

# **Migration, Religious Conversion, and Transnational Activism: A Vancouver Chinese Church's Quest to Change China**

by

Joshua Tan

B.A. (summa cum laude), New York University, 2016

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

(History)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

May 2018

© Joshua Tan, 2018

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

MIGRATION, RELIGIOUS CONVERSION, AND TRANSNATIONAL ACTIVISM: A  
VANCOUVER CHINESE CHURCH'S QUEST TO CHANGE CHINA

Submitted by JOSHUA TAN in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS in HISTORY

**Examining Committee:**

GLEN PETERSON, HISTORY

Supervisor

LEO K. SHIN, HISTORY & ASIAN STUDIES

Supervisory Committee Member

DONALD L. BAKER, ASIAN STUDIES

Supervisory Committee Member

## **Abstract**

Exile or migration, and religious conversion, are two powerful impetuses for people disillusioned with existing regimes to improve their predicament and find new sources of meaning and purpose. Whereas both the study of overseas Chinese, as well as religion in modern China, have flourished since China's era of reform and opening— alongside growing religious practice and reinvigorated transnational networks— scholarship in both fields has paid insufficient attention to transnational Chinese communities drawn along religious lines, and their potency to mobilize for activist causes in China. This thesis draws attention to the confluence of migration, religious conversion, and transnational activism to “change China” among a generation of intellectuals who exited China in the aftermath of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. Taking as case study a Vancouver Chinese church which grew commensurate with mainland Chinese migrations to Vancouver since the early 1990s, this thesis argues that that conversion to Christianity among members of this congregation enacted a change in self-identify from “migrant” to “self-exile,” a transformation embodied by its activist-turned-pastor. However, despite their remaining abroad and eschewing complicity with an unjust Communist regime in China, they remain intimately concerned with Chinese politics and seek to enact change in China through performative solidarity with “persecuted” Christian groups in China.

## **Preface**

I hereby certify that this thesis is my original work, and that the research has been cleared by the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board, ethics certificate H17-00783 “Chinese Urban Church Protest.”

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Table of Contents.....</b>	<b>v</b>
Acknowledgements.....	vi
.	
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 A prayer to China.....	1
1.2 The Pilgrimage from Tiananmen Square: Taking a Vancouver Chinese Church as Case Study.....	3
1.3 Post-Reform transnational networks: “Good” and “Bad” religion.....	8
1.4 Exile and Transnational Activism.....	13
1.5 FCNABC, a “China-oriented” church in Canada.....	15
<b>Chapter 2: Post-Tiananmen Chinese-Christian encounters.....</b>	<b>19</b>
2.1 <i>Pathway in the Wilderness</i> : One Chinese Intellectual’s Road to Faith.....	22
2.2 A new “China-oriented” congregation takes form .....	25
<b>Chapter 3: Migration, Conversion and Chinese Identity.....</b>	<b>35</b>
3.1 The “moral significance” of migration.....	38
3.2 Conversion, self-exile, and new identities abroad.....	41
3.3 Converting China from afar.....	46
<b>Chapter 4: Reconnecting with China through religion.....</b>	<b>47</b>
4.1 Solidarity with a dissident Beijing church.....	48
4.2 Rituals of Intimacy.....	52
4.3 Imagined Transnational Ties.....	56
<b>Chapter 5: Conclusion.....</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>62</b>

## Acknowledgements

My first debt of gratitude goes to the Chinese Christians I have encountered in each of the cities I have lived for prolonged periods—Singapore, New York, Tel Aviv, and Vancouver—who truly have redefined, at least in my mind, what it means to be Chinese, and to be Christian. Their life-stories have complicated the assumptions upon which my secular intellectual milieu were based, foregrounding how Christianity could in fact provide liberating visions of social and moral progress for individuals coming-of-age in militantly atheistic, authoritarian Communist regimes. Pastor Hong Yujian and the congregants of FCNABC in Vancouver deserve special thanks, for their willingness to share their experiences, and granting me access to their church and personal archives. Even though our viewpoints have not always converged, listening to stories of carefully considered adult-conversion lent me sensitivity to how newfound faith may be appealing in times of dislocation, loss, and trauma. I hope that the leaders and members of FCNABC will be heartened with my attempt as an outsider, to genuinely understand their deep, heartfelt aspirations for the future of China, and communicate their cause to a wider audience.

This “initiation” of-sorts into the academic world was prompted, encouraged, and sustained by excellent mentorship, and I am truly grateful for the academic advisors who have played a formative role in shaping my scholarship. Dr. Rebecca Karl at New York University, my undergraduate thesis supervisor, in many ways, was my first role-model for critical thinking, writing, and activism. My current supervisor, Dr. Glen Peterson has been a calm voice of reason amidst my penchant for vacillating-between-topics in my first semester as a graduate student. His guidance throughout this project allowed me to better articulate my various interests at points of transition, and ultimately bring them all together. Dr. Timothy Cheek, and Dr. Jeremy Brown have both been formative in shaping my reflection about China, and I have benefited immensely

from their teaching and feedback on my writing at various stages. The China Cluster at UBC was my first opportunity to present an initial draft of this thesis, and I am thankful for the suggestions provided at that meeting, especially by Dr. Diana Lary, Dr. Wang Yi, Dr. Leo Shin, and Luther Cenci, which have been incorporated into this thesis. My cohort of graduate students at UBC deserve special mention for gamely reading and commenting on a topic of which they had little prior knowledge, with enthusiasm, care, and grace; I am thankful not simply for their thoughtful feedback and suggestions, but also for the companionship and camaraderie fostered in our time spent together. In Singapore, Dr. Huang Jianli and Dr. Francis Lim were generous with their time, and provided much-needed inspiration that sustained my process of writing. Wilson Lee, Zi Yanyin, and Zhang Zilong were always present to listen, discuss, and draw me out of numerous conundrums. Ma Nan, Guldana Salmijan, and Wei Wei, were companionable friends in Vancouver who made my stint there truly enjoyable.

Finally, my family has always been supportive, even when at times my research interests seemed disconcerting and potentially dangerous. My father, amateur historian in his own right, has never withheld encouragement, and was at the time of writing also compiling a history of the Chinese church in Singapore his grandfather used to pastor. Xu Mengxi has been a constant source of support, refuge, and comfort, and I thank her for always keeping me grounded, and focused on the things that matter most.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 A prayer to China

On an unremarkable winter's evening in December, 2008, an estimated five hundred Mainland-Chinese-émigré Christians hailing from all around the world, gathered on a California beach near San Francisco, to pray. In the words of reporters present, they looked straight across the Pacific Ocean in the direction of their motherland China, and for over an hour that afternoon stood tearfully and passionately praying for the salvation of China, and its 1.3 billion unsaved souls.<sup>1</sup> The occasion for this masterfully orchestrated spectacle, was a conference entitled *Testimonies of this Generation*, a large-scale meeting organized by a Christian nonprofit China Soul for Christ Foundation. That its convener, the dissident Chinese author-turned-itinerant evangelist Yuan Zhiming chose to foreground the peculiarities of *this generation*, underscored a belief in divine providence at that particular moment: Christianity would be China's salvation, and this generation of Christian converts abroad would be the vanguard in China's imminent spiritual-political transformation.<sup>2</sup>



Delegates at “Testimonies of this generation” praying alongside the Pacific Ocean<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Testimonies of this generation: Special evangelistic meeting on the *other side*. Christianity Missionary Resource Center <http://www.nzmorningstar.info/mstar/home/index.php?option=loadfmicatitembyid&Itemid=691&date=1-1> (last accessed, Nov 16, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Ian Buruma, *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Photo found on google images, photographer unknown. Video footage of this communal prayer event was recorded on YouTube, and can be viewed on this link: ChinaSoul. “彼岸（九集系列纪录片）Beyond: a nine-



Indeed, those in attendance, a who's-who of this new Chinese-Christian circle, all came of age in the People's Republic of China around the late 1970s and 80s. Their conversion testimonies were rooted in collective memories of Maoism, Reform, and many cited the failed democracy movement and crackdown on Tiananmen square in 1989, as a crucial point which turned them from believers in communism to followers of Christ. In line with the providential significance ascribed to the present moment, religious faith was not simply a source of individual comfort and meaning, but pronounced as the ultimate solution to China's woes— its path to democracy, human rights, and eventually, heaven. As the opening speaker Liu Tongsu boldly proclaimed: "Was God's grace simply given for us? No, it is for China! We are just *carriers*, on the larger pathway to converting China!"<sup>4</sup> In this spirit then, the conference culminated with the publication of a "San Francisco Consensus"— less known in secular circles but symbolizing the coming-of-age of this burgeoning community—that summarized their aspirations for spiritual revival in China.<sup>5</sup> Following a preamble affirming some basic tenets of Protestant Christianity, it articulated their national ambitions for *all* the people of China (*zhongguoren*), for example, "May God... show grace to the Chinese people, save the Chinese people, use the Chinese people, and prosper all of humanity through the Chinese people."<sup>6</sup> It was read aloud by Pastor Hong

---

episode documentary series." YouTube video, 1:20:00. Posted May 2012. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQIz0x-NeoU&list=PL\\_rEQI64J0teJgbe08tnz7HtTmx5p048l&index=4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQIz0x-NeoU&list=PL_rEQI64J0teJgbe08tnz7HtTmx5p048l&index=4) (last accessed, March 27, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Canberramethodist. "一代人的見證 1:福音見證之夜" (Testimonies of this generation 1: a night of evangelistic testimonies). YouTube video, 22:15. Posted Sep 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijKU2kyf2lk&t=9023s> (last accessed, Nov 16, 2017)

<sup>5</sup> Luke Leung, "North America Chinese Minister's Stance on China- San Francisco Consensus," *The Gospel Herald*, Dec 16, 2008, <http://www.gospelherald.com/articles/44872/20081216/north-america-chinese-ministers-stance-on-china-san-francisco-consensus.htm> (last accessed, Nov 16, 2017). The term "Chinese" used in the document (*beimei huaren*) was already ambiguous in who the consensus claimed to represent, given that its first line unequivocally stated that they were "Christians from China" or rather mainland China, which more accurately reflected the background of the delegates and signatories

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Yujian of Vancouver—himself a key leader at the conference and main drafter of this document—to rapturous applause.

## 1.2 The Pilgrimage from Tiananmen Square: Taking a Vancouver Chinese Church as case study<sup>7</sup>

My journey of faith is intimately linked to June the Fourth (1989). The spiritual testimonies of this generation start with June the Fourth, it was June the Fourth that transformed this generations' pathways and principles, allowing this generation to walk towards faith together....

(Jin Mingri, Pastor of Zion Church in Beijing, 2008)<sup>8</sup>

This thesis tells the story of a rise in migration or exile, and religious conversion after Reform and Opening of the People's Republic of China, but especially since 1989, where a new generation of Chinese converts abroad tracing their life's transformations and subsequent worldviews to the failed ambitions on Tiananmen square, have sought to enact change in China through religious channels. It takes as case study a Chinese Church in Vancouver, Faith Chinese North American Baptist Church (溫哥華浸信會信友堂, hereafter, FCNABC) and its Pastor Hong Yujian, as a lens into how disillusioned Chinese intellectuals negotiated fraught identities in the wake of the Tiananmen square crackdown in 1989 through the dual impetuses of exile and religious conversion, and asks what was its larger impact on overseas Chinese identity and

---

<sup>7</sup> Ian Buruma, "The Pilgrimage from Tiananmen Square" in *The New York Review of Books*, April 11, 1999. Buruma's 1999 article in the New York Times magazine entitled "The Pilgrimage from Tiananmen Square," later developed in *Bad Elements* (2002), was a preliminary attempt at investigating why so many Chinese dissidents who arrived in the West after 1989, converted to Christianity. He interviewed the four co-scriptwriters of the influential documentary *River Elegy*, an influential program screened on Chinese Central Television which lamented Chinese culture for failing to modernize. After 1989, all of them were living in exile in the United States, two had converted to Christianity, and another had expressed interest in Christian values. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/11/magazine/the-pilgrimage-from-tiananmen-square.html> (Last accessed, Dec 14, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Yu, Jie, Wang Yi ed. *The Expectation for Whole Life* (一生一世的仰望). Taipei: Christian Arts Press, 2010, 49.

activism.

Beginning in the 1980s and accelerating in the 1990s, the revitalization of religious practice as well as the growing ubiquity of migration—both in and out of China—have emerged as two dominant forces influencing Chinese society and politics. Whereas scholarship on Chinese religion and Chinese overseas have previously been peripheral to the larger field of modern Chinese studies, the growing potency of religious communities, diaspora networks, and in some cases, transnational networks drawn along religious lines, renders that greater scholarly attention should be paid to Chinese religious communities in a transnational context. Recent studies on Chinese religion have flourished alongside growing religious practice,<sup>9</sup> whereas scholars of overseas Chinese have also begun to pay increasing attention to post-Reform migrations from the People's Republic of China.<sup>10</sup> Taking cue from historian Shelly Chan who has proposed looking at diaspora with “a new emphasis on temporality,” a “series of moments in which reconnections with a putative homeland takes place,”<sup>11</sup> this thesis focuses on the post-1989 exodus of Chinese intellectuals into Vancouver, Canada, as one such diaspora moment where newly arrived and converted overseas Chinese Christians constructed a new image of China, and correspondingly reconfigured their identities as loyal Chinese subjects on a crusade to

---

<sup>9</sup> The recently established interdisciplinary journal *Review of Religion in Chinese Society* is an example of invigorated interest in contemporary religion in China. Some excellent book length works include: Lian, Xi. *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. Cao, Nanlai. *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. Sun, Anna. *Confucianism as a World Religion*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013. Ashiwa, Yoshiko and David Wank ed. *Making Religion, Making the State*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Among scholars of overseas Chinese, who have traditionally focused on historical migrations to Southeast Asia and the Americas, there has been renewed interest in new migrations from the People's Republic of China. Some notable works published recently include: Wong, Bernard and Tan Chee-Beng ed. *Chinatowns around the World: Gilded Ghetto, Ethnopolis and Cultural Diaspora*. Brill, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Shelly Chan. “The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience.” *Journal of Asian Studies* 74 (1) 2015: 109.

change and Christianize China from afar.<sup>12</sup> The process through which migration and religious conversation informed this new image of China and corresponding transformations in the self-identity among migrant-converts, is the focus of this thesis. I argue that conversion to Christianity, in Vancouver, among attendees of FCNABC has resulted in a changing identity from “migrant” to “self-exile,” a transformation enshrined by the personal experience of Pastor Hong, eschewing return to China as complicity with an unjust regime. However, this distance and newfound faith was no retreat into a sanctuary of solace, but rather provided renewed inspiration and conviction to change China. Whereas physical cross-border movements among this community are extremely limited, such reimagined ties to China through the Christian church, remain extremely potent forces for mobilization, a discourse of patriotism which captivates their imaginations to change China from afar.

Admittedly, the phenomenon of exile and religious conversion post-Tiananmen is not exclusive to Protestant Christianity, nor the Chinese of Vancouver. Numerous disillusioned activists and intellectuals sought spiritual solace in Buddhist ideals of nonviolence, *qigong* practices, while concurrently seeking safe havens in global sites ranging from Princeton, Paris, Bangkok and Hong Kong.<sup>13</sup> Christianity however, found the most converts among activists and intellectuals in North America, and many among them represented at *Testimonies* (2008) have publicly broadcast faith and conversion narratives as central to their subsequent activism.<sup>14</sup> Yet

---

<sup>12</sup> It is perhaps worth noting at the outset that almost all of the interviewees for this study, and indeed most of the church members of FCNABC, are Canadian citizens who were born in the People’s Republic of China, and adult converts to Christianity. Only one was not yet a citizen, but a Permanent Resident of Canada who expected to receive his citizenship soon.

<sup>13</sup> The gathering on the California beach of Chinese Christians from all around the world testified to the wide-range of this new, transnational community. Notably, it was the overseas Christians who took the lead in that event, while a smaller delegation of around 300 pastors from mainland China were featured as a “junior partner” at the conference.

<sup>14</sup> Yang Fenggang, “Growth and Dynamism of Chinese Christianity,” in *Christianity and Freedom*, Allen Hertzke and Timothy Samuel Shah ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 182. See also: Wright, Teresa and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu, “Atheist Political Activists Turned Protestants: Religious Conversion among Chinese

even within self-identified Christian circles, this activism, broadly construed in the Christian idiom of “evangelizing to the Chinese” has taken hugely disparate forms beneath a veneer of unity, ranging from humanitarian work like women’s education, anti-(forced)abortion initiatives, gospel meetings and large-scale evangelistic rallies, to “rights-defense” (*weiquan*) activities like public demonstrations and protest against the Communist Party, and legal assistance for dissidents in China. On this spectrum, Hong and FCNABC occupies the extreme end of antagonism vis-à-vis the Chinese state, which eschews all complicity with the Chinese Communist Party and its affiliated institutions, including and especially its sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) church. Even though he was not in Beijing in 1989, but completing his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania then, Hong’s “political awakening” took place in the United States in 1989, and since 2000 he has refused to return to China, asserting a principled stand of “self-exile” in order to freely admonish China’s rulers. Therefore, unlike many other Christian converts who frequently travel to China to proselytize, Hong and his church have particularly fixated on calling out injustices and evils of the Chinese Communist Party, and pressing for political transition. Unsurprisingly, his politicization of the pulpit has been polarizing but the church has nevertheless maintained a sizeable following among mainland Chinese migrants to Vancouver: especially intellectuals who entered Vancouver in the early 1990s, but also many more recent migrants, exiting China since the late 1990s and 2000s.<sup>15</sup> What led these new migrants to Christianity, and not simply to one of many other evangelical

---

Dissidents.” *Journal of Church and State* 55(2), 2013, 268-288.

Among the well-known exiled activists from Tiananmen square who have converted to Christianity include Chai Ling, Zhou Fengsuo, Zhang Boli, Han Dongfang, Xiong Yan.

<sup>15</sup> FCNABC and Pastor Hong are well-known among other Chinese churches in Vancouver, and North-American Chinese Christian circles more generally. They claim to be one of the most successful Chinese churches in Vancouver, which have grown from one location to three separate congregations in the greater Vancouver area. This growth and reputation has been attributed to Hong’s itinerant evangelistic activities, as well as his publicity on Chinese-Christian websites and publications.

churches, but to such an anomalous church clearly oriented towards politics in China? How did this “conversion” affect their identities as Chinese living in Vancouver, and their postures toward China? Finally, how do they practically seek to enact change in China, and what are the implications of these new initiatives in the broader context of diaspora-activism? This thesis aims to answer these questions.

In the sections which follow, I outline the growth of FCNABC, how it has emerged as a distinctive form of overseas Chinese religious association, and how its constituent’s positions towards China have changed as a result of religious conversion. The remainder of the first chapter looks at emergent transnational networks which flourished in China’s post-Reform era, and proposes that religion, especially new transnational communities drawn along religious lines, is a useful lens through which relationships between China and overseas Chinese communities can be viewed. The second chapter introduces the post-Tiananmen encounters between disillusioned Chinese intellectuals and Christianity, through the biography of Hong Yujian, and the highly anomalous, “China-oriented” church that emerged very soon after his conversion and ordination as Pastor. The third chapter incorporates interviews with church members who joined the church after Hong’s tenure, and proposes that encounters with this brand of Christianity enacted a transformation in self-identity from “migrant” to “self-exile” among congregants at FCNABC. In the fourth and final chapter, I scrutinize this self-exiled mentality in the context of their aspirations to change China from abroad. It draws attention to the frustrations of supporting Christians in China while remaining overseas, their perceived solidarity with a dissenting Beijing church, and broader debates in overseas Chinese-Christian circles about diaspora-led activism.

### 1.3 Transnational networks in post-Reform China: “Good” religion, “bad” religion

A sizeable body of scholarship produced in the immediate wake of China’s Reform and Opening has drawn attention to emergent networks between overseas Chinese communities and the mainland. Since the early 1980s, the Chinese state’s overt attempts to shore up economic ties with overseas Chinese communities saw state-endorsed reunification of transnational families, renewal of kinship ties, and links between the diaspora and ancestral villages (*qiaoxiang*). Oftentimes, these comprised religious elements, and overseas Chinese sponsorship of temple rebuilding and revitalization of ancestral rituals were conveniently given official labels of “cultural practice” rather than religion, to legitimate official sponsorship.<sup>16</sup> As Kenneth Dean’s research on Daoist temples in Fujian during the early 1980s has shown, “local cadres quickly learned that they (overseas Chinese from Southeast Asia) could be persuaded to make substantial contributions to local schools, hospitals... once they have been allowed to spend on rituals,” and some even went to the extent of imposing a tax on ritual expenditure.<sup>17</sup> Religion, in this case, was co-opted by the state in order to achieve its larger political and economic aims.

However, if the latter examples describe a too rosy, nostalgic reunion of transnational families and a mutually beneficial relationship between pilgrims and Party, other more recently established networks drawn along religious lines have elicited much more complicated responses from state actors. Revitalized religious traditions can function as political resistance, as Stephan Feuchtwang’s research on the post-Reform Chinese state has demonstrated.<sup>18</sup> Tibetan practitioners of Buddhism, Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, or even Han-Chinese Catholics faced

---

<sup>16</sup> Important works of this period which foreground this religious-economic nexus are Dean, Kenneth, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast Asia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, Kuah Khun Eng, *Rebuilding the Ancestral Village: Singaporeans in China*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2000, 158.

<sup>17</sup> Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast Asia*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Feuchtwang, “Religion as Resistance,” in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, first edition, 163.

with imposition and encroachment of the Party-State, understand religious rituals as a means of asserting global identities as practitioners of world religions, with global connections and identities beyond the dictates of the Party.<sup>19</sup>

Among emigrants exiting post-Mao China, there have emerged new kinds of religious communities deemed subversive and hostile to the Chinese state, which have grown commensurate with the new Chinese diaspora. With the freed-up religious space in the post-Reform period, new religious movements grounded in millenarian eschatology have specifically targeted Communist Party rule, featuring the Communist Party as primary antagonist in this divine drama, the evil force which righteous religious practitioners were striving against.<sup>20</sup> Among them, the Christian-related group Eastern Lightning which grew from rural Henan province asserts that the “great red dragon (the devil)” of Revelation, is in fact the Chinese Communist Party<sup>21</sup>; Falun Gong practitioners especially after the Beijing crackdown of 1999 are exhorted to bring forth righteous thoughts not simply for the intrinsic value of righteousness, but to “eradicate the Communist evil specter and all of the evil factors of the Communist party in other Dimensions”<sup>22</sup>; Chinese Christians influenced by American anti-communism especially

---

<sup>19</sup> Ilham Tohti. “Present-day Ethnic Problems in Xinjiang Uighr Autonooous Region: Overview and recommendations.” *ChinaChange*, May 19, 2015. Translated by Cindy Carter. <https://chinachange.org/2015/05/19/present-day-ethnic-problems-in-xinjiang-uighur-autonomous-region-overview-and-recommendations-for-download/> (Last accessed, Dec 19, 2017). For an account of how rural Catholics gradually conceived of themselves as part of a global Catholic movement, an authoritative account is: Henrietta Harrison. *The Missionary’s Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenniarian Response to Russia and Israel since 1917* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 216.

This idea of identifying the biblical apocalypse with contemporary politics has precedent in history, a dominant theme in American evangelicalism. Dwight Wilson writes, “The current crisis was always identified as a sign of the end, whether it was the Russo-Japanese War, the First World War, the Second World War, the Palestine War, the Suez Crisis, the June War, or the Yom Kippur War. The revival of the Roman Empire has been identified variously as Mussolini’s empire, the League of Nations, the United Nations, the European Defense Community, the Common Market, and NATO Speculation on the Antichrist has included Napoleon, Mussolini, Hitler and Henry Kissinger...”

<sup>21</sup> Emily Dunn, “‘Cult,’ Church and the CCP: Introducing Eastern Lightning,” in *Modern China* 31(1) 2009: 100.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Penny, “Falungong and the State,” in Mayfair Yang ed. *Chinese Religiosities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 137.



discourse emerging from the Cold War have also claimed Communism as Satanic and heralding the apocalypse.<sup>23</sup> Crucially, while many of these religious groups labelled by the state as “evil cults” have been proscribed and effectively policed during the Mao-era, the post-Reform rise of a new Chinese diaspora renders that they have been able to live on and continually mobilize overseas, organizing a religious leadership-in-exile with overtly messianic aspirations to save China from the clutches of the Communist Party.<sup>24</sup>

One needs to look no farther than the doorstep of any Chinese consulate in North America to find evidence for this, where the ubiquitous presence of Falun Gong practitioners defiantly wielding signs of “Truth, Benevolence, Forbearance” testifies to a religious activism which transcends borders between North America and China. As a corpus of recent scholarship on Falun Gong practitioners in-exile have shown, contemporary teachings of Falun Gong as “physical, mental and moral practice of self-transformation and salvation (are) inseparable from the suppression in China.”<sup>25</sup> At the same time, aggressive Protestant proselytization in China, and numerous high-profile conversions to Christianity especially among political dissidents and human-rights lawyers, have stoked fears that “hostile foreign (Christian) forces” might combine with religious fervor to spark the Communist regime’s downfall in China.<sup>26</sup> Especially since the

---

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aiello, “Constructing ‘Godless Communism’: Religion, Politics and Popular Culture, 1954-1960.” *Americana*, 2005, 4 (1). [http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring\\_2005/aiello.htm](http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2005/aiello.htm) (Last accessed, Feb 2, 2018).

Evangelists in the United States, especially during the Cold War, portrayed Communism as Satanic, “an anti-Christian religion competing with Christianity for American souls.” Popular literature from this milieu includes Billy Graham’s “Satan’s Religion” (1954), “A Christian America” (1955), “Our World in Chaos: The Cause and Cure” (1956).

<sup>24</sup> I have personally heard from various sources that leaders of these various proscribed Chinese religious groups live within very close proximity to each other, in the New York Chinese enclave of Flushing, Queens. The visible and vehement street-side protests against the Communist Party in this neighborhood, where numerous different dissident religious groups are represented, is a fascinating phenomenon worth further research.

<sup>25</sup> Scott Dalby. “Popular Qigong and transnational Falun Gong inside and outside post-Mao China,” in Bryan Turner and Oscar Salemink ed. *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, 255. 247- 261

On Falun Gong, see also: David Ownby. *Falun Gong and the Future of China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008; Benjamin Penny. *The Religion of Falun Gong*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Carsten Vala, *Failing to Contain Religion: The Emergence of a Protestant Movement in Contemporary China*.

1990s, conversion to Christianity among new mainland Chinese migrants in North America has been rapid, and some enthusiastic, patriotic new converts abroad have also sought to evangelize in China, replacing earlier aspirations for the democratization of China, to the “Christianization” of China as the nation’s only hope, an unexpected phenomenon which has unsettled China’s rulers.<sup>27</sup>

Historical writing in the field of overseas Chinese studies has mostly been confined to writings on pre-1949 encounters, while only recently starting to pay attention to new migrants coming of age in Communist China.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, writings about contemporary Chinese religion since the 1980s have paid insufficient attention to its transnational dimensions, and only recently have scholars drawn overseas Chinese experiences into this discussion. Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer’s *The Religious Question in Modern China*, is one excellent publication which takes a comprehensive view to include the “margins of the Chinese world,” acknowledging how at least in the religious arena, trends in the diaspora provide leads to developments in mainland China.<sup>29</sup> Social scientists in the field of Asian-American studies have perhaps taken the greatest interest in North American immigrant religious associations. Yet their work has focused predominantly on the role of religion in social integration and linguistic assimilation, while reflecting less on how religious conversion shapes transnational political activism and engagement.<sup>30</sup> While I am not proposing a Sinocentric definition of diaspora which has been

---

Unpublished doctoral dissertation (UC Berkeley), 2008, 105.

<sup>27</sup> Buruma, *Bad Elements*, 105.

Among the post-1989 generation of Chinese-intellectual converts to Christianity in the United States, the clearest exposition of this view has come from Yuan Zhiming, a dissident-turned-pastor currently based in California. He has publicly stated his change of views, that China can only democratize when it becomes a Christian nation.

<sup>28</sup> Wong, Bernard and Tan Chee-Beng ed. *Chinatowns around the World: Gilded Ghetto, Ethnopolis and Cultural Diaspora*. Brill, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 15.

<sup>30</sup> For example, Yang Fenggang’s *Chinese Christians in America*, published in 1999, was produced at a moment where mainland Chinese congregants were still relatively few, and looked at Chinese in a general sense (referring to

rightly denounced—oftentimes, it is indeed the case that Chinese migrants reflect very little about China while integrating into a new host society— it is impossible to ignore the specific sociopolitical context of the exodus of Chinese in the 1990s, a diaspora moment where Christian conversions among highly educated intellectuals in North America were results of intense reflection and agonizing over China’s future.<sup>31</sup> Outside observers have been repeatedly struck by the messianic overtures—to use a Christian idiom—that individuals of the Tiananmen generation, especially émigré intellectuals, espouse in relation to China. Perry Link writes about Chinese intellectuals speaking between 1988-89 in Beijing, that they felt a deep moral duty to *help* China, asking “How can China be saved?” even in their encounters with religious faith.<sup>32</sup> And as Ian Buruma eloquently describes his encounters with various dissidents of the Tiananmen generation who converted to Christianity in its aftermath, remnants of the old Confucianist project are still glaringly apparent in their interpretation of religious faith, for example, as a new way of saving China: “the desire to convert the entire Chinese people... a new correct way of thinking to impart to the ignorant masses.”<sup>33</sup> Whereupon rulers lacked virtue, they had to be corrected, and the embrace of any new ideology— like Christianity, for example— rather than challenging old Confucian traditional structures, still functioned within the same frameworks.<sup>34</sup> One chaplain at a North American campus would surmise: among Chinese students he encountered in the 1980s and early 1990s, the constant question raised was “How would

---

mainland Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asian Chinese), and how they reconciled their Chinese-American-Christian identities. Likewise, Carolyn Chen’s excellent monograph on Taiwanese migrants in California argues that religious conversion is a process of becoming American.

<sup>31</sup> Shelly Chan, “The Case for Diaspora,” 109.

<sup>32</sup> Perry Link, *Evening Chats in Beijing*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992, 123.

<sup>33</sup> Buruma, *Bad Elements*, 87.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

Christianity affect China?” rather than more commonplace, individualistic concerns among other American college students.<sup>35</sup>

#### 1.4 Exile and transnational activism

The recent attention given to a contemporary wave of globe-trotting new Chinese migrants in both scholarly and popular circles, has obscured the abiding presence of a more longstanding form of out-migration—exile—among individuals either unable or unwilling to return to China because of restrictions imposed by the ruling regime. Rowena He’s widely acclaimed oral history *Tiananmen Exiles* draws attention to such communities emerging in the wake of 1989 and fraught decisions they must contend with; they wish to change China, but practical realities and restrictions render that oftentimes the activism and energy fades away. What Timothy Cheek argues about the Sinophone intellectual world is a relevant lens into contemporary Chinese diaspora-activism, that in order to be an *authoritative* speaker in this intellectual universe you must present yourself as a Chinese living in China,” or be content with a “foreign commentator” identity and being relegated to the margins of Chinese public discourse.<sup>36</sup> As Edward Said reflects, the romantic and glorious depictions of exile belie its permanent condition of displacement, loss, and longing, “a condition of terminal loss.”<sup>37</sup> With the internet and access to information in China highly regulated, many Chinese political prisoners and activists both domestic and abroad are virtually unknown in their home country,

---

<sup>35</sup> Liu Lisong, “Chinese Student Migrants and American Religious Organizations.” *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 12, 2016, 129.

<sup>36</sup> Timothy Cheek. *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 278.

<sup>37</sup> Edward Said. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

despite publicity and high levels of recognition overseas.<sup>38</sup> For those who choose exile then, they acknowledge that they will be silenced among the vast majority of China's populace.

However, given the restrictions on civil society and speech in the People's Republic of China, speaking from abroad may well be perceived by many as liberating, albeit having to speak to a different audience. Especially among religious actors, faith-communities are a potent form of mobilization that open up new audiences, provides ready-made communities and constituents around which social movements may be organized.<sup>39</sup> David Ownby's *Falun Gong and the Future of China* makes a convincing case that religious networks in the diaspora can exert significant and unforeseen effects on events in China, as the tenacity and stubbornness of Falun Gong practitioners in the face of the Beijing crackdown in 1999, have shown.<sup>40</sup> Whereas many other diaspora-led activist movements have faded simply because of insufficient interest or changing circumstances overseas, Falun Gong has persisted while constantly redefining itself, and embedded relatively successfully into North-American society while continuing its religiously-infused indictment of the Chinese Party-State.<sup>41</sup> Practitioners are unable to travel to China, or at least have to hide their alliances if they do, but they see their fates as inextricably linked to the China's future. In this sense, even though there is minimal traversing of China's national borders, it is still a transnational movement in the sense that practitioners are still advocating for change in China, and that religion preserves their aspirations for China, albeit from afar. Rather than disappearing into oblivion in Chinese labor camps, such transnational ties

---

<sup>38</sup> Yang, 2016, "Growth and Dynamism of Chinese Christianity," 183.

<sup>39</sup> Ian Johnson. *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*. New York: Pantheon, 2017.

Johnson makes this comment about Pastor Wang Yi, that he may well be much better off preaching from the pulpit, than as a legal academic subject to constant harassment by state authorities.

<sup>40</sup> David Ownby. *Falun Gong and the Future of China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas Hune-Brown, "Selling China by the Sleeve," *Hazlitt*, October 2, 2017, [https://hazlitt.net/longreads/selling-china-sleeve-dance?utm\\_source=SupChina&utm\\_campaign=29b287d883-20171018-401+CheatSheetXi%E2%80%99sSpeech&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_caef3ab334-29b287d883-164864805](https://hazlitt.net/longreads/selling-china-sleeve-dance?utm_source=SupChina&utm_campaign=29b287d883-20171018-401+CheatSheetXi%E2%80%99sSpeech&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_caef3ab334-29b287d883-164864805) (last accessed, Nov 16, 2017).

allow for religious communities to live on and function as a challenge to defining Chinese identity.<sup>42</sup>

### 1.5 FCNABC, a “China-oriented” church in Canada

I first encountered FCNABC and Pastor Hong’s story through the church’s website, and was immediately struck by the manifold notices about Tiananmen square massacre filling the home page. Of course, it was the month of June, a commemorative moment among various activist groups in the diaspora, but to see a church so overtly rallying in protest was surprising. As one who grew up attending a British-Methodist school in Singapore, I am conversant in the Christian idiom but was struck by how the discourse employed by this Vancouver church was rooted in the language of contemporary Chinese politics. Initially, I perceived this as simply a result of the demographic composition of this church—nearly all the members were from mainland Chinese coming-of-age in the mid-late twentieth century, rather than the mixture of ethnic-Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast-Asia, and mainland China that more accurately characterized a majority of the 150 self-identified Chinese-Canadian protestant churches in the Metro Vancouver area.<sup>43</sup> However, it quickly became apparent that this was not simply a case of *tusheng* (local-born) and *xinyimin* (new-migrant) differences; a brief survey revealed that other exclusively mainland Chinese congregations in Vancouver had little if not no interest at all in the politics of the People’s Republic of China.<sup>44</sup> Recent scholarship on Vancouver’s rapidly multiplying Chinese churches has situated this growth of migrant religiosity

---

<sup>42</sup> Prasenjit Duara, “Nationalism and Transnationalism in the Globalization of China,” 19. *China Report* 39:1 (2003) Sage Publications, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London.

<sup>43</sup> Yu Li, “Christianity as a Chinese Belief” in Larry DeVries, Don Baker and Dan Overmyer ed. *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Wing-Chung Ng’s *The Chinese in Vancouver* draws attention to differences between the self-identified Chinese community of Vancouver, and argues that different waves of migrants construct Chinese identity differently, leading to tensions over whose definitions of Chinese identity would prevail.

as part of the emergence of a fairly independent system of services among new Chinese migrants— ranging from laundry, childcare, taxi, food delivery, to religion—in new ethnic enclaves beyond a spatially-demarcated Chinatown.<sup>45</sup> Tracing these differences based on national origin is therefore insufficient in explaining the peculiarity of FCNABC, as many other mainland Chinese churches even more narrowly delimited by place (for example, Fuzhou church, Wenzhou church) are less concerned about politics in China, but see Christianity as a way of leading more meaningful and fulsome lives abroad.<sup>46</sup>

I visited the church in July 2016, and expressed my interest in understanding why they were so deeply invested in mainland Chinese politics, and publicly indicting the Chinese Communist Party. Since mid-2017 I have attended church events, Sunday services around twice monthly, and during the summer of 2017 conducted in-depth interviews with Hong, and five key church members I identified with his assistance. From those conversations I further reached out to other members of various backgrounds in order to achieve a more representative sample. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of interviewees, but Hong has been identified, as his views have already been made public on numerous occasions. I made clear my identity as an outsider who would not become a church member, and clarified my identity as historian, not theologian, and interest specifically in church activities pertaining to mainland Chinese politics. Fortunately, I was able to gain the support of Pastor Hong, who was enthused at the fact that I would “publicize” the important role of his church, and its position vis-à-vis the Chinese Party-State which he frequently lamented that other overseas Chinese churches had little interest in supporting.<sup>47</sup> In addition to these interviews and participant-observer research, I also perused the

---

<sup>45</sup> Yu Li, “Christianity as a Chinese Belief.”

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Hong’s passion for China is unmistakable. In our first interview, he recollected that other student researchers, mostly seminarians from Regent College and Carrey Theological Seminary in Vancouver, had previously

corpus of Hong's writings, published interviews, recorded sermons, speeches and radio broadcasts, most of which are neatly curated on the church's website, its YouTube channel, as well as other Chinese/Christian news sites.<sup>48</sup> Finally, as a counterpoint to what I learned from FCNABC respondents, I spoke with some other Chinese Christians leaders in Vancouver and Beijing, and considered voices among other prominent actors in Vancouver's Chinese Christian community.

It is worth noting that this work focuses on a living community, which still meets weekly and is extremely central to the everyday lives of its congregants, some of whom I have come to know and respect. As such, while my discussion of the past seeks to maintain accuracy based on currently available evidence, future developments may well result in revisions to the narrative. Furthermore, one limitation of such an interdisciplinary study is choosing an appropriate context within which to situate this research. One could choose to group Hong and FCNABC within the larger category of religious fundamentalists who are an enclave of social conservatism strikingly anomalous in Vancouver's liberal environs. Scholars of Asian-American studies would be interested in the church's lack of success in retaining its Canadian-born second-generation, a subject of considerable internal anxiety among the church's leadership. Theologians may be fascinated by their deep interest in Calvinism, Puritanism, "Reformed theology" and theological exchange in the Chinese world.<sup>49</sup> Hong and his congregants too, choose their own context, perceiving themselves as activists championing the cause of religious freedom in China, on a crusade to reclaim and shape the future of China. All the above mentioned aspects are striking

---

interviewed him about pastoral work. However, he acknowledged that the "special feature" about his church was its interest and concern for China, and therefore my choice of researching his church was astute.

<sup>48</sup> The church website is [fcnabc.org](http://fcnabc.org). It is extremely well curated, and video and audio recordings of sermons and talks are all available to the public. Links to its YouTube channel which collects weekly church sermons as well as other church activities, talks, Pastor Hong's other speaking engagements, are also prominently displayed.

<sup>49</sup> A majority of Vancouver's Chinese churches are evangelical churches with little liturgy, but FCNABC prides itself as one of few churches of the "Reformed tradition," which informs the way liturgy is performed.



and merit separate studies in themselves. However, even though the nature of this project renders that I draw liberally from scholarship in Religious Studies and Asian-American studies, as historian I am principally interested in how the dual-impetuses of migration and conversion to Christianity has shaped this congregation's identity vis-a-vis China at a particular historical moment since the 1990s, and how the confluence of factors within this historical context gave rise to this group of Christian converts with a remarkable self-designated mission to transform China, not Canada.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Indeed, one unexpected finding was that this community reflected very little publicly about the Canadian political context besides a banal criticism of liberal social values, drawing on a discourse of conservatism popular within certain evangelical circles. Immigrant churches are anomalously conservative, in the overall religious landscape of Vancouver. For a greater focus on the religious landscape in the Pacific-Northwest, see: Tina Block, *The Secular Northwest: Religion and Irreligion in Everyday Postwar Life*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016. For Chinese-Christian conservatism and political engagement in the Vancouver context, an excellent extended study by an Asian-Americanist is: Justin Kin-Hung Tse. *Religious Politics in Pacific Space: Grounding Cantonese Protestant Theologies in Secular Civil Society*. *Grounded Theologies*. Unpublished dissertation, UBC Geography, 2013.

## 2 Post-Tiananmen Chinese-Christian Encounters

Jesus said: “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

(A favorite bible verse of a Vancouver fellowship for Chinese students in the 1990s, recorded in Hong Yujian’s biography, *Pathway in the Wilderness*).

The Tiananmen square democracy movement and subsequent military crackdown of 1989 has been the subject of immense scholarly and popular attention, especially among Western observers of China who in its aftermath struggled to understand the failure of an ostensibly imminent democratic transition. Yet, the moral dimensions of the conflict, and the turn towards religion amidst the existential struggles which followed, remain an understudied topic.<sup>51</sup> As the sociologist Yang Fenggang writes, if the Tiananmen massacre “shattered the utopia of the Communist idealism,” it likewise “opened up the gates of the heavens.”<sup>52</sup> At a moment of seeming existential crisis and national catastrophe, spiritual solace was a soothing balm to a young generation of intellectuals coming of age amidst the intellectual ferment leading to 1989. As they nursed both physical and emotional wounds, an urgent search for some kind of moral framework saw a period of intense spiritual seeking. In China, answers were sought through Daoist hermit practices, joining the sangha of Buddhism, or participating in Christian congregations.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> The corpus of writings on Tiananmen square is large. A summary of important works and sources are listed on the website <http://www.tsquare.tv/links/> which is an accompanying website to *The Gate of Heavenly Peace* (1996) directed by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon, an authoritative documentary account of the events of 1989. A notable exception is Richard Madsen’s *China and the American Dream*, which focuses on how Tiananmen was a moral story with an “immoral” ending for American audiences. The existential reckoning that took place among Chinese survivors in its aftermath is analyzed in a sociological study by Teresa Wright and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu entitled “Atheist Political Activists turned Protestants.”

<sup>52</sup> Yang Fenggang, “What about China? Religious Vitality in the Most Secular and Rapidly Modernizing Society.” *Sociology of Religion*, 2014, 75 (4), 564.

<sup>53</sup> Yang, *Ibid*.

Within the broader context of overall religious seeking in this period, it was the mass conversion to Christianity among Chinese students and scholars—both in the mainland but especially those studying abroad in North America—which was the most numerous and visible within a relatively short time, from 1989 to the early 1990s.<sup>54</sup> Many overseas students, isolated and disillusioned in various universities abroad, found comfort and community from ethnic-Chinese churches in the community which reached out in fellowship.<sup>55</sup> For those student activists coming straight out of Beijing who were granted fellowships in Princeton, the liberal intellectual environs at the university contrasted with easy fellowship at Chinese churches which actively reached out. In some cases, the latter won over their affections.<sup>56</sup> One of this group's most zealous Christian converts, Yuan Zhiming noted his personal transformation: first viewing Christian rituals akin to Cultural Revolution brainwashing, to later being attracted by the warmth and love of Christian fellowship.<sup>57</sup> Even for those who ultimately did not convert, they did seriously consider religious answers, as the renowned author Su Xiaokang, in a 1999 interview with Ian Buruma, recounts that all intellectuals in exile “all struggled with Christianity” and he

---

A series of recent interviews done by journalist Ian Johnson with contemporary Chinese intellectuals, published in the New York Review of books, has revealed the potency of religious faith in the direct aftermath of Tiananmen square. Johnson, Ian. “‘You Won’t Get Near Tiananmen!’: Hu Jia on the Continuing Crackdown” in *The New York Review of Books*, June 02, 2014. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2014/06/02/you-wont-get-near-tiananmen-square-talk-hu-jia/> (last accessed, Oct 28, 2017).

<sup>54</sup> Yang Fenggang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999.

Yang, a prominent Sociologist of Religion currently based in the United States, is himself part of this post-Tiananmen generation of overseas-educated Chinese scholars who became a Christian in this period and conducted his doctoral research in a Washington Chinese Church, the subject of his first book.

<sup>55</sup> The attractiveness of Christian fellowship among disillusioned Chinese scholars in the United States, was cited as a key reason for conversion among the speakers at the 2008 conference entitled *Testimonies of this generation* (一代人的見證).

<sup>56</sup> Carolyn Chen. *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, 105. Through her extensive fieldwork with Taiwanese immigrant religious groups in California, Chen argues that Taiwanese migrant churches in North America cultivate kin-like relations among acquaintances through “intentional practices of intimacy,” rituals which include faith sharing practices, prayer in small groups.

<sup>57</sup> Yuan Zhiming, interview with Yu Jie, in *The Expectation for Whole Life*, 141. Following his conversion, Yuan notes that he was no longer interested in pursuing studies of democracy, but wanted to study theology, and transferred from Princeton to the Reformed Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

even unsuccessfully tried to embrace the faith.<sup>58</sup> As Edward Said writes, exile as “redemptive motif” is compelling and deeply rooted, painfully emphasizing the human need for rootedness which is only recognized once lost.

Notably, the context of an abrupt exit from China and arrival in North America also played a role in this religious revival. Among students who remained in China, the attractiveness of Buddhism in the aftermath of Tiananmen square has been referenced in various publications, even though empirical studies of this phenomenon are still lacking.<sup>59</sup> Rather, it was Christian conversions among intellectuals in the United States which were most highly publicized and celebrated, especially within Christian circles. That this happened in North America rather than elsewhere was no coincidence. Richard Madsen writes about the enormous and disproportionate outpouring of support from the United States public for the victims of Tiananmen, many of whom were fueled and funded by Christian charities and affiliated human-rights organizations.<sup>60</sup> The perceived compatibility between Protestantism and Democracy in some Chinese intellectual circles, furthered the attractiveness of Christianity or Christian values when juxtaposed against the recent military crackdown by an atheistic Communist Party.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Buruma, “The Pilgrimage from Tiananmen Square.”

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, “You Won’t Get Near Tiananmen!”

<sup>60</sup> Madsen, *China and the American Dream*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

<sup>61</sup> Buruma, *Bad Elements*, 87.

Yuan Zhiming has noted his view that “the core of Western civilization... is Christianity. Without that, you cannot have democracy or human rights,” hence, his newfound motivation to convert all the Chinese people to Christianity. The idea that Christianity and liberal democracy in the West are linked is still prevalent, and has resulted in a recent interest among Chinese intellectuals to Puritanism and Calvinism. One more recent proponent of this view is the exiled dissident essayist Yu Jie, who has stated that “the liberty to choose is God-given—not given by the state but by God... It’s the foundation of Western democracy.”

Ian Johnson. “China’s ‘Fault Lines’: Yu Jie on His New Biography of Liu Xiaobo.” *The New York Review of Books*, July 14, 2012. <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2012/07/14/china-fault-lines-yu-jie-liu-xiaobo/> (Last accessed, October 28, 2017).

## 2.1 *Pathway in The Wilderness: One Chinese Intellectual's Road to Faith*

In Vancouver, the post-1989 moment saw an influx of new migrations which resulted in significant changes to its Chinese community. Compared to the present-day demography of Vancouver's Chinese community, where migrants from the People's Republic of China form a sizeable majority, Vancouver's Chinese community has historically been dominated by Chinese migrants from the Pearl River Delta.<sup>62</sup> In 1989, the mainland Chinese population in Vancouver was in fact small minority, comprising mostly of migrants who entered under family reunification schemes since 1973, with ties to Guangdong province.<sup>63</sup> However, the Tiananmen square crackdown in 1989, subsequent international condemnation, and the Canadian government's allowance for mainland Chinese students to apply for landed immigration status over a two year period, resulted in a sizeable community of young intellectuals with Canadian residency, grappling with "survivor's guilt" and conflicting loyalties between China and Canada.<sup>64</sup> Unsurprisingly, churches mobilized to welcome and evangelize to the wave of new arrivals— disillusioned young Chinese scholars seeking answers to China's cultural malaise.

This new wave of Chinese scholars—many of whom held doctoral degrees in the sciences from prestigious universities— including Hong Yujian himself were welcomed by two Christian faculty members at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Medical School, who started a fellowship group in 1991 specifically to cope with this wave of arrivals, and provide

---

<sup>62</sup> Peter Li. "Rise and Fall of Chinese immigration to Canada." *International Migration*, 43 (3) 2005, 14. In the period surrounding 1989 and its immediate aftermath, the greatest spike was actually in Hong Kong migrations into Canada and indeed the rest of North America, whereas mainland Chinese migrations only grew much more substantially and steadily after 1993. The most rapid growth of Hong Kong migration to Canada was between 1986 – 1994: 30,000 arrivals in 1990, peaking at 44000 in 1994, and then declining. Mainland Chinese migration rose between 1989 and 1991, as a result of landed immigration policies (There were 4,415 arrivals in 1989, growing to 14,203 in 1991).

<sup>63</sup> Li, "Rise and Fall of Chinese Immigration to Canada," 14.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

them biblical answers at a time of intense questioning and uncertainty.<sup>65</sup> Hong was one of the early converts of this period, and within this new diaspora rapidly emerged as one of its most eloquent spokespersons who could articulate their struggles and aspirations in spiritual terms. His personal experience in many ways embodied the journeys of the overseas scholars in North America since the late 1980s. He was a doctoral student of Chemistry at the University of Pennsylvania since 1985, and in 1989 was one of the most outspoken voices among overseas Chinese student activists protesting the Tiananmen massacre, organizing conferences and talks to publicize the event in Philadelphia. An involved member of the Independent Federation of Chinese Students and Scholars, he also travelled as its representative in 1990 to garner support for the Chinese democracy movement, in Eastern Europe. He received his doctorate in 1991, and proceed to UBC in Vancouver, Canada for postdoctoral studies that same year, where he converted to Christianity and abruptly shifted course in his struggle and activism for democracy in China. Following his baptism at FCNABC in December 1991, and with the enthusiasm of a new convert, he enrolled in UBC's affiliated Christian seminary Regent College, in his own words, firstly "to investigate the relationship between Christianity and Democracy."<sup>66</sup>

His written biography, intimately familiar to every congregant at FCNABC and which is today still distributed to all first-time visitors to the church—entitled *Pathway in the Wilderness* (旷野中的道路)—articulates this search for answers that many in the church readily identify with.<sup>67</sup> Succinctly written and taking readers chronologically through four distinct periods and the corresponding worldviews Hong embraced (Communism, Science, Democracy, and

---

<sup>65</sup> Yu, "Christianity as a Chinese Belief," 241.

This fellowship group was called Overseas Chinese Bible Fellowship, and led by the Xie family from Taiwan and the Li family from Hong Kong. Although unaffiliated with FCNABC, the group met in the FCNABC building, the church that Hong would later Pastor.

<sup>66</sup> Hong Yujian, *Pathway in the Wilderness* (旷野中的道路), FCNABC Press (Vancouver, BC), 2003.

<sup>67</sup> Hong, *Pathway in the Wilderness*, 5.

Christianity), it is rooted in historical moments of rupture well-known to audiences who grew up and came of age in China under Communist Party rule. The first chapter, “Communism: Aspirations, and a Dream Shattered,” traces his enthusiasm and disillusionment with Marxism. It begins with his youthful aspirations as youth “sent-down” to the countryside to make revolution during the Cultural Revolution, explains his moment of awakening and disillusionment with Party propaganda following the Lin Biao incident and various encounters with senior cadres, which ultimately led him to seek answers in the twin-giants of Science and Democracy.<sup>68</sup>

The following section “Science” outlines his journey to the United States, excitement at doctoral research at an Ivy league institution, but ultimately tempered by the resignation that science cannot provide all the answers and resolve life’s questions. Meditating on a Daoist idiom – “the limits of human intellect can never prevail against infinite knowledge (以有涯随无涯)” —Hong muses, the Western academy has been over-glorified, cannot provide objective truth, but rather only allows for tentative conclusions to be overturned by future research.<sup>69</sup> But “Democracy” was not the answer either. The 1989 Tiananmen square massacre saw the awakening of his political activism in the city of Philadelphia, rallying overseas Chinese scholars to march in protest and publicize the injustice to global audiences. Yet as he repeatedly emphasizes, many of his fellow students deserted the overseas-student democracy movement after receiving United States residency status, and stopped attending the conferences and demonstrations he organized. “Why did they forget?” he asks in anguish. “Because people can never do unto others as they would have others do unto them.” With such a self-centered human

---

<sup>68</sup> Hong, *Pathway in the Wilderness*, 5.

The Lin Biao incident refers to the mysterious death of Lin Biao, Chairman Mao’s chosen successor in 1971, which became widely known in the summer of 1972. Official explanations that comrade Lin was in fact a traitor who died fleeing the Soviet Union after traitorous actions in China, came as a surprise to many, and undermined a generation’s trust in the Party’s pronouncements.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 9.

nature, how can a truly democratic polity and constituency be realized?<sup>70</sup> The failings of the overseas democracy movement further compelled him to contemplate the meaning of democracy: “If the value of democracy is on the respect of human rights, what are human rights? And why should we respect them... How can we love those unworthy of our love?” The will to love one’s country and one’s people had to be eternal, not fleeting and transient, otherwise the path to democracy would never be complete.<sup>71</sup>

At that moment of despair, national and personal crisis—his activism led him estranged from family and friends— his wife’s conversion to Christianity and a series of unexpected coincidences (or providential moves) allowed him to find answers in faith. It is the ultimate answer which has sustained him thus far, satisfying all the insufficiencies of Communism, Science, and Democracy, and gifting him a much larger vision and purpose. As his pithy biography concludes,

“Thank God for allowing me to be a typical Chinese intellectual of this generation, allowing us this shared destiny! (同呼吸， 共命运) He prepared me, not just to save me and give me an eternal promise, but to send me forth to sow seeds of the gospel, and share the gospel with many spiritually hungry intellectuals from China. In this life, how can I not be used by God?”<sup>72</sup>

## **1.2 A new “China-oriented” congregation takes form**

As Hong joined the church, his identity as a prominent activist and student leader in North America attracted to its pews an unexpectedly large number of mainland Chinese scholars, and the number of new visitors to the church rapidly grew and outnumbered its existing members.<sup>73</sup> The church’s identity and demographic composition began to change rapidly, taking an

---

<sup>70</sup> Hong, *Pathway in the Wilderness*, 12.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, Mr Huang., Aug 30, 2017.



unexpected new trajectory. From an unexceptional Chinese church home to around 40 elderly Taiwanese-Canadians in the early 1990s, it rapidly emerged as among the foremost destinations in Vancouver where mainland Chinese disillusioned with the Communist regime, came to seek spiritual answers. Regular church attendance more than tripled after Hong started preaching in 1995, and the existing Taiwanese-Canadian pastor who felt increasingly inadequate meeting the spiritual and intellectual needs of a growing number of highly educated mainland Chinese scholars in the congregation, resigned and was duly replaced by Hong himself, who was ordained as pastor in May 1996.<sup>74</sup> Hong's vision for the church was singular and unprecedented among Vancouver's Chinese churches—to be a refuge and intellectual incubator for mainland Chinese intellectuals seeking moral answers in that post-Tiananmen moment, where his personal conversion experience would be instructive.<sup>75</sup>

Such stories of conversion stating a linear trajectory out of Communism and into Christianity are not uncommon, indeed, they were the centerpiece of *Testimonies* in 2008. However, Hong's decision to personally lead a church in Vancouver had ramifications for Vancouver's Chinese community, which hitherto had no precedent of such an activist at the helm of a church. His burden and passion for democratizing China and calling the Party-State's injustices to account had not changed, but *now* he had answers, and a trove of moral resources to draw from in his indictment of the Chinese regime. Thus emerged a new form of religious association, availing services not simply to any new Chinese migrant striving to find community in Vancouver and perhaps Christ along the way, but providing answers and moral clarity foremost for those concerned with the future of China.

---

<sup>74</sup> Interview, Mr Huang., Aug 30, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Hong, interview with Yu Jie, *The Expectation for Whole Life*, 29.

Armed with ambitious aspirations and a charismatic young pastor whose eloquence was well-renowned in the overseas activist community, a regular and committed congregation began to take form. His expositions from the pulpit were eloquent, persuasive, a crusade for justice in the aftermath of Tiananmen, spoken in vocabulary that mainland Chinese intellectuals who had no prior encounters or experience in Christian churches could identify with.<sup>76</sup> One of Hong's earliest initiatives which began in the early 2000s, were "Faith and Culture talks" held at the church, where he grappled with topics pertinent to China's intellectual elite. Early iterations of these talks grappled with questions he himself were fascinated by, for example: Are Faith and Science Compatible? What is the relationship between Christianity and Democracy? Christianity and Politics? Many of them were overtly oriented to questions arising from the People's Republic of China's Recent Past—Christianity and Marxist-Leninism; Christianity and the Tiananmen Square Massacre; and recently, Christianity and "Harmonious Society."<sup>77</sup>

Two themes were repeatedly emphasized. First, the idea that faith is essential to democracy, a "God-given" or divinely ordained idea of human-rights and justice, which was antithetical to the authoritarian and atheistic Communist Party; "religious freedom is the principal freedom of humanity and a universal principle," only when the China finds faith and religious freedoms are assured, then will it be able to democratize.<sup>78</sup> As reflected in Hong's biography, his view was that the value of liberal democracy is its respect for human rights, but

---

<sup>76</sup> This is not to discount his role as Pastor. He also had to assume responsibility for other pastoral duties, like weddings, funerals, baptisms.

<sup>77</sup> These speeches and sermons are all collected on the website: [www.fcnaabc.org](http://www.fcnaabc.org).

<sup>78</sup> Yu, *Expectation for Whole Life*, 28.

Despite such open advocacy of religious freedoms, there is little interest in interfaith dialogue. However, Hong at least once mentioned that his congregants had to "unlearn" their bias against the Falun Gong, and that the Epoch Times is more favorable to Christianity, than the Global Times.

the meaning of human rights and why we should respect them had to be understood in light of “God-given” rights.<sup>79</sup>

Second, the notion that the Chinese Communist Party was not simply an unjust government, practicing bad politics, but is sinful (有罪) and evil (邪恶). Of course, his articulation of these ideals are much subtler and thoughtfully articulated than how other proscribed groups like Falun Gong or Eastern Lightning proselytize, but the claim that the Party wasn’t simply unjust or illegitimate but “sinful” and subject to God’s wrath, lent his claims a spiritual dimension. There are various justifications for this, for example, the Communist Party claims absolute truth, and “any polity which claims to hold absolute truth, and self-proclaims as absolutely glorious, places itself in the position of God.”<sup>80</sup> Hong draws a linear trajectory between Satanic forces at work since the temptation of Adam and Eve, the Egyptians opposing the Israelite exodus, the Roman empire, Hitler’s Fascist dictatorship, Muslim Extremism, and Communist rule to persecute Christians!<sup>81</sup> Communism is particularly galling as it is atheistic, and supplants the role of God, which in his view is precisely the reason for China’s present cultural malaise. Of course, the very real humanitarian justices committed by the Communist Party are obvious to even non-Christians, a problem he believes can only be resolved if faith is given its rightful place in the Chinese public sphere.

Accordingly, the appropriate response then is that of battle (争战) against the state. However, Hong emphasizes, this is a spiritual battle unlike the battles of China’s past; “it is unlike peasant rebellion, nor the Communist-led struggles for the laboring revolutionary people

---

<sup>79</sup> Hong, *Pathway in the Wilderness*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> Fcnabcvideos. “20131214 「與北京守望教會風雨同行四周年」 戶外晨禱會(Standing in solidarity with Beijing Shouwang church for four years. Outdoor morning prayer). YouTube video, 27:00 Posted Dec 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB4ucBYlVaY&t=2942s>. (last accessed, Dec 27, 2017).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

to *fanshen*, but a battle for the glory of God”.<sup>82</sup> God will eventually triumph, but the church must first experience persecution and training, to fully understand the sufferings of Jesus. They should speak out boldly (放胆的讲) without fear of the government, even if such speaking out means political persecution, martyrdom or exile.

Significantly, that such overt critiques of the Chinese Communist Party are not simply empty rhetoric but declared in a Christian idiom, renders necessary a brief discussion of his theology. While a sustained discussion of theological hermeneutic is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting that brand of Christianity Hong received in the early 1990s and found most compelling was a conservative neo-Calvinist theology promulgated by overseas Chinese preachers he encountered in North America, notably, the Chinese-American theologian Jonathan Chao (赵天恩) and itinerant Chinese-Indonesian evangelist Stephen Tong (唐崇荣).<sup>83</sup> Hong was most influenced by the “Reformed evangelical movement” led by Stephen Tong, based on a particular interpretation of Calvinism, which sought to demarcate his movement apart from charismatic churches or liberal theology.<sup>84</sup> As such, the transformations to FCNABC taking

---

<sup>82</sup> Fcnabcvideos. “20131214「與北京守望教會風雨同行四周年」戶外晨禱會(Standing in solidarity with Beijing Shouwang church for four years. Outdoor morning prayer). YouTube video, 27:00 Posted Dec 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB4ucBYIVaY&t=2942s>. (last accessed, Dec 27, 2017).

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of Calvinism in China, see: Alexander Chow, “Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China Today.” *International Journal of Public Theology* 8 (2014) 158-175. Fredrik Fällman, “Calvin, Culture and Christ? Developments of Faith among Chinese Intellectuals” in *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-cultural Perspectives*, ed. Francis Khek Gee Lim (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 152-68. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss theological hermeneutic and weigh in on Christian denominational debates. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Calvinism in China has associations with Christian fundamentalism harking back to pre-socialist missionizing, what the state church’s post-Reform leader Bishop K.H. Ting has challenged with his emphasis on “post-denominationalism.” However, this so-called Calvinist variant of Christianity has been immensely popular among lawyer-converts in the “rights defense movement (*weiquan yundong*).” Among its most eloquent interlocutors is the legal scholar-turned-pastor Wang Yi, who asserts a “historic relationship between constitutionalism and Christianity... birthed from the Puritan faith tradition” (Chow, 166). Many of the other prominent conversions among Chinese intellectuals in North America were to nondenominational evangelicalism. Popular evangelists who trace their conversion from Tiananmen square include Yuan Zhiming, Zhang Boli, who preach at all kinds of churches (Charismatic, Pentecostal, Evangelical), however, Hong has noted that his primary affiliation and allegiance is with “Reformed theology.”

<sup>84</sup> Wielander, Gerda. *Christian Values in Communist China*. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2013, 94.

place since Hong's tenure were not simply cultural-demographic changes, but shifts in theology as well. Whereas FCNABC's earlier Baptist affiliation was a marriage of convenience since they were sharing premises with the established Ebenezer Baptist Church, Hong deliberately introduced and emphasized Reformed theology, identifying himself as Pastor of a Baptist church who strictly adheres to "Reformed" faith (坚守改革宗信仰立场的浸信会牧师).<sup>85</sup> Even today, Hong claims that his subsequent activism through the church is a direct result of his theological training and associations with Stephen Tong, and not simply personal background and experience—in other words, being "Reformed" renders that he has to speak out against the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>86</sup> Recent sociological research by Li Ma and Jin Li explaining the attractiveness of Calvinism among some Christian circles in mainland China has drawn attention to how Calvinist literature—a category which includes disparate publications ranging from Jean Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Abraham Kuyper's *Stone Lectures on Calvinism*, and more recent books by American Reformed pastors like Timothy Keller, D.A. Carson and John Piper—empowers Christians to eschew popular separationist and pietistic theology in favor of living out their faith in "all spheres of life"—for Hong, which crucially includes the political realm that Chinese churches have traditionally shied away from.<sup>87</sup> Of course, the historical moment at which these ideas are transmuted cannot be ignored either; these notions of Reformed theology and a set-apart elect having a public voice in engaging society, especially Tong's

---

<sup>85</sup> Hong, interview with Yu Jie, in *Expectation for whole life* 34.

Hong's denominational identity and theological persuasions were established early-on in his pastoral ministry, and he states that he was "jointly ordained" (联合按立) by the Reformed representative Stephen Tong, and the North American Baptist church.

<sup>86</sup> Interview, Hong Yujian, Aug 17, 2017.

<sup>87</sup> Li Ma and Jin Li, *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A sociological portrait of Christians in mainland China*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018.

Ma and Li posit that Calvinism, or more broadly Reformed theology is developing into a strong, quasi-denominational identity among many urban churches in mainland China today.

militant position exhorting a divinely-appointed elect to struggle against a sinful world took on new meaning in the context of a post-Tiananmen community navigating their conflicted positions vis-à-vis the Chinese state. For these émigré intellectuals uninitiated to North American culture wars—viewing their encounters with faith through the lenses of contemporary Chinese politics and the trauma of Tiananmen square—the Puritanical “hellfire and brimstone” exhortation to confront secular forces may have held a much different meaning, in which this anti-Christian adversary was, unsurprisingly, the (atheistic) Chinese Communist Party.<sup>88</sup> Christian converts therefore became part of a divine drama, with the Chinese Communist Party featuring as primary antagonist and epitome of atheistic evil.<sup>89</sup>

Whereas intellectuals exiting China in the early-1990s were generally receptive to his critiques of China’s social ills, such an uncompromising, antagonistic view towards the Chinese Party-State has shocked some other migrants to Vancouver in more recent times—in the words of one church member who invited a mainland Chinese friend to one of these talks: “why is this pastor preaching from the pulpit in Canada reprimanding the revered leaders of my country?”<sup>90</sup> But for others disillusioned with the perceived moral failings in China, this platform provided exactly the critique and moral clarity that they were searching for abroad.<sup>91</sup> Among the church members I interviewed in the course of this project, every single one mentioned Hong’s “Faith

---

<sup>88</sup> Individual accounts of religious conversion are subject to multifarious interpretations, and one can only speculate why these highly educated Chinese intellectuals were attracted to conservative Christianity, rather than more liberal visions of social justice and activism to be found in the Christian tradition. This observation, nevertheless, is based on my comparison of the Hong’s preaching with that of the Chinese-Indonesian evangelist Stephen Tong. They both preach a militant message of battle (争战), however, the object of conflict and their ultimate adversary is ambiguous. Hong uses the same idiom but to critique the Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>89</sup> Hong claims that the church “battles” against all sinful aspects of society, including social liberalism in Canada. However, when pressed, he admitted that the church’s divinely appointed purpose was to call out the injustices of the Chinese government, hence, their open activism against the Chinese Communist Party, not other sources of so-called sinfulness, like the Canadian government, for example.

<sup>90</sup> Mr Chen, interview, Aug 31, 2017. Voices of dissent are plentiful, especially among other Chinese Christians in Vancouver. However, unsurprisingly many of those congregants critical of Hong’s approach have already left the church, and those who remain have been very much shaped by Hong’s views.

<sup>91</sup> Mr Chen, interview, Aug 31, 2017.

and Culture talks” of the early 2000s as truly impressive and unprecedented in Vancouver’s Chinese community, which convinced them that his preaching and the church had something to offer. Nearly all of the attendees at these events were migrants from mainland China, although one member—who together with his wife identified as the only Hong Kong-background church members—were so awed by the views and arguments put forth by Hong in those talks, that they decided to remain in an otherwise mainland-Chinese-only church to learn.<sup>92</sup> Unlike other Chinese churches which never really dwelled much on so-called sensitive topics like Taiwan, Tiananmen square, Falun Gong and mainland politics for example, Hong took them head-on and responded to those unspoken questions troubling many of his congregants, in the process delivering unambiguous damnations of the Communist Party and its moral legitimacy to rule China.

Among the Chinese of Vancouver then, FCNABC emerged as a very different kind of religious organization, oftentimes polarizing, but nevertheless gaining a sizeable following.<sup>93</sup> It was an unambiguously “China-oriented” form of organization, and not simply because of the national origin of its members. On the contrary, many other Chinese Christian congregations which emerged commensurate with new waves of mainland Chinese migrations into Vancouver especially since the 2000s have been composed almost entirely by recent migrants from the mainland, but asserted little interest in the politics or affairs of China. In fact, one of Hong’s constant complaints expressed in his preaching was that other Chinese churches were not supportive of his initiatives, unwilling to speak out against injustices in China, and oftentimes

---

<sup>92</sup> Mr Li, interview, Aug 28, 2017.

<sup>93</sup> The church grew the fastest in the 1990s. Over roughly around a decade, it gained around 300 regular, committed members in the Vancouver church, with an additional 500-800 visitors passing through the church per year. It subsequently set up two satellite campus in the neighboring cities of Surrey and Coquitlam in British Columbia since 2010, to accommodate interested members who lived farther from the main church complex in Vancouver.

alarmingly even complicit with the Communist Party's rule. A case in point was the publication of a 2009 document entitled "Declaration by Chinese Christians on the twentieth anniversary of June the Fourth, 1989." Drafted by Hong himself and the dissident essayist Yu Jie, it exhorted all "Chinese churches of the world" to repent for their "attitudes towards the murder of June the Fourth, sins of cowardice, numbness, hypocrisy, forgetting and silence," and to "seek to uncover the truth about 6/4 through various means," including speaking openly about the event and caring for its forgotten victims.<sup>94</sup> The document re-inscribed the Tiananmen massacre at the center of their faith journeys over the last twenty years, and emphasized that only with the restoration of truth and justice over the event, would meaningful reconciliation between God and China be possible.<sup>95</sup> Chinese Christians around the world were therefore urged to "pray for the salvation of the souls of the Chinese people," and churches petitioned to organize a concurrent "prayer for China."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the few hundred signatories on this declaration were largely ineffectual in organizing anything significant to change the prevalent situation in memorializing the Tiananmen massacre. Only Hong, as he recounted with the slightest hint of pride in his congregation, was able to mobilize his church in prayer for the Tiananmen massacre, a morning memorial service which he has subsequently organized every year since the start of his tenure in 1996.<sup>96</sup> In his words, no other overseas Chinese church has been able to implement this official day of remembrance for the Tiananmen square massacre, and his open invitations to other Chinese churches in Vancouver to join FCNABC in remembrance on June the Fourth have been

---

<sup>94</sup> "Eighty Chinese Christians and Preachers Publish "Declaration on the twentieth anniversary of June the Fourth, 1989." Radio Free Asia. <http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/jidu-05072009162855.html> (last accessed, Nov 15, 2017).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Hong, interview, Aug 17, 2017. The only other church which has been active in implementing a day of prayer for June the Fourth, 1989, is Early Rain Reformed Church in Chengdu led by the Lawyer-Pastor Wang Yi.



largely ignored. In his view, his congregation—which really grew commensurate with his own leadership of the church— had received a “robust theological training,” and therefore was well-equipped to channel their faith towards social justice.<sup>97</sup> As he complained, even for many of the declaration’s signatories who in their own capacities were concerned about the injustices of Tiananmen, they were largely unable or unwilling to broach the idea of organizing a church-wide prayer or demonstration in their own communities, for fear of the associated political sensitivity. “They enjoy the freedoms in North America, but are unwilling to speak out, for fear of antagonizing their church members or being blacklisted by the Chinese government!” Even other religious leaders whose personal conversion experiences were intractably linked to the trauma of Tiananmen square, for example, the exiled student-leader Zhang Boli who is currently a Pastor, were discouraged by their own congregants from speaking about that past, for fear of politicizing the pulpit.<sup>98</sup> The unity of the congregation of FCNABC in standing by Hong’s position is therefore striking, evidenced by the fact that many lay-members of the church were also willing signatories on the declaration.<sup>99</sup> Hong laments:

When I committed to becoming a Pastor, the sentiment of June the Fourth (1989) had not been forgotten. However, in the years since, as voices of dissent among the people have waned, the Chinese churches have also followed in evading this issue of public justice. The Chinese church has been willing to speak out against social injustices... how is it then, that when the perpetrator of injustice is the government (and especially the Chinese government), those voices are muted? How is it that Chinese churches are willing to help the oppressed in society, but not political dissidents or Chinese prisoners of conscience? Is this not a cause for serious introspection?<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>97</sup> In an interview with Hong, I was surprised that he cited his “Reformed Theology” as the primary reason for his activism. While it is impossible to prove or refute the theological reasons for his activism, I argue that it would likewise be imprudent to ignore other social forces that pushed him in this direction.

<sup>98</sup> Hong, interview, Aug 17, 2017.

Zhang Boli’s path to exile from Tiananmen square is recounted in his biography: Zhang, Boli. *Escape from China: The Long Journey from Tiananmen to Freedom*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2003. This was recounted by Hong and cannot be corroborated, but from Zhang’s preaching and subsequent activities it appears that he no longer participates actively in pro-democracy circles overseas.

<sup>99</sup> I counted at least 20 recognizable names of FCNABC church members on the list of signatories.

<sup>100</sup> Hong Yujian, interview with Yu Jie, in *The Expectation for Whole Life* (一生一世的仰望), 46.

### 3 Migration, Conversion and Chinese Identity

Hong's story, while no doubt compelling and dramatic, has much larger ramifications beyond his own salvationist mission for China. Given his role as Pastor, the congregation which listens weekly to his sermons from the pulpit, and the many more audiences which eagerly absorb his message at large-scale evangelistic events, his role in shaping them—spiritually, politically— is significant. As Ian Johnson quotes the Chengdu-based activist Ran Yunfei describing the legal academic-turned-pastor Wang Yi, a close associate of Hong's who likewise regularly indicts the Party from his pulpit, "People like (Pastor) Wang Yi have their own followers. These are real followers. It's not like on social media, which they (the government) can switch off when they want."<sup>101</sup> Hong, too, has his faithful following among the nearly 700 congregants spread throughout the three church campuses in Vancouver, and an even larger base to promulgate his message at university Chinese Christian meetings, Chinese church events, or evangelistic rallies targeting mainland Chinese audiences in North America. In this sense, he fares better than many other overseas Chinese activists who find themselves fading into irrelevance, both in China and abroad. Therefore, a closer look at some of the congregants at FCNABC, and their responses to the teachings of this church, is necessary.

It is impossible to generalize among the estimated 700 members who are spread across the church's three campuses in the Metro Vancouver area, who no doubt all have multifaceted reasons for gathering. Nevertheless, interviews with a few key church members at the main Vancouver congregation, as well as more general participant-observer research has provided me with insight I believe is fairly representative of this church's demography, how individual

---

<sup>101</sup> Johnson, *The Souls of China*, 66.

encounters with faith have shaped church members' identities, their perceptions of China, as well as their understanding of what it means to be Chinese.

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the growing trend of return and circular migrations since the 1990s, emphasizing migrant transnational networks, cultural hybridity and fluid interpretations of citizenship, in contrast to earlier paradigms of acculturation into one's new locale of residence. Transnational migrants, who "maintain connections in both their nations of origin and destination" through various conveniences afforded by air-travel and internet technology, protected by residency statuses or even citizenship in various locales, are in many ways, the paradigmatic "global citizens" characteristic of this twenty-first century moment of hyper-connectivity.<sup>102</sup> Yet, such new frameworks to understand migration must be perceived alongside the much more longstanding phenomenon of "exile," where persons exiting their home country are either unable or unwilling to return. In a widely acclaimed oral history *Tiananmen Exiles*, Rowena Xiaoqing He spotlights the experiences, dilemmas and struggles of the "Tiananmen Generation" in exile, torn between "home and homeland, between a longing for ordinary life and sacrificing for an unfinished cause."<sup>103</sup> She foregrounds both literal exile—persons legally banned from returning to their home country— but also the idea of "self-exile," the conscious choice to reject complicity with an unjust regime, that she and many others of the Tiananmen Generation have chosen.<sup>104</sup> These stories complicate the picture of overseas Chinese communities, and give agency to silent voices drowned out by popular caricatures of new

---

<sup>102</sup> Lisong Liu. *Chinese Study Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016, 1.

David Ley. *Millionaire Migrants*. Oxford and New York: Wiley and Blackwell, 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Rowena Xiaoqing He. *Tiananmen Exiles: Voices of the Struggle for Democracy in China*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 172.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

Chinese migrants—foregrounding thoughtful, serious voices struggling to articulate conflicted positions vis-à-vis their home and emotional center in China.

In this chapter, I argue that Chinese migrants' encounters with this particular brand of Christianity at FCNABC have in fact enacted a transition between "migrant" and "exile" identities. This transformation was most clearly articulated by the "Tiananmen generation" who exited China in the early 1990s—Hong and those who joined the church during the early years of his tenure—however, later migrants into Vancouver who joined the church after the 2000s and into the present likewise had their lives invariably shaped by what they heard preached weekly from the pulpit.<sup>105</sup> Unlike many other North-American immigrant religious communities which "offer new moral vocabularies, institutional structures and ethical traditions" in the process of "becoming American" and integrated into their various locales, FCNABC members' embrace of Christianity abroad has not simply affected spirituality and the ways that they understand Canadian society—on the contrary, there is scant evidence that they have thought very deeply about what it means to be Canadian or located in Vancouver—rather, its largest impact has been on how they perceive China, and changed their position with regard to the Communist regime in the mainland.<sup>106</sup> Therefore, unlike the excellent sociological portrait drawn in Carolyn Chen's *Getting Saved in America*, which argues that Taiwanese migrants "become religious by becoming American," my findings suggests that mainland-Chinese congregants at FCNABC redefine "Chinese-ness" as a result of religious conversion.<sup>107</sup> Sermons, teachings, as well as incessant reminders of the injustices of the Party-State have provided a new vocabulary

---

<sup>105</sup> Currently church growth has slowed compared to the 1990s, as many younger migrants and students do not identify with what is preached. Nevertheless, the church is still attractive among a particular demography of persons aged 40-50 who came of age in China in the 1990s, as what this preached from the pulpit still does have some resonance with them. Despite the church's attempts to attract younger student-migrants for example, it has experienced little success in retaining them.

<sup>106</sup> Chen, *Getting Saved in America*.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

to discuss China's problems, and ready-made answers for Chinese migrants dissatisfied with problems rampant in China. In the process however, it has unwittingly created a new category of exiles who increasingly eschew their ties and connections to China in order to guard against complicity with the regime.

### 3.1 The "moral significance" of migration

Vancouver as a site of Chinese migration has received widespread media as well as scholarly attention, with varied focal points ranging from investment, integration and perennial debates over multiculturalism in practice. Yu Li's empirical study of recent mainland Chinese migration to Vancouver has found that the majority are relatively well educated, upper-middle class urbanites who seek to improve their standards of living in a better social and natural environment.<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, especially among those who have found material successes in post-Reform China, are individuals defensive of the Chinese government's positions, and still generally accept the Party-line that Western human rights agencies regularly take political advantage of China.<sup>109</sup> However, my interviews with members of FCNABC complicate this picture, in that they claim to have exited China not simply to improve their quality of life, but based on deep disillusionment and frustration with the current state of affairs in the People's Republic of China. In other words, it was not the attractiveness of Vancouver that attracted them, but rather the wretchedness of social life in the PRC that compelled their exit. Granted, this group is obviously not representative of all Chinese migrants, and there is a self-selection bias, but it is notable that they choose to portray a deliberate "rejection" of China, a difficult decision

---

<sup>108</sup> Yu, Li, "An Empirical Study of Recent Mainland Chinese Migration to Vancouver." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 19, no. 2 (2009): 180-196.

<sup>109</sup> Yu, "Mainland Chinese Migration to Vancouver."

involving considerable sacrifice. While it is impossible to ascertain the truthfulness or historicity of such claims which inherently are multidimensional and constantly in flux, here I am interested in the *meaning* that they retroactively ascribe to their decision to leave China, and venture to propose that their experiences attending this church have had a significant and direct impact on how they transitioned from migrant to persons in self-exile.

Mr Chen. and his wife grew up in South China in the 1960s, and had no prior background or affinity with Christianity. On the contrary, they stressed the extreme improbability of their Christian conversion, with their families deeply stepped in atheistic Marxist-Leninism and Buddhism, respectively. They arrived in Canada in 2003, and have since taken up Canadian citizenship. In an interview, they recounted their life histories, and how the church allowed them to find faith, as well as new ways of understanding China.

“I was caught up in the craze of doing business and getting rich in China. I was crazy, yes, you can describe me as crazy. That is what the high pressured social environment in mainland China does to people. I only decided to move to Canada after a health-scare gave occasion to pause my moneymaking. Our family then decided to emigrate.”

“After arriving in Vancouver in 2003 my wife and I were unemployed. We realized that we were all brainwashed, we didn’t know anything about the ‘truth’ of China and devoted ourselves to self-study. We read books, and sought out answers about our own identity... We first encountered Pastor Hong at a public lecture on the centenary of the 1911 revolution. One of the panelists, a Taiwanese historian, praised Chinese culture, but we knew that there were problems with Chinese culture, we just couldn’t articulate them. Then Hong spoke and raised the point that the evil spirit of Communism (共產邪靈) had infiltrated Chinese culture! He only spoke for about thirty minutes, but his point about the (biblical) idea of human sinfulness as the cause of China’s problems left a lasting impression. We then decided to attend his church to learn more.”<sup>110</sup>

Another church member, Mr. Zhou, was even more skeptical about contemporary China’s problems, and disillusioned especially with the current way of life in Shanghai where he

---

<sup>110</sup> Interview, Mr Chen., Sep 1, 2017.

was raised and worked for many years. As a relatively new migrant only arriving in 2013, he was still waiting for approval of his Canadian citizenship.

“I used to be a teacher in China. By local standards in Shanghai it was a prestigious school, but I found myself increasingly at odds with the way of teaching there. Children are being brainwashed, and they don’t even realize it! The students’ ideas are being suppressed, and they can only learn within the confines of what the Party permits. My main reason for leaving China was that I didn’t want my children to be educated there. I cannot stand the culture, the environment in Shanghai. The city is modern, our lives are comfortable and affluent, but it pains me that people in this country (China), society is superficial, materialistic, dissatisfied, and morally lacking!”

Just before leaving China I actually just started attending a house-church in Shanghai, but there it just “wasn’t convenient” to talk about these topics of public importance. In this regard the Party has succeeded in erasing this history from the public space. But when I came to FCNABC, I learned (from Pastor Hong) that Christians must have a view and bring it into the public space. Now, I recognize that we are engaged in a spiritual battle with the Party-State, which is the evil spirit in control of the country! (共產邪靈)

Looking back at the Party-State now, I see their sinfulness; it isn’t simply a matter of criticizing the government, as some other churches accuse us of doing.<sup>111</sup>

Such rejections of secular, materialist ways of life in China always culminate in moments of reckoning aboard, where these new migrants seek answers to both spiritual and political questions that had burdened them since their arrival in a foreign land. All recounted an experience of dislocation, alienation, and the desire to find their own identities as Chinese. For many migrants who are in their 40s and 50s, this involved a period of searching, which invariably led them back to the Tiananmen massacre of 1989, which embodied the frustrations and discontent they felt for the governing regime in China.<sup>112</sup> Ultimately, it was Pastor Hong’s

---

<sup>111</sup> Interview, Mr Zhou., Aug 31, 2017.

<sup>112</sup> Repeatedly in my interviews, church members brought up the Tiananmen massacre of June 4, 1989, as an example of the injustices of the Communist Party; their involvement in protests and hunger strikes on campus, and their spiritual awakening. The fact that they drew that link between Tiananmen and conversion was also striking, and even though they might have exaggerated their “activism” in 1989, the attempt to frame their conversion in those terms suggests an attempt to “fit-in” individual life stories with the broader trajectory of the church’s growth.

sermons, with his unique mix of Christian moral certainty, outspokenness in critiquing the failures of the Chinese Party-State, and compelling vision for a democratic China infused with Christian morals, that convinced them that this was the answer they had been seeking. The fact that interviewees regularly brought up the term “evil spirit of Communism (共產邪靈)” as a term which Hong used to describe the Chinese Party-State was striking, as it reflected a linguistic use consistent with how they heard it from the pulpit. This framed their current (Christian) conflict with the Communist Party as good and evil, righteous warfare which extended into a spiritual struggle against Satanic forces.

The majority of the church’s current members are migrants who entered Canada in the late 1990s or early 2000s. Unlike many other immigrant churches—where Mainland-Chinese emigres only encounter Christianity *after* going abroad—members of FNCABC are divided roughly equally between those who encounter faith abroad, and those who were already Christians in China. Nevertheless, even for those who arrived with some Christian background, the brand of Christianity they encountered at FCNABC was radically different than what they had known previously. It was assertive, confident, and spoke to social-ills beyond the church. It redefined not just their religious identity as Christians, but their perceptions of China and what it means to be Chinese.<sup>113</sup>

### **3.2 Conversion, “Self-exile,” and new identities abroad**

Among Chinese migrants in Vancouver, especially among those who recently arrived from mainland China, it is not uncommon to ask when one is next travelling to China. In fact, the

---

<sup>113</sup> In fact, throughout the course of my conversations with church members, a few members expressed deep surprise when I mentioned that not all churches regularly have prayers in remembrance of the Tiananmen square massacre and that FCNABC was unique in this respect.



remarkable rise of round-trip air travel between Vancouver International Airport and China—over ten airlines making regular flights to at least eight cities—is testament to the remarkable numbers of travelers between these two transnational sites, growing commensurate with the Chinese migrant community. However, when the question came up in my interviews, it was repeatedly met with a chuckle, sigh, or some other ambiguous expression reflecting a reluctant resignation to their new identity.

Hong himself, who has resided in the United States and Canada since the 1985, is emblematic of an individual in self-exile, who has made the deliberate choice not to return to mainland China. His last visits to China were in 1999 and 2000, where he was invited to preach and provide training to some local Christian leaders. Since then however, he has decided to preach from Vancouver, and channel his aspirations to Christianize China through other means.

“I actually did visit China in 1999 and 2000 to preach, but I didn’t feel comfortable speaking there. It is too restrictive! I want to speak the truth boldly, without restraint, but the organizers (hosts at a local church) there urged me to tone down my criticisms of the Party, to avoid trouble. They weren’t ready to be “martyred” and kept reminding me to be careful. This is paradoxical! If they want safety, they must sacrifice the truth. So I prefer to remain abroad, I can say whatever I like, and forgo the “right” to return to China.”

“When invited to attend our church events to speak against injustices of the Party-State, many other Chinese Christian preachers overseas give the excuse that they don’t speak out against the Party, or avoid sensitive topics in order to protect their right to return to China. They sometimes even give the excuse that they wish to return to China in order to evangelize and preach. I highly doubt the truth of what they are preaching!”<sup>114</sup>

In his view then, returning to China would necessarily entail making compromise in order to exist, calculations that his local partners or other overseas-based preachers were willing to

---

<sup>114</sup> Interview, Hong Yujian, Aug 17, 2017.

He has made publicly stated this view on numerous occasions, most recently at a Christian conference in Hong Kong, September 2017. fcnabcevideos. “2017 年第四屆三化異象營會「問題解答」(2017 fourth threefold vision meeting Q&A section)” YouTube video, posted Oct 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIlcWQ4mqc&t=1931s> (last accessed, Nov 16, 2017).

make, but he felt stifled by. Therefore, he decided to permanently remain overseas and speak out from the safety of Vancouver. According to Hong, this is a position that he has constantly reminded his congregation of, and the fact that his church members have been the majority of signatories on his publications are a source of validation and support.

Given the meaning church members ascribed to their out-migration from China into Vancouver—reasons ranging from an unjust system to lack of freedoms—choosing to return to China after this “conversion” would therefore make those decisions seem hollow and insincere. Following Pastor Hong’s position that living in China or operating within its confines involves at best “compromise,” or at worst “complicity” with the regime, members’ lives have invariably been shaped by this view. None were really involved in activism prior to attending this church, on the contrary, many are middle-class new migrants who still work full-time and have families to provide for. For almost all interviewees who participated in this project, the church community was their primary, if not only social circle outside of the workplace. Therefore, these views promulgated from the pulpit, with an aura of divine authority, had a significant effect on how regular congregants perceived their own experience. Many reflected antipathy towards life and China, and had no desire to return. For example, as Mr. Zhou recounts:

“Look at the many other Chinese migrants in Vancouver, they are still operating within a Mainland-Chinese mode of thinking! Many come here to purchase property, to invest, and to enjoy the freedoms here. But they all have no critical reflection about China! They are still stuck within the “big China” mentality, essentially how they have been brainwashed back in China. Only if they receive Christianity, will they truly be able to see China today for what it is.”<sup>115</sup>

Another church member described the Chinese migrants who circulate frequently between Vancouver and mainland China as akin to the biblical Israelites of the Exodus, who

---

<sup>115</sup> Interview, Mr Zhou., Aug 18, 2017.

journeyed towards the promised land but in defiance of God's instructions still desired the familiarity and comforts of captivity in Egypt! Because they were unwilling to choose, and therefore reluctant to speak out against the Communist Party's injustices while enjoying the freedoms of Canada, they were selfish in enjoying the best of both worlds while indifferent to the suffering of the persecuted Christians in China.

Yet, suffering "persecution" for the faith was a final reason which convinced one member that he had no place in Chinese social life after his migration and conversion in Vancouver. As he recounted:

My family only returned to China once (since 2013), and even though it was only for three weeks, I couldn't bear it. It was too dirty, messy, chaotic. My father-in-law berated me for initiating my son into an evil cult (邪教). We all felt sick for the entire duration of the trip, and couldn't bear the weather and intense pollution. That experience embodies my attitude towards China now. I don't think I will be returning too often, or anytime soon.<sup>116</sup>

As a new convert whose family was openly antagonistic to Christianity, Mr Zhou had an added impetus to re-start new lives abroad and symbolically cut-off ties with a heathen past. He recounted, all his friends in Canada rejoiced at the baptism of his family, but it was his family in China which was most upset and discouraging about this newfound faith. This was for him, a reminder that China was steeped in sinfulness, a condition completely attributable to the Communist Party's rule. Therefore, "the Communist Party must be thoroughly discredited and have its legitimacy to rule completely debilitated. Only then can Christianity and Democracy take root. Anything that can help this should be our ally."<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>116</sup> Interview, Mr Zhang., Aug 31, 2017.

<sup>117</sup> He even raised the example of controversial New York-based real-estate tycoon Guo Wengui, who has recently been lambasting the Communist Party's top leaders through unverifiable leaks to the media, as "divinely appointed to destroy the authority of the Communist Party." In his view, "it is God's providence that allowed Guo Wengui to completely destroy the Party's credibility, such that the laypeople in China would see the Party's corruption and moral depravity, leading them to give up their faith in Communism and convert to Christianity."

Another, Mr. Huang., who was one of the earlier members of the church entering in the 1990s noted that he had not visited mainland China in more than 15 years. There was nothing there for him since his parents had already passed away, and he had no reason to return. In fact, today he would deliberately even avoid passing through mainland Chinese airports in transit, opting to pass through Taiwanese airports if necessary, when travelling to other parts of Asia.<sup>118</sup>

For those who did still continue to visit mainland China, there was a distinctly apologetic tone of voice answering my questions, and almost all of them framed those decisions as involuntary, as if I were about to judge or condemn them for somehow still refusing to give up their “old” identities and ties to the People’s Republic of China. For Mr. Lin and his wife for example, who still had family and parents alive in China, they admitted that they still return to China regularly to visit family. However, they qualified, whenever they return they make it a point to return to visit and support “persecuted house churches” in China, networks and relationships that were endorsed by the church. Another longtime church member, when asked whether she still travelled to China, coyly responded that she had “no choice”, as her elderly parents were still not yet Christians and she had the responsibility to evangelize to them.<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, they made a point to emphasize that these old networks left behind were not as important, if anything, just remnant obligations of a previous pre-Christian life. Now however, they returned to China to fulfill familial responsibilities, but their principal connections and relationships in China were established through the church.

---

<sup>118</sup> Interview, Mr Huang, Aug 30, 2017

<sup>119</sup> Interview, Ms Chen., Sep 5, 2017.

### **3.3 Converting China from afar**

If China is controlled by the evil spirit of Communism, as Hong charges, then following his logic the good will naturally be diametrically opposed to it, and must resist Chinese state authority at all costs. Yet at FCNABC, Hong through his preaching is passionate and interested in converting millions of unsaved souls, in China. How does he envision change being affected, and what practical support can a church located in Vancouver, Canada, whose leaders and members rarely if not never visit the mainland, offer to Christians in China or further this Christianizing mission in China, without being complicit with the Chinese state? The following section draws attention to a fascinating new form of transitional solidarity between FCNABC and what they call the “persecuted house churches of China,” which they believe to be the vanguards of imminent political transition in the mainland. It reveals one model for how Chinese in the diaspora have channeled their aspirations and struggles for China, imposing new meaning and significance to ongoing political struggles in China. Their primary connections to the mainland are no longer prior kinship ties or familial relationships, which have been supplanted by transnational networks with burgeoning churches in the mainland, what they see as the vanguard in China’s imminent political transition.

## 4 Reconnecting with China through Religion

“In recent times, many Chinese churches have cited that ‘churches shouldn’t be involved in politics’ in order to sidestep the sins of social injustice, political persecution, and retreat into their self-righteous, comfortable and protected spiritual enclaves. These Chinese churches can pray for the government in a general sense, or even specifically pray for the (Beijing) Olympic games, and yet say they are uninvolved in politics; but when we suggest praying for the victims of June the Fourth, supporting those who lost loved ones and children at Tiananmen, they say this is preaching politics. Is this truly spirituality or hypocrisy?”<sup>120</sup>

“But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.”

(Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews, Chapter 10, 32-34, a verse cited at FCNABC’s prayer-protest in solidarity with the “persecuted” Shouwang church in Beijing, Dec 2017).<sup>121</sup>

In his acclaimed essay “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said writes: “exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.”<sup>122</sup> This sense of dislocation, estrangement from homeland, and one’s ineffectual ability to enact any change, renders a palpable frustration and helplessness incapacitation. Practically, one forfeits the ability to be fully satisfied, placid or secure, insofar as the future of China—or any other homeland—remains an obsession.<sup>123</sup> The author Louisa Lim sympathetically refers to the exiled Tiananmen-dissident twenty-years on as “impotent,” “neutered,” and akin to football players on the bench “begging to be let back in and shouting from the sidelines.”<sup>124</sup> Her lengthy interview with the then-student leader Wu’er Kaixi

---

<sup>120</sup> Hong, interview with Yu Jie, in *Expectation for this life*.

<sup>121</sup> Biblical text from the Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews, Chapter 10 (32-34), cited regularly by Hong as a justification to support those being persecuted by the (Chinese) state.

<sup>122</sup> Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 137.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid, 148.

<sup>124</sup> Louisa Lim, *The People’s Republic of Amnesia*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014, 75.

underscores one exile's fears of marginalization and disappearing into irrelevance, that necessitates a kind of narcissism (*zilian*, 自恋), what he considers a requirement for martyrdom.<sup>125</sup> Unsurprisingly therefore, narratives which such individuals or communities construct to make sense of their predicament are therefore oftentimes idealistic, salvationist or even messianic visions of progress. As Said muses, exiles cut off from their roots, their land, their past, feel, "an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or restored people."<sup>126</sup> Religion, especially Christianity's central tenets of rebirth and salvation, form a potent alternative ideology which provide comforts and new meaning amidst social tumult. Yet beyond individual spiritual refuge, it also provides persons in exile a newfound lens through which their nation's predicament can be understood, and new channels through which to channel their aspirations for China, from afar.

#### **4.1 Solidarity with a dissident Beijing church<sup>127</sup>**

Since 2008, FCNABC has been embroiled in a controversial and unexpected contest emerging between the Church and State in China. Whereas many Chinese churches or religious groups – both domestically and in the diaspora—would go to great lengths to operate without antagonizing the Party, Hong and the leaders of FCNABC jumped at the opportunity to get involved in supporting this protest in China, what they perceived to be a crucially important prophetic moment with major ramifications for China's political future.

---

<sup>125</sup> Lim, *The People's Republic of Amnesia*, 76.

<sup>126</sup> Said, "Reflections on Exile," 141.

<sup>127</sup> Even though Beijing Shouwang church maintains that it's "outdoor worship service" was never intended to be a protest, but rather an assertion of their freedom of religion, there is little doubt that their gathering of a huge congregation—at their peak, around a thousand members—in a public area could be interpreted otherwise.

The case in point arose when Shouwang Church, a large unregistered church in Beijing which drew congregants principally from the educated elite of Beijing's Haidian district, were denied a sufficiently large meeting place by local authorities, and subsequently decided to organize an outdoor congregational worship service as a form of public protest in Beijing.<sup>128</sup> The subsequent state harassment of congregants and dispersal of the gathering was perceived by disparate groups differently— some nonreligious observers perceived it as surprisingly restrained for suppression of public dissent in the nation's capital, but other Western human rights watchers placed it within the larger continuum of religious persecution under a repressive, atheistic regime. Nevertheless, the widespread coverage in the international news media rendered that the Shouwang church incident received disproportionate attention among Western audiences, solidifying existing perceptions of religious suppression under an illiberal, atheistic Communist government.<sup>129</sup>

That two of the most influential leaders of the Beijing Protest were once members of FCNABC during prior year-long sojourns in Vancouver is significant, even though it is unclear how exactly their short stints at the Vancouver church shaped their theological or political views.<sup>130</sup> Regardless, Hong in Vancouver immediately seized the occasion of the Shouwang

---

<sup>128</sup> "Shouwang" literally means "to keep watch" in Chinese, which is reflective of their position towards the Chinese state and society. They want to keep in check the state's injustices and suppression of civil liberties, especially religious freedom.

Carsten Vala, "Protestant Christianity and Civil Society in Authoritarian China," in *China Perspectives*, 2012(3), 2012, 43-52.

<sup>129</sup> International media coverage of the Shouwang incident was widespread, including the New York Times, Radio France Internationale, BBC.

Shouwang church members maintain that their taking to the public space wasn't intended as a protest, but rather was an outdoor worship service (户外礼拜) made necessary by the lack of indoor space to house such a large congregation. But the public implications of this gathering were obvious, and I still use "protest" to describe the confrontational nature of this church gathering.

<sup>130</sup> Both elders—Sun Yi and Liu Guanhui—were doctoral students at Peking University then, who were visiting scholars at Regent College in Vancouver between 2000 and 2001. Sun is currently Professor of Philosophy at People's University and Beijing, and one of the most articulate defenders of the church's position. He converted to Christianity and was baptized at FCNABC. Liu, who subsequently went on to a career in Chinese Christian publishing, was already a Christian and attend FCNABC during his stint in Vancouver.



church protest to renew his church's solidarity with the "persecuted churches of China," speaking out forcefully against the Chinese Communist Party for their wrongful and unjust suppression of religious freedoms. This was "a battle, a battle which was unprecedented in five thousand years of Chinese history," over the right to worship.<sup>131</sup> And in his view, it was a movement that embodied strong currents for civil society and lawful freedoms in China. This view, which has been elucidated to predominantly Chinese Christian audiences in various public speeches, was that this fight for religious freedoms is not simply about freedom to practice religion, but in fact represents an awakening of nascent civil society that will invariably culminate in democratic government. Therefore, it was a movement that would have implications beyond the church context itself.

Privately, Hong articulated that he believes these churches like Shouwang to be the seeds of civil society that could ultimately play a major role in political transition, and the toppling of Communist Party rule. As he recounted, "everyone knows the injustices of the Communist Party. Change will come. What will the church's role be in that political transition? Political transition usually involves upheaval, bloodshed and social unrest, but the churches advocate a nonviolent and peaceful approach. It is my hope that they can be at the forefront leading this transition."<sup>132</sup> This burgeoning wave of new urban churches which eschew the house church label, coming into the public space, have fueled his imaginations and aspirations that such a democratic transition might already be underway, and he had to rally overseas Chinese Christians at this prophetic moment. For members at FCNABC, this Shouwang church "persecution" quickly became shorthand for the repressive and unjust nature of the Communist regime, and the most

---

<sup>131</sup> fcabc videos. "20121103 户外晨祷告会 (Outdoor morning prayer meeting) " YouTube video. Posted May 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kP8w6aim90&list=PL4ySDlhAUh\\_gwbyR6zTMD7BvPcbMZKt2-&index=14](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kP8w6aim90&list=PL4ySDlhAUh_gwbyR6zTMD7BvPcbMZKt2-&index=14) (last accessed, Nov 17, 2017).

<sup>132</sup> Interview, Hong Yujian, Aug 17, 2017.

recent iteration of heavy-handed suppression that remained unchanged from Tiananmen square in 1989, until the present.

In a 2011 public lecture about the Shouwang church protest entitled “Keeping Watch, The Road to Freedom of Faith,” Hong preached to a captivated audience in Vancouver, about the gross injustices committed by the mainland Chinese regime towards Shouwang church. For many Chinese in Vancouver, this was the first time they received news or knowledge about this lesser-known event in Chinese media circles. Hong’s speech, which generated significant controversy, was widely publicized and debated on overseas Chinese media circles in the West. He unambiguously cast the conflict in Manichean terms: a heroic church willing to be martyred but yet not completely broken by the ruthless regime. In his words, the Shouwang church was ordained to be a “City on a Hill” in Beijing, to stand up against the Chinese government and provide a model for all other unregistered or underground churches to follow.<sup>133</sup> No longer would churches in China be subordinate to the State, but they would rise up and exert their divinely-protected rights to worship. By denying this right to worship, the Chinese government was in effect opposing God, controlled by Satan, and slave to sin. This emphasis on the Shouwang church’s “willingness to sacrifice” in the course of this struggle was repeated constantly, and Hong’s biggest criticisms were in fact levelled against those Chinese Christians—including those in the diaspora, in his audience—who were unwilling to take a “stand” in this conflict and therefore were to be indicted as complicit with the Chinese state! “A country’s sins are the shame of its people, including its Christians,” and therefore all Chinese people especially its Christians had the social obligation to speak out against these injustices, to

---

<sup>133</sup> fcncabvideos. “容我的百姓去——守望信仰自由之路——洪宇健牧師 (Let my people go\_ Shouwang’s road to freedom of faith\_ Pastor Hong Yujian).” YouTube Video. Posted Dec 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fKHQIEkHFQ> (last accessed, Nov 17, 2017).

create a “righteous, pure and law-based society.”<sup>134</sup> By not “speaking out”, this behavior would weight on their conscience and call upon judgement.

FCNABC has subsequently organized annual outdoor prayer-cum-protests for Shouwang church in Vancouver, but drawn little support from others beyond their own church congregation.<sup>135</sup> Hong has repeatedly emphasized the fact that his congregation deliberately chose to brave the cold outdoors in Vancouver, in order to reflect their unity with the “hardships” and persecutions that Shouwang church faced. These meetings have been specifically targeted at critiquing the Chinese Communist Party, and overtly confronting the legitimacy of China’s rulers. If “God’s special ordination of Shouwang church was to show the hypocrisy of the Chinese regime,” who could speak otherwise?

## **4.2 Rituals of Intimacy**

On December the 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, I stood among a group of 150 Chinese-Christians on the sidewalk alongside Fraser St. and 53<sup>rd</sup> Avenue in Vancouver, gathered to stand in solidarity with the “persecuted churches of China.” It was publicized as a day of prayer for China, targeted at all civic-minded Chinese migrants in Vancouver.<sup>136</sup> The church leadership and many members saw this event as unique and most important in the church calendar, in Hong’s words, “a symbolic movement which must never stop,” despite the fact that on that winter’s morning he was visibly

---

<sup>134</sup> fcnaabcvideos. “容我的百姓去——守望信仰自由之路——洪宇健牧師 (Let my people go\_ Shouwang’s road to freedom of faith\_ Pastor Hong Yujian).”

<sup>135</sup> The event is called a “morning prayer meeting (晨禱會)” but its political overtones are evident. The time spent in prayer was perhaps 5-10 minutes, whereas Hong’s exhortation to do battle against injustice in China spanned nearly an hour.

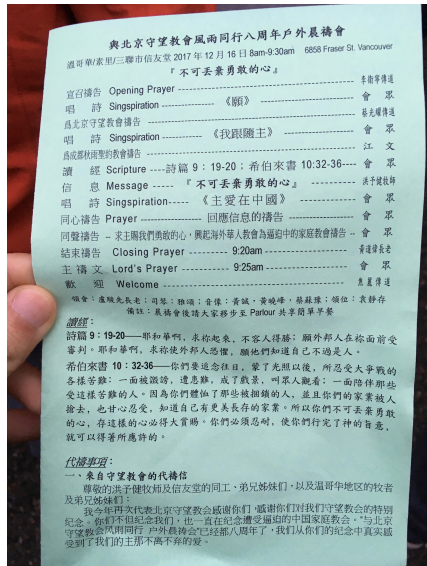
<sup>136</sup> The intent is for this meeting to be beyond the congregation, but apparently only congregants attend. Non-church members were acknowledged and given a gift, thanking them for their “support” for the church’s cause. I too, received a small token of appreciation for my presence as a non-member there. Crucially, as with all church events, proceedings were conducted exclusively in Mandarin Chinese and not Cantonese or English, which excluded large proportions of Vancouver’s self-identified Chinese-Canadian community.

ill, and nursing a sore throat.<sup>137</sup> At least one young man, however, was much more tempered in his enthusiasm and assessment of its importance: “we come regularly for all church events, so we naturally should attend this prayer meeting as well, but we didn’t *specifically* come because it is a special event for China.” Nevertheless, before daybreak and in the morning darkness, there was a palpable sense of excitement, anxiety, and eagerness in the crowd. Today, they had gathered for a purpose much larger than themselves or their church. They were casting their aspirations and hopes back to China, and speaking out for a national cause. Putting to rest any doubt about the significance and actual impact of such an activity, Hong proclaimed in his prayer: “this meeting might not have any effect in changing the situation, or the minds of the government—God might well decide to harden the hearts of the Party leaders, just like the Egyptian pharaoh in the Exodus—but He still remembers these sacrifices we made today. More importantly, in writing the history of Chinese Christianity, there will now be a voice from among the overseas Chinese Christians who supported those persecuted Christians in China.”<sup>138</sup>

---

<sup>137</sup> fcnabc videos. “20171216 与北京守望教会风雨同行八周年户外晨祷会——洪牧师信息（Walking alongside Beijing Shouwang church in the wind and rain for eight years, an outdoor morning prayer meeting）” YouTube video. Posted Dec 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_VgE0VQPSMY&t=203s4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VgE0VQPSMY&t=203s4) (last accessed, Dec 29, 2017).

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.



(bulletin distributed at the morning prayer service; Hong's exhortation)<sup>139</sup>

The event was titled “Walking alongside Beijing Shouwang church in the wind and rain for eight years, an outdoor morning prayer meeting.” This year, the eighth consecutive year that FCNABC organized this event, their prayers extended not just to Shouwang church, but a few other representatives of “persecuted churches” in China whose pastors were personal acquaintances of Hong: Guiyang Living Stone Church and Chengdu Early Rain Reformed Church.<sup>140</sup> The event’s central theme underlay Hong’s belief that renewed persecutions of Christianity in China—starting with the Shouwang church incident—would herald a new epoch in church-state relations in China, with an imminent triumphant outcome. As with many Christian meetings, it began with prayer and song, rousing those gathered from the early-morning lethargy. Although this church has a penchant for singing traditional hymns in translation—which often incorporates awkward grammar and syntax not immediately comprehensible to the uninitiated — this occasion perhaps

<sup>139</sup> Photos by Joshua Tan.

<sup>140</sup> In this eighth year of prayer for Shouwang church however, the flyers distributed noted the special burden and plight of three churches in China: Beijing Shouwang Church, Early Rain Reformed Church in Chengdu, and Living Waters Church in Guiyang. The latter two churches had more recently come into conflict with the authorities, and as Hong stated, were to be lauded for their courage in standing up for the truth.

merited music with a more distinct oriental flavor. As the pentatonic melody of the hymn *Yuan*, or “Aspiration” flowed, its message was unambiguously clear, none of the meaning lost in translation:

“For the Chinese land,  
I earnestly pray,  
May your truth shine on the land,  
For our flesh and blood, I boldly ask  
That our billion countrymen (tongbao) will be saved...”<sup>141</sup>

The high point of this meeting—as in the case of most other FCNABC events—was Hong’s exhortation, entitled “Never Abandon a Courageous Heart.”<sup>142</sup> It was openly combative, urging those “brave courageous warriors who do battle in the name of Christ” to continue battling (争战) the injustices in China, which have been permitted and endorsed under Communist Party rule. This tenor was sustained throughout the 40-minute sermon, where the contents of his message summarized historical and contemporary “persecutions” of Chinese Christians, delving into contemporary politics, the hypocrisy of the China Dream, and the alarming “Cult of Xi Jinping” advanced at the recently concluded 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress. “Are we going to let Xi Jinping become a new Mao Zedong?” A chorus of responses were spontaneous and forthcoming; “No, no! Never! Amen...” Hong continued, “the Communist Party claims to lead all things (党是领导一切的). We have to completely abolish this, and this responsibility has been given to the church. If we are the *true* church, we have to struggle or battle (争战) on behalf of God... Yes,

---

<sup>141</sup> The congregation of FCNABC typically eschews Chinese hymns in favor of Puritan, “Reformed” hymns translated from English, oftentimes resulting in awkward grammar and syntax structures. However, it seems like on this occasion a more overtly “Chinese-sounding” hymn was deemed appropriate.

<sup>142</sup> fcncbc videos. “20171216 与北京守望教会风雨同行八周年户外晨祷告会——洪牧师信息（Walking alongside Beijing Shouwang church in the wind and rain for eight years, an outdoor morning prayer meeting）” YouTube video. Posted Dec 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_VgE0VQPSMY&t=203s4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VgE0VQPSMY&t=203s4) (last accessed, Dec 29, 2017).

the Party can pressure some ‘not really’ Christians, to fear, withdraw and give up... But they cannot stop the *real* Christians, those soldiers who triumph with the help of God.” These real Christians standing firm on the sidewalk of Fraser St. in Vancouver, then, but with aspirations reaching across the ocean to their beloved China, were imbued with an odd mix of love and contempt for China; sympathies with the idea of Christian brethren suffering persecution for their shared faith, and disgust with the ruling Communist regime for perpetrating those persecutions.

#### **4.3 Imagined Transnational Ties**

Many churches in China, and indeed religious associations more generally, eschew overt “foreign ties” for fear of running afoul of the law. However, the role of overseas Chinese Christians in this unfolding drama strikes an uneasy balance between alignment with hostile foreign forces, and patriotic Chinese eager to pay their dues and contribute to the motherland. Perceiving himself as defender of China’s persecuted Christians, Hong straddles the space between both roles. In his congregation, he has cultivated an image of Christians under duress in China, a nation mired in sin and depravity. And whenever they encounter news of Christians from China, it invariably is framed in the context of antagonism with the state, persecution, and salvationist terms. At a 2017 speech delivered in Hong Kong, Hong, addressing a group of Chinese-Christian leaders, maintained that this form of “speaking out” from overseas would help to support them, and “whenever persecutions arise they should send a message, and FCNABC in Vancouver will speak out on their behalf.” He affirmed, “whenever you (the Christians in China) suffer, we overseas Chinese also suffer alongside you... Our mouths may be silenced by the government, but the bible teaches us that we must bravely speak out.”

Their counterparts in China however, have been much less forthcoming. Visiting Beijing Shouwang church in June 2017, a few longtime members did have some knowledge of FCNABC and other established overseas Chinese churches, even though they were quick to mention that those were merely personal friendships cultivated over many years. Despite this perceived solidarity among Vancouver Chinese Christians, with their practice of outdoor protests in Vancouver creating a sense of intimacy and shared ritual between both transnational sites, these ties between congregations are largely one-sided imaginations. Shouwang's public protests have already subsided but the outdoor prayers cum protests in Vancouver remain constant. As one young Shouwang church preacher who came to Vancouver in 2014 to study recounted, her first visit to FCNABC was surprisingly emotional, at least for some members of the congregation, who remained behind after the service to embrace her, with tears in their eyes, thanking her for "suffering persecution on behalf of all the Chinese Christians." In her view, it was unnecessarily emotive and exaggerated, and wondered what kind of image had been cultivated of Shouwang church, at this church in Vancouver?<sup>143</sup> Regardless, she found the "pressure" disconcerting, and avoided this crowd for the remainder of her stint in Canada. Of course for the above-mentioned young preacher who knew little about FCNABC before that visit, that emotional outpouring and catharsis seemed awkward and uneasy. But for FCNABC members who had been passionately praying for Shouwang church and protesting on their behalf year after year, her coming to Vancouver seemed almost like a long-lost family member finally being liberated after years of imprisonment.

---

<sup>143</sup> Ms Zhang, interview, in Beijing. She later recounted that Hong encouraged her to preach boldly in Beijing outdoors and gather more followers to call out the Party's crimes. She stated her view that Hong was so divorced from the realities in Beijing since he was operating from Vancouver, and was not subject to the restrictions that ordinary Christians in China were.



## 5 Conclusion

In post-Tiananmen China, the state's refrain is appealing: why dwell on an imperfect past, when there are opportunities to benefit from the existing system, as long as one is willing to accept certain restrictions and out-of-bounds topics? The Singapore activist KC Chew's veiled critique of authoritarian neoliberal regimes underscores an ideology that citizens of such polities—the People's Republic of China, Singapore, stand out as examples—have unwittingly bought into: "I will eschew politics and pursue wealth."<sup>144</sup> As long as the proverbial red-line is not crossed, opportunities to profiteer from within the system are plentiful and promising.

In perusing the corpus of Hong's writings and sermons however, one is struck by the frequency and intensity of his critique against those who forget. Chinese émigré intellectuals "forgot" the national tragedy of 1989 so soon after they received their permanent residency status in the United States; Chinese Christians "forgot" the problems and injustices against the church in China after they resettled comfortably abroad... But his church can *never* forget. They are fighting a losing battle, but they will resist the tendency to forget and cave-in to the Party's pressures.

Louisa Lim's *People's Republic of Amnesia* investigates the extraordinary processes through which the tumult of Tiananmen square has been expunged from the public memory of its citizens, and the process through which various people make calculations whether or not to remember. Many among the post-Tiananmen generation know nothing about the humanitarian crimes of China's recent past. Nearly thirty years on, silence and amnesia has stood in the place of reconciliation, nor have any steps been taken towards the "truth, compensation, and

---

<sup>144</sup> Cited in Ian Burma, *God's Dust: A Modern Asian Journey*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989.

accountability” that civil society and activist groups like the Tiananmen Mothers have laboriously advocated for.<sup>145</sup> Yet many have since willingly accepted that the nation’s economic flourishing and prosperity under Communist Party rule has validated martial-law and military crackdown in 1989, that getting rich is indeed much more glorious than a stellar human-rights record. This trend is paralleled among Chinese communities in the diaspora, including many religious practitioners, who have evaluated a net-positive outcome of recent developments on the mainland. The student activist-turned-pastor Zhang Boli, who personally suffered and witnessed the military crackdown on Tiananmen square in 1989, has actually been rather laudatory of China’s contemporary progress and political situation, and no longer speaks out about human rights abuses of the Communist Party, but rather claims to be satisfied with the pace of political change and progress.<sup>146</sup> Likewise, Canadian-Chinese-Christian scholar Thomas In-sing Leung who founded the Cultural Regeneration Research Society (CRRS)— the first Chinese nonprofit registered in Canada—actively partners with high-profile Chinese state actors in various humanitarian initiatives ranging from rural education to religious rights.<sup>147</sup> His overtly conciliatory and cooperative stance with the Chinese state has been emphasized repeatedly, including that “China was a ‘child’ in terms of human rights but ‘an old man’ in its spiritual culture,” requiring that the latter be respected first before human rights’ agendas could be imposed.<sup>148</sup> This model has been popular with Chinese communities overseas—including

---

<sup>145</sup> Lim, 107. The Tiananmen Mothers are a community of women whose children were killed in Beijing during the military crackdown on June the Fourth. Led by the former People’s University Professor Ding Zilin, they have lobbied to the National People’s Congress, petitioned, to no avail, as well as courageously investigated the deaths and confirmed the identities of victims.

<sup>146</sup> Wright and Zimmerman-Liu, “Atheist Political Dissidents turned Protestants,” 287.

<sup>147</sup> Leung eventually was appointed to the Overseas Chinese Relations Board, the Tibet Cultural and Economic Development Committee, and the Chinese People’s Party Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

<sup>148</sup> Thomas Leung, in a human-rights paper submitted in 2008 to Canadian PM Stephen Harper and BC MP Stockwell Day. <https://openparliament.ca/committees/foreign-affairs/39-2/33/dr-thomas-in-sing-leung-1/only/> (Last accessed, Jan 19, 2018).

nonreligious Chinese-Canadian youth interested in humanitarian work in China, for example—as well as various state and private agencies in China. His position of a strong and fundamentally good, primordial “Chinese culture,” while scoffed at among Chinese dissidents-in-exile, has found considerable support among a majority of lay-evangelical Chinese communities, for whom Leung is an authoritative spokesperson for both Christian religion as well as Chinese identity.<sup>149</sup>

Viewed in this broader context, Hong Yujian’s call to “speak fearlessly,” to “never forget” the crimes of the Communist Party, deserves sympathy, and some measure of respect. This position is one which he freely acknowledges is unpopular among recent Chinese migrants to Vancouver, symptomatic of the calculus which has already been made among many Chinese citizens. A favorite biblical passage, Ephesians 6:19, is regularly cited in support of this thesis: “as the Apostle Paul desired to speak the gospel fearlessly (放胆的讲), so too, must I speak fearlessly.” Since the scriptures as infallible, divine authority which cannot be compromised, there can likewise be no compromise with an unjust and evil Communist dictatorship. At a stage in life where the temptation to forget and simply get on with life can be so alluring, struggles to remember, to organize and enacting rituals to commemorate, are acts of sacrifice worthy of respect. Yet, can one divorce this from the conservative Christian ideology, espoused as a moral alternative, which in its many iterations is another form of exclusion and control? Chinese

---

<sup>149</sup> Tse, *Religious Politics in Pacific Space*, 381.

In July 2013, the dissident Chinese-Christian essayist Yu Jie wrote a scathing critique of Leung in an essay entitled “The ‘Christian scholar Leung’ who endorses despotic rule.” It lambasted Leung’s recent initiatives in cooperating with the Chinese Party-State, his unlikely emergence as a spokesperson for China’s Religious Affairs Bureau, and what Yu chastised as a hypocritical about-face from public activism after the 1989 Tiananmen square massacre, to complicity with unjust dictatorship. Yu concluded with two models for Chinese Christians today—Bonhoeffer-like martyrdom, or capitulating like Ludwig Muller, leader of the complicit German Church under Nazism. His concluding lines are chillingly harsh: For Leung, (and all others) who choose the latter path, the fires of hell await. 为暴政背书的基督徒学者梁燕城 “The ‘Christian scholar Leung’ who endorses despotic rule,” <http://chinainperspective.com/ArtShow.aspx?ArtShow.aspx?AID=22089> (last accessed, March 27, 2018).

Christians would do well to contemplate how the same pitfalls of authoritarianism can be avoided in the latter.

I conclude by reflecting upon Chloe Starr's evaluation of Chinese house-church Pastor Wang Yi's legal activism and assertiveness against the state, where she "holds in tension two conclusions": first, the courageous sacrifice of a church's strong moral voice, and legal activism grounded in theology; second, problems associated with "zealous and uncompromising interpretation" of theology which lends itself unwittingly to state oppression or exclusivity.<sup>150</sup> For the first-generation FCNABC members and leaders who fear the dissolution of this church and the discontinuation of their activism beyond the next generation, they may well benefit by drawing upon the strengths of the former while correcting the latter. Grounding activism in theology is indeed an extremely potent form of mobilization, providing a compelling alternative moral vision in the face of corruption and widely-acknowledged moral decay in the Communist party. For activist religious groups like FCNABC who seek to enact change, coming out of their ethnic-religious enclaves and seeking common ground with other mainline churches in Canada, for example, and perhaps even like-minded Chinese religious practitioners-in-exile—Xinjiang Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong, who share in and empathize with their plight—can be a productive first step to a more robust model of activism which will live on beyond this generation. Rather than having an authoritarian government legitimize its role in policing interreligious tensions, faith-based groups with aspirations for "God-given" hope and justice for China should acknowledge each other, and collectively function as the symbol of resistance that crass materialism under a neoliberal Communist regime can never displace.<sup>151</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> Chloe Starr. "Wang Yi and the 95 Theses of the Chinese Reformed Church." *Religions* 7(142), 2016, 13.

<sup>151</sup> I am indebted to Ian Johnson's corpus of writings, especially *The Souls of China*, for highlighting the power of faith in contemporary China and how it can function as a mode of resistance against the neoliberal state.

## Bibliography

- Aiello, Thomas. "Constructing 'Godless Communism': Religion, Politics and Popular Culture, 1954-1960." *Americana*, 2005, 4 (1).  
[http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring\\_2005/aiello.htm](http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2005/aiello.htm) (Last accessed, Feb 2, 2018).
- Ashiwa, Yoshiko and David Wank ed. *Making Religion, Making the State*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- "The Globalization of Chinese Buddhism: Clergy and Devotee Networks in the Twentieth Century." *International Journal of Asian Studies*, 2(2): 2005, 217-237.
- Bays, Daniel. *A New History of Christianity in China*. Oxford and New York: Wiley and Blackwell, 2011.
- Block, Tina. *The Secular Northwest: Religion and Irreligion in Everyday Postwar Life*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016.
- Buruma, Ian. *God's Dust: A Modern Asian Journey*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989.
- *Bad Elements: Chinese Rebels from Los Angeles to Beijing*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002.
- Canes, Tony and Yang Fenggang ed. *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*. New York: NYU Press, 2014.
- Cao, Nanlai. *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010.
- Chan, Shelly. "The Case for Diaspora: A Temporal Approach to the Chinese Experience." *Journal of Asian Studies* 74 (1) 2015: 107-218.
- Cheek, Timothy. *The Intellectual in Modern Chinese History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Chen, Carolyn. *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.
- Chow, Alexander. "Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China Today." *International Journal of Public Theology* 8 (2014) 158-175.
- Dalby, Scott. "Popular Qigong and transnational Falun Gong inside and outside post-Mao China," in Bryan Turner and Oscar Salemink ed. *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, 247-261.

- Dean, Kenneth. *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast Asia*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- DeVries, Larry, Don Baker and Dan Overmyer ed. *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2010.
- Duara, Prasenjit. "Nationalism and Transnationalism in the Globalization of China." *China Report* 39:1 (2003) Sage Publications, New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London.
- Dunch, Ryan. "Protestant Christianity in China today: fragile, fragmented, flourishing," in Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (eds.), *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 195–216.
- Dunn, Emily. "'Cult,' Church and the CCP: Introducing Eastern Lightning." *Modern China* 31:1 (2009).
- Fällman, Fredrik. "Calvin, Culture and Christ? Developments of Faith among Chinese Intellectuals" in *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-cultural Perspectives*, ed. Francis Khek Gee Lim (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 152-68.
- Feuchtwang, Stephen, "Religion as Resistance," in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2000, first edition.
- Goossaert, Vincent and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Guest, Kenneth, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community*. New York: NYU Press, 2003.
- Harrison, Henrietta. *The Missionary's Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013.
- Han, Huamei. "'Love your China' and evangelize: religion, nationalism, racism and immigration settlement in Canada." *Ethnography and Education* 6, no. 1(2011): 61-79.
- He, Rowena Xiaoqing. *Tiananmen Exiles: Voices of the Struggle for Democracy in China*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Hong, Yujian. *Pathway in the Wilderness (曠野中的道路)*. Vancouver, BC: FCNABC Press, 2003.
- Johnson, Ian. *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*. New York: Pantheon, 2017.
- Kuah, Khun-Eng, *Rebuilding the Ancestral Village: Singaporeans in China*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2000.

Ley, David. *Millionaire Migrants*. Oxford and New York: Wiley and Blackwell, 2010.

--- "The Immigrant Church as an Urban Service Hub." *Urban Studies* 45, no. 10 (2006): 2057-2074.

Li, Peter. "Deconstructing Canada's discourse of Immigrant Integration." *PERCII Working Paper Series* (2003).

--- "Rise and Fall of Chinese immigration to Canada." *International Migration*, 43 (3) 2005, 9-32.

Lian, Xi. *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

--- "'Cultural Christians' and the Search for Civil Society in Contemporary China." *The Chinese Historical Review*, 20(1), 2013, 70-87.

Lim, Francis Khek Gee ed. *Christianity in Contemporary China*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012.

Lim, Louisa. *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Link, Perry. *Evening Chats in Beijing*. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992.

Liu, Lisong. *Chinese Study Migration and Selective Citizenship: Mobility, Community and Identity between China and the United States*. London and New York: Rutledge, 2016.

--- "Chinese Student Migrants and American Religious Organizations." *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 12, 2016, 122-153.

Ma, Li and Li, Jin. *Surviving the State, Remaking the Church: A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018.

Madsen, Richard. *China and the American Dream*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

--- *China's Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in Emerging Civil Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

--- *Democracy's Dharma: Religious Renaissance and Political Development in Taiwan*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007.

- "The Public Sphere, Civil Society and Moral Community: A Research Agenda for Contemporary China Studies." *Modern China* Vol 19(2), 1993, 183-198.
- "The Sacred and The Holy," in *Restless China*, Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul Pickowicz ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2013) 151-164.
- Moser, David. "An Invisible Path: 'Urban Buddhists' in Beijing and their Search for Meaning," in *Restless China*, Perry Link, Richard Madsen, and Paul Pickowicz ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2013) .
- Ng, Wing Chung. *The Chinese in Vancouver*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999.
- Nyiri, Pal. "Expatriating is patriotic? The discourse of 'new migrants' in the PRC and identity construction among recent migrants from the PRC." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27(4) 2011, 635-653.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Ownby, David. *Falun Gong and the Future of China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Penny, Benjamin. *The Religion of Falun Gong*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.
- "Falungong and the State," in Mayfair Yang ed. *Chinese Religiosities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.
- Said, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000.
- Starr, Chloe. "Wang Yi and the 95 Theses of the Chinese Reformed Church." *Religions* 7(142), 2016.
- Sun, Anna. *Confucianism as a World Religion*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013.
- Tan Chee-Beng ed. *After Migration and Religious Affiliation: Religions, Chinese Identities and Transnational Networks*. Singapore: World Scientific, 2015.
- Thunø, Mette. *Beyond Chinatown*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2007.
- Tohti, Ilham. "Present-day Ethnic Problems in Xinjiang Uighr Autonooous Region: Overview and recommendations." *ChinaChange*, May 19, 2015. Translated by Cindy Carter.



- Tse, Justin K.H.. *Religious Politics in Pacific Space: Grounding Cantonese Protestant Theologies in Secular Civil Societies*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of British Columbia), 2013.
- Vala, Carsten. *Failing to Contain Religion: The Emergence of a Protestant Movement in Contemporary China*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation (UC Berkeley), 2008.
- "Protestant Christianity and Civil Society in Authoritarian China." *China Perspectives*, 2012(3), 2012, 43-52.
- Wang, Xiaoxuan. "The Dilemma of Implementation: The State and Religion in the PRC, 1949-90," in *Maoism at the Grassroots*, Jeremy Brown and Matthew D. Johnson ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Weller, Robert. *Resistance, Chaos and Control in China*. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1994.
- Wielder, Gerda. "Bridging the Gap? An investigation of Beijing intellectual house church activities and the implications for China's democratization." *Journal of Contemporary China*, 18(62): 2009, 849-864.
- *Christian Values in Communist China*. Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Wong, Bernard and Tan Chee-Beng ed. *Chinatowns around the World: Gilded Ghetto, Ethnopolis and Cultural Diaspora*. Brill, 2013.
- Wright, Teresa and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu. "Atheist Political Activists Turned Protestants: Religious Conversion among Chinese Dissidents." *Journal of Church and State* 55(2), 2013, 268-288.
- Yang, Fenggang. *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1999.
- "Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald's: Conversion to Christianity in Urban China." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44(4), 2005, 423-441.
- *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- "What about China? Religious Vitality in the Most Secular and Rapidly Modernizing Society." *Sociology of Religion*, 2014, 75 (4).
- "Growth and Dynamism of Chinese Christianity," in *Christianity and Freedom*, Allen Hertzke and Timothy Samuel Shah ed., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Yang, Mayfair ed. *Chinese Religiosities*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.

Yu, Jie, and Wang Yi ed. *The Expectation for Whole Life* (一生一世的仰望), Taipei: Christian Arts Press, 2010.

Yu, Li, "An Empirical Study of Recent Mainland Chinese Migration to Vancouver." *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 19, no. 2 (2009): 180-196.

--- "Christianity as a Chinese Belief" in Larry DeVries, Don Baker and Dan Overmyer ed. *Asian Religions in British Columbia*, Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2010.

Zhang, Boli. *Escape from China: The Long Journey from Tiananmen to Freedom*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2003.