrary to the popular perception that Christianity is becoming indigenized in China, this American ministry is aware of the fascination the outside world holds for young Chinese people and does its best to display its “foreign” (especially American) features to attract young believers. This present-day transnational ministry diverges considerably from the perennially assumed connection to imperialism in the official discourse of the Chinese state. Its presentation of Christianity in a package with the modern image of the United States has deeply influenced young people, not only in their beliefs but also in their understanding of modern society and Christianity. Indeed, the cooperation between local churches and the American Christian agency has not been all plain sailing but has turned out to be troublesome for both sides.

To understand the collective passion for reinventing the past in Xiamen, it is important to understand the local sense of nostalgia, the way in which individuals or social groups seek to re-create the past to satisfy their present needs. As Peter Nosco describes, nostalgia can be a response to dissatisfaction with one’s immediate situation, engendering a desire to idealize past events. By looking backward to an idealized past, one can momentarily disengage oneself from the unsatisfactory present.⁹¹

My respondents, consciously or unconsciously, often mentioned the glorious past of Gulangyu. Then they would shake their heads and heave a sigh about how the island had deteriorated culturally in the wake of the local government’s efforts to expand tourist revenue. While the government unilaterally tried to discredit historical missionary activity, the people I spoke with invariably overembellish the city’s past by intentionally dissociating Christianity from colonialism, and exaggerating the church’s role in the modernization of Xiamen. What they are doing is in some ways similar to what the state does, rewriting historical narratives to fit with a specific version of the present; only they are operating from a diametrically opposite perspective. This fixation on an imagined past might explain why local people have no interest in the present-day American evangelists, even though they cherish missionary history and see the erstwhile missionaries as having made a valuable contribution to the region’s prosperous past.

Success in cultural reinvention can only be achieved when the timing is right and when there is a certain degree of liberty to do so. The historical and sociopolitical contexts are too important to be overlooked. The previous decade saw a nationwide movement for recording oral history that at times challenged official narratives. One salient movement is the current “Republican fever” (*Minguo re*)—namely, the upsurge in public support in

China for the legacy of the Republican era. The roots of this great yearning for Republican freedom and democracy can be traced precisely to dissatisfaction with China's present situation.⁹²

What is happening in Xiamen is occurring at a significant historical juncture. It is important to note that some locals share a collective need for this sort of reinvention and believe that writing their own history is essential to the survival of their social collectivity. A conviction about such a need pushes people to group together and join in the process. If the group enjoys a relaxed and liberal political climate, it could engage in cultural reinvention without fear of reprisals for its members and without its cultural practices being repressed. Nevertheless, the political climate in which this reinvention is taking place is far from liberal. We should bear in mind that, as a national project, social memory or history writing in modern China has been dominated by social engineers who invariably try to dictate citizens' remembrance and forgetting.⁹³ Even today, Chinese authorities seek to keep a tight rein on society's memories. Jun Jing puts it on three levels: "At the archival level, such control takes the form of restricting access to historical documents. At the level of mass media and public education, control is exercised through censorship, political propaganda, and the careful writing and rewriting of history textbooks. At a more personal level, control relies on intimidation and, sometimes, physical punishment of those who offer a radically different and unwelcome version of the past, particularly when it touches on the history of the Communist Party."⁹⁴

Social Memory: Theoretical Considerations

Traditional historiography saw memory as being essentially different from history because memory was considered an unreliable source. However, more recently, scholars have reconsidered the distinction between memory and history, and memory has now become a newly valued source of evidence in historical research. Yet conversely, as a consequence of postmodernism, the way we understand "objective" truth and whether there is indeed a "truth" has changed, blurring the boundaries between history and memory.⁹⁵

In this research, I have moved away from trying to distinguish memory and history, leaving this question to more eminent specialists. Terminologies like "social memory" and "history" will be used alternately without being strictly defined, but with the proviso that "history" is most often used to describe representations of the past that appear in written form,

22 while “social memory” refers to living information about social events that members of a particular society conserve in their minds. Throughout the book, unless noted, these two terms always refer to the past.

Memory, Power, and the Invention of Tradition

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs pioneered the study of what he termed “collective memory,” which, as he established, is connected to particular social groups. He argued that there are as many collective memories as there are groups and institutions in a society, and all memories are structured by group identities. Therefore, the study of memory must be placed within a social framework, taking into account the impact of such social institutions as family, community, religious group, tradition, and social class.⁹⁶

Following the Durkheimian understanding of social continuity, Halbwachs asserted that the past is a social construction mainly shaped by present concerns and developed the notion that present concerns determine what we remember. This influential idea has since been developed further by other scholars. George H. Mead, for example, claims that the past is construed from the standpoint of today’s new problems.⁹⁷ Ian M. L. Hunter states that the primary function of memory “is not to conserve the past but to make possible adjustment to the requirements of the present.”⁹⁸

The invention of tradition approach argues that the past is shaped to suit the interests of dominant groups in the present. According to this perspective, the most prominent members of society tend to dominate its way of thinking and seize every means available to exploit public ideas about the past: public commemorations, school syllabuses, and the mass media, as well as sources such as official records and chronologies. As Paul Connerton writes, people’s image of the past commonly legitimates the present social order.⁹⁹ Thus, power relations have become a central theme in memory studies. Michel Foucault’s work has been influential in this regard, arguing that memory “is actually a very important factor in struggle . . . if one controls the memory of the people, one controls their dynamism. . . . It is vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, administer it, tell it what it must contain.”¹⁰⁰

In this approach, researchers have illustrated how new traditions and histories are invented to legitimize political structures, solidify social orders, and sustain national communities. Yet in defining social memories as inventions of the past, scholars tend to focus on the officially led institutionalization of remembrance or the creation of a master narrative

of a common history to the exclusion of experiences outside of official narratives.

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) represents this perspective. "Traditions which appear or claim to be old," as Hobsbawm points out, "are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented." Invented tradition, he postulates, is taken to mean "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."¹⁰¹

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While the Durkheimian tradition argues that people remember collectively and selectively, the invention of tradition approach suggests more directly who is responsible for this selective remembering; that is, who controls or imposes the content of social memories. The official manipulation of these narratives of the past, resulting in the production of official memory, is embodied in both socially organized forgetting and socially organized remembering, legitimizing and stabilizing the political orders and interests of ruling groups.

This state-centered approach emphasizes the mechanism of state rituals as an effective means to produce official narrative. In the course of the last century, communist revolutions eliminated the rituals and symbols of the ancien régime from which they took over and invented new ones to replace them. Paving the way for new social memories, communist regimes designed new flags, rewrote school textbooks, and thought up new national events to be commemorated.¹⁰²

Undeniably, there is a long-standing tradition of ruling groups controlling the writing of history in China. Each of China's dynasties sought to legitimize its power through new interpretations of history. One of a dynasty's first acts to consolidate its rule was invariably to write the history of the preceding dynasty.¹⁰³ Since 1949, the People's Republic has continued this tradition, making Marxist historiography an important sphere of ideological control.¹⁰⁴ Under the rule of the CCP, the careful crafting of history has been a monopoly of the state, shaping social memory. In some areas, freedom of discussion is either absent or strictly limited; any conflict with official narratives invites persecution.¹⁰⁵

The ruling groups in China are well aware that the only dependable way of making people effectively forget one thing without the aid of natural amnesia is to make them remember another with greater effect. The art of official amnesia, therefore, "always goes hand in hand with the art of political remembrance."¹⁰⁶ The political elites indicate which part of past experience

should be remembered or forgotten according to the current political line.¹⁰⁷ Certain past episodes have been thoroughly erased from both official history and personal memory, leaving those who are ruled with a seemingly plausible representation of the past that elides a great deal of politically laden experiences. The colonization of public and private space, as Rubie Watson has declared, constitutes one of the hallmarks of state socialism.¹⁰⁸

Numerous ethnographies of China since 1949 have shown that technologies of memory were deployed and embodied in various political movements, such as “speaking bitterness” (*suku*) and the Large-Scale Production Campaign (Dashengchan yundong).¹⁰⁹ “Speaking bitterness,” in which people were pushed to mold their personal memories around Communist tropes of suffering and liberation, served as an important psychological mechanism to mobilize rural people against the politically constructed landlord class. Modern Chinese history has been written so as to maximize the gratitude due to the Communist Party. Therefore, written history serves as a record of debts that the ruled owed the rulers. Alongside this kind of history there has developed another practice known as *yiku sitian*—recalling the bitterness of the past so as to appreciate the sweetness of the present, establishing a debtor-creditor relationship with the state.¹¹⁰

When attention is paid to who controls or imposes invented memories, social memory appears as an ideology serving the interests of the powerful, an instrument of elite manipulation used to control lower classes. Because the social and cultural aspects of memory are underplayed, as Alon Confino points out, it “becomes a prisoner of political reductionism and functionalism.”¹¹¹ Nevertheless, it is also misleading to equate memory with ideology. One of the chief purposes of ideology is to act as a sort of cement that will guarantee national cohesion; hence it is monolithic. On the other hand, although social memory can strengthen, it can also cause discord. It is crucial to remember that the memory of a social group cannot always be reduced to the political aim of sustaining relations of power as it is not necessarily solely imposed from above.

Popular Memory: Contesting Dominant Ideology

The official manipulation of social memory is not always effective. Individuals and subgroups have their own, often quite strong opinions, and therefore they will readily repudiate any depiction of the past that conflicts with what they personally can recollect and what they perceive to be the truth. As Michael Schudson has pointed out, “The past is not only the stories

people tell of it; it is the claim of events that set the conditions about which people feel compelled to tell stories.”¹¹² In other words, collective memory is not so easy to undermine or distort. A dominant power that ignores the authenticity and experience of memories held by any group under its sway risks being challenged or accused of unethical behavior. Moreover, the negative memories produced by a ruling group might challenge its legitimacy, and a regime could fall if it creates too many bad memories and fails to eradicate them.¹¹³ It is not always possible to impose totally invented or fabricated traditions on people regardless of the political system, democratic or undemocratic. As Jun Jing writes, “The transmission of memory involves a large armamentarium of symbolic resources and moral evaluation, in which the worth of political control itself can be questioned and even challenged.”¹¹⁴ In this sense, this state-centered memory approach tends to presume the ruled to be passive recipients of assigned narratives and simplifies the multidimensional relations between the people and the state.

In discussions of the popular memory approach, scholars are particularly interested in the issue of unofficial narratives shared by members of certain social segments who do not necessarily adhere to the dominant, public, or official representations of the past. This approach, inspired by Foucault’s notion of countermemory, observes that memories can be socially constituted from below as well as from above. The articulation of countermemories has been taken as evidence of resistance to various forms of domination.¹¹⁵ Unlike the official memory approach, which assumes that memories are socially constituted from above, popular memory theory emphasizes that cogent memory can also be constructed from the grassroots.¹¹⁶

These forms of political control over society’s memory have been extensively researched in terms of the relationship between the Chinese party-state and intellectuals.¹¹⁷ But more research needs to be done, especially grassroots studies that focus on local reactions to official manipulations of social memory.

Memory as a Domain of Dynamic Negotiation

What this analysis of popular and official memory shows is that there are limitations to the construction of overarching official historical narratives. The past is often resistant to efforts to make it over; permanent and changing versions of history are always mutually imbricated. Taking this into consideration, we need to develop a more complex perspective, which acknowledges that dominant constructions of memory can be challenged

or even rejected by ordinary citizens, and that various elements are often simultaneously in play. Thus, memory is a domain of dynamic negotiation. This approach shifts our focus toward a more complex view of how past and present interact with each other in the formation of collective memory, positing that it is an operative process of sense-making over time.¹¹⁸

As Barbara Misztal argues, this perspective allows us to understand “commemoration as a struggle or negotiation between competing narratives and stresses that the dynamics of commemorative rituals involves a constant tension between creating, preserving, and destroying memories.”¹¹⁹ In this context, commemoration is seen as a socially constructed and contested process that is shaped by, and shapes, the present as well as the past. Social memory is viewed as a continuous exercise in dialogue and consequently, when examined, it reveals the restrictions placed on the ability of actors to refashion history in general or what might have happened to them personally to suit what they want to achieve now.¹²⁰ Hence, the dynamic negotiation perspective argues that memory is not constrained solely by the official narrative but recognizes that commemoration can also be constructed and contested by ordinary citizens. It sees memory as inhabiting the space left over between what is imposed by ideology and the possibility that there might be other ways of understanding and interpreting experience.

Generally speaking, the virtue of this approach is that it avoids political reductionism and functionalism. As Misztal notes, it “runs a lower risk of reifying collective memory as it is aware of the flexibility and ambiguities of memory and because it incorporates conflict, contest, and controversy as the hallmarks of memory.”¹²¹

This research adopts the dynamic negotiation perspective, starting from the assumption that the history of Chinese Christianity is not a free field that can be repeatedly contrived to suit particular purposes. As I show in the following chapters, efforts to stamp out any alternative version of Christian history in Xiamen, or indeed to browbeat people into submission, have not been nor will be effective enough to guarantee that imposed interpretations of past events will find general acceptance.

Doing Fieldwork in Xiamen

This research is based on materials collected during fieldwork in Xiamen between 2011 and 2015. My field study was undertaken in three parts. The

first began in May 2011 and continued up to the spring of 2012. At that time, I focused on transnational Christian networks, in particular a group of Chinese Americans who have devoted themselves to bridging the gap between Chinese society and American Christianity. The second part was conducted from December 2013 to May 2014, as well as in October 2014. The final trip came in November 2015. During my fieldwork, the School of Public Affairs of Xiamen University where I pursued my master's degree offered me letters of introduction bearing official seals to assist my visits to the Xiamen Archives and the Xiamen RAB. In China, a letter of introduction from an official or quasi-official agency is necessary to access government and other sorts of work units (*danwei*).

When interviewing people within or outside of the church community, I referred to my status as an affiliate of Leiden University. It turned out that my research benefited from the foreign associations conferred by a Western university. I would have been less welcome if I had come as a local student. My background prompted my respondents to discuss the decline in Christian beliefs in Europe (in particular the Netherlands, where they noted that prostitution, homosexual marriage, and personal use of marijuana are all legal) and also led to a request from local history experts who were looking for help locating foreign historical materials related to the Xiamen church.

Whenever I gained access to archives and interviewed officials in religious affairs, I showed letters of introduction from Xiamen University. Even so, most officials were hesitant to share their ideas about Christianity with me.

One afternoon in April 2014, I made a visit to the Xiamen Archives. Before I had even entered the door to the reception room, I heard the sounds of an emotional debate. A man who had requested access to his father's personnel file (*dang'an*) had been refused. A staff member explained the policy to him, stating that only his father himself was qualified to see it. "But my father is bedridden. Do I need to carry him over here?" He was filled with rage at the way he was being prevented from seeing his own father's file.

I was carrying an official letter of introduction in the hopes that it would give me access to church archives. After showing the letter, I was asked to fill in a form and to check the boxes associated with the subjects listed. I was surprised to see a short list indicating very limited information. Contrary to the list I had been given, when I had been to the archives I already knew that a local church member had copied hundreds of pages of historical documents relating to the city's Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) just

two years earlier. Even worse, when the junior staff member submitted my request to her superior in charge, the latter rejected more than half of items on the list. What I was allowed to access were merely policy documents that had been made public and could be found online. They explained that a notice had been issued not long before stating that archives relating to sensitive religious questions were not open to the public; an official letter of introduction from religious affairs authorities would be required to grant me greater access. However, shortly afterward my request for such a letter was rejected by an RAB official. This experience depressed me, but it also helped me understand the difficulty in accessing church histories during the Maoist era. Historical archives concerning post-1949 Christianity are now under even stricter control than they were before.

Just one month after initiating the second phase of my field study, I was left feeling extremely frustrated. I was quite aware of the difficulties in investigating foreigners' transnational Christian activities because I had a thorough knowledge of the state policies and appreciated the complexities. Nevertheless, I still underestimated how challenging it would be. These Chinese American missionaries were alert to any potential risk when I explained my purpose. The problem, I later realized, was that I had assumed a fairly "open" landscape in the Xiamen church and that I would encounter no problems in doing research on such fashionable themes as modernity and transnationalism. My intention was to identify the characteristics of Christianity in Xiamen and compare it with other areas such as Wenzhou.

In his study of a Chinese Catholic community, Wu Fei has said, "Like a stonemason, I attempt to carve a regularly shaped artifact, to be named 'academic research,' out of a single piece of stone. However, is it really my work to dress or cut the stone according to my own likes and dislikes?"¹²² When I realized the problem, I decided to depart from my intended focus and reacquaint myself with the Xiamen church community from another, hopefully more objective, angle. Then as I worked, I became conscious that my fieldwork was taking place at a historical juncture at which local people had just begun to be concerned about their Christian legacy. This prompted me to shift my focus to locals' efforts to reconstruct the Christian past.

The fact that I am not a Christian rarely proved to be a significant hindrance to my research but it did sometimes affect how people perceived and responded to me in the field. On one occasion an unregistered church leader refused my request for a conversation, even though I had been introduced by his fellow preacher. He gave a straightforward justification from a typically Christian perspective: "Such a non-Christian from a secular

university could not understand our faith in Christ.” I supposed that his reaction was prompted largely by safety reasons in the current political context, and I fully understood the fragility of his position as an unrecognized church leader. On many other occasions, Christians told me that I could not understand their faith and experience unless I accepted Jesus as my savior.

When I was in Wenzhou, a pastor who gave me accommodation reiterated this view over and over again. In one conversation, he mentioned a scholar from Beijing who once visited his church and authored an article on it. “I read her article. With all due respect, from the Christian view, these articles written by non-Christians are ridiculous.” His contempt for nonbelievers’ research turned up again and again in our everyday conversations and made me quite uncomfortable. I then responded, “With all due respect, from the non-Christian view, articles written by Christians are sometimes ridiculous too.” He forced a slight, reluctant smile but did not say anything. My sudden impulsive response embarrassed him. Since then I have often pondered why many Christians insist that their beliefs could not be comprehended. Is it simply because of my lack of religious experience? The only thing I can assume is that these believers must have already generated their own interpretive systems that run contrary to the aims and assumptions of non-Christians.

In the past the composition of China’s Christian population has frequently been described in Chinese as “three-many”—that is, many female, many old, and many illiterate believers.¹²³ Recently, however, an increasing number of young, educated people are attending urban churches in economically advanced regions, a trend that is gradually changing the composition of today’s Christian population. Xiamen Christians invariably profess the city’s long-standing Christian tradition and wish to demonstrate their cultural superiority. “Even the finest dignitaries,” a local intellectual proudly said to me, “bow their noble heads when they set foot on Gulangyu.”

Rather than identify myself as a “cultural Christian,” a term popular in Chinese society to refer to someone who appreciates the Christian doctrine and the faith but has no personal commitment to the church,¹²⁴ when asked I replied that I regarded myself as a “seeker” (*mudaoyou*). This term is used in Chinese, both among Christians and more generally, to refer to someone who is keen to learn about a religion but has not yet converted to it.

My respondents often tried to convert me. Apparently, I disappointed all of them. They felt sorry to have to tell me that I would not be saved without Jesus as my savior. I often gave them an excuse, claiming that it

was necessary to distance myself from the faith in order to maintain a certain degree of objectivity. I appreciated that many of them understood the requirements of scientific research. I attended various church services just as an ordinary Christian would do and became familiar with their faith by reading the Bible, listening to sermons, and singing hymns. As often as possible, I made my presence visible on various occasions. But I neither prayed in public nor participated in Communion, a rite reserved for church members only.

In October 2011, I attended a closed men's retreat held by a Chinese American fellowship. When sharing testimonies, my emotions spun out of control and I burst into tears. Since that time, I have become more aware of the dangers of becoming profoundly involved in religious experiences and reminded myself from time to time of my role as a researcher rather than a believer. However, precisely because of this unexpected episode, I caught the attention of the leader who believed that I would accept Jesus soon. Even though I did not convert, I did become more popular and credible among members of that fellowship, a step that greatly facilitated my investigation.

Although local history experts are keen to explore the Christian past, their efforts are often restricted because of limited sources and lack of foreign language skills. Ma Zhenyu, a retired engineer who was in charge of writing the history of Trinity Church, came to seek my assistance. The biggest difficulty in the construction of Trinity Church in 1936 had been constructing the roof. Thanks to a Dutch engineer from the Netherlands Harbor Works Company, who was living in Xiamen, a roof for the new structure was finally designed and the church building was completed one month before it hosted the second National Bible Assembly in July 1936. As the engineer had solved the most difficult part in the construction process, Ma believed that his name should be committed to memory. Ma did his utmost but still could not identify the engineer. When he heard that I was doing my doctoral research in the Netherlands, he invited me to lunch and requested my help. As soon as I returned to Leiden, I devoted myself to the matter. However, because of the multiple restructurings of the company, I was unable to locate the engineer's name. Ma then asked me to bring a picture of the current company building with me to the church. To my surprise, my picture was projected on a big screen during his testimony at the church's eightieth anniversary celebration. On behalf of the church, he spoke of his appreciation of my help and even listed my name among his

most important sources. An American guest joked with me, saying, “Now you’re famous.”

Given my active involvement and assistance, Ma said to me, “You are no longer an outsider (*wairen*).” Every time he presented me to other church people, he introduced me with the words: “He is the young man from the Netherlands who tried to help us identify the Dutch engineer.” Although my name was far from familiar among those Christians, after this the distance between me and these church members had indeed narrowed. My research benefited from becoming not just part of the church community but also part of the cause to which local people were so committed.

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I collected historical materials for those who appreciate the past of the Xiamen region in general and the role of Christianity in particular. In so doing, I became far better acquainted with two key pastors and several local history experts, who were delighted to be of assistance. Quite apart from research purposes, I gladly contributed to the local cultural or church activities because I appreciate these people’s growing cultural awareness and enthusiasm to narrate alternative histories. I have to say that the refocused theme of my research is more welcome among the local history experts who consider me as their companion in history issues, even though I have repeatedly explained my research subject. In a sense, they appreciate my research as they rightly think that their commitment and efforts are being recorded.

Being Chinese helped me avoid the official restrictions that often hinder foreign researchers from participating in Christians’ everyday lives in China. I was well aware that the theme of my research could be quite sensitive and might cause my informants unwanted trouble. The first priority in my research was to avoid putting them into any kind of difficulty, even though Christians are no longer under pressure to renounce their religion (but still cannot join the CCP without doing so). Those who are still alive will remain anonymous throughout this research, despite prior public disclosure of persons and/or events existing in published forms (including newspaper and internet articles). However, I cannot keep the geographical site of my research anonymous, as many sociological or anthropological studies have traditionally done, because this research needs to be located in the historical, political, and social contexts of modern and contemporary Xiamen to make sense of the collective enthusiasm for connecting the past to the present and how this is undertaken. Moreover, the locality is referred to in detail, and some of the historical and geographical information would

easily lead readers to Xiamen; any efforts to keep the place unidentified would be in vain.

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When collecting my data, I conducted interviews and occasionally used participant observation. Sixty-one people acted as my respondents (some of them on a number of occasions; eighty-one interviews in total were carried out), including those with twelve pastors and eight local history experts. In most cases, informal conversations, rather than (semi)structured interviews, were preferable. I did design major questions but, in many cases, let them tell their stories freely. They were all aware of my identity as a researcher and what the purpose of our conversations was. Careful consideration was given to information derived from discussions that they specifically asked me not to publish. In the case of some quotations that are essential to the analysis, I have carefully changed the informants' personal details to preserve their anonymity.

I studied at Xiamen University from 2007 to 2012, giving me a sense of familiarity with the region. The Southern Fujian dialect (Minnanhua), which is significantly different from Mandarin (Putonghua), the official language, is used by many local people. Xiamen is a city of domestic migration in which a large proportion of the population are not native speakers of the local dialect. As a result, in my fieldwork all conversations were conducted in Mandarin. Even so, I was aware that the use of Mandarin could potentially color the research. To reduce any negative impact, each time I sensed something in interviews might be inaccurate or contradictory, I posed the same question to other respondents and compared their answers.

Throughout the research, I identified myself as a narrator who retells the stories of those who are recounting the Christian past. Locals may not always agree with my perspective, and unfortunately I expect that many will never have access to my research. However, I often think of Wu Fei's image of the stonemason as a metaphor for how we shape the raw material of our research, and I have tried to be as accurate and respectful as possible in presenting the narratives and thoughts they were generous enough to share with me.

Organization of the Book

In addition to the introduction, this book has five major chapters and conclusion. In chapter 1, I give a complete picture of the region of Xiamen,

covering the geographical, administrative, historical, social, and cultural contexts of the broader region as well as Gulangyu Island, the focal point of my research. The social change that has affected Gulangyu and its Christian community are described in detail, showing the complex connections between Christianity, nationalism, imperialism, and Communist movements that serve as the backdrop for the present production of Christian history. Chapter 2 examines a memorial service held in Xiamen in 2010 for an American missionary who died and was buried there in 1910, and how local history enthusiasts, as well as government authorities, are reclaiming and rewriting ideas about the region's foreign missionaries. Chapter 3 recounts the eightieth anniversary celebration of Trinity Church in October 2014 and the life story of "Old Pastor" Wen, who was instrumental in the church's survival and revival through successive political movements. The chapter reflects on the fate of Christianity on the changing island and how the church has responded to state modernization projects, reinterpreting its glorious past, and grieving over its irreversible fate. In chapter 4, I depict tensions and connections in the creation and publication of Christian history texts between the state, churches, and enthusiastic amateur historians.

Chapter 5 explores the role of a foreign missionary organization in reviving the lagging Trinity Church, revealing the complex mechanisms at work in the interactions between churches, "new era" evangelists, and local authorities. Though it has been immensely successful and long-lasting by local standards, the international Christian agency has continued to experience tensions with the Chinese Christian community because of its political sensitivity, as well as its absence from the historical tradition and present-day social fabric. Finally, in the conclusion, I revisit the central themes of my research and point to some of its broader implications.