Saving Deities for the Community: Religion and the Transformation of Associational Life in Southern Zhejiang, 1949-2014

A dissertation presented

by

Xiaoxuan Wang

to
The Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

East Asian Languages and Civilizations

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts

August 2015
Dissertation Advisor: Michael Szonyi

Xiaoxuan Wang

Saving Deities for the Community: Religion and the Transformation of Associational Life in Southern Zhejiang, 1949-2014

Abstract

My dissertation examines the post-1949 transformation of religious and organizational culture in rural Ruian County of the Wenzhou region, Zhejiang. It explores the diversified adaptation patterns adopted by rural religious organizations in order to preserve, reinvent and even expand themselves in the volatile sociopolitical environment of post-1949 China. Based on hitherto unexploited government documents collected from local state archives, memoirs, historical accounts of religious organizations, as well as extensive oral interviews with Ruian residents, I demonstrate that, rather than following a linear and uniform decline that conventional wisdom suggests, religious organizations took divergent paths in Ruian during the Maoist era. The level of religious activities in Ruian and many regions of Zhejiang exhibited fluctuations over time rather than a linear downward movement. The Maoist period, I argue, was both destructive and constructive for religion. By stripping religious organizations of their traditional leadership and economic foundation, Maoist campaigns inadvertently accelerated the organizational reinvention of Chinese religions. Even more far-reaching, the Cultural Revolution dramatically stimulated a quick rise of Protestantism vis-à-vis other religions and fundamentally reshaped the religious landscape in parts of China, making China no exception to the global trend of religious resurgence, despite its isolation at the time. Religion in today’s China and related phenomena, in particular the uneven distribution of religious revival, the development patterns of rural organizations, and state-religion relations, cannot be fully explained without reference to the Maoist legacy.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: Adaptation to Socialism: Religious Organization and Transformation of the Rural Order in China in the 1950s ......................................................................................... 40

Chapter Two: Oscillating Between Campaigns: Practicing Religion under Maoism, 1949-1978 .................................................................................................................................................. 97

Chapter Three: Diversification and Unification—The Protestant Church at the Zenith of Maoism, 1958-1978 ........................................................................................................................................ 133

Chapter Four: Mixed Blessings: Flourishing and Schisms of Protestant Churches, 1978-2014 .................................................................................................................................................. 187


Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................. 267

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................... 275
Illustrations

Maps

Map I.1, Wenzhou, Google Map (2015)
Map I.2, Ruian, Google Map (2015)
Map 3.1, Protestant churches and gathering places in 1957
Map 3.2. Protestant gathering places in 1978

Figures

Figure 3.1, The distribution of Protestant congregations in Ruian: 1957 and 1978
Figure 3.2, Regional distribution of churches and gathering places in 1957 and 1978
Acknowledgment

I thank my teachers. I owe a great debt to my Ph.D. advisor Michael Szonyi, who has been a model of scholarship and teaching. Professor Szonyi’s meticulous reading and critical insights have helped me shape my ideas into their current form in the dissertation. Robert Weller’s thoughtful comments and his broad perspective on Chinese religions constantly impress and never fail to inspire me. Peter Bol’s thought provoking questions have also contributed to my dissertation. To all my teachers at Harvard I owe my training as a historian. My teachers at the University of Colorado at Boulder, including Terry Kleeman, my advisor, and George Keyworth, introduced me to the study of Chinese Religions. I was first trained as a historian in China. I thank my advisors Chen Suzhen and Luo Xin at Peking University, Lu Xiangqian at Hangzhou University, and all my teachers in Beijing and Hangzhou.

Throughout this project I have received the aid of numerous individuals. Above all, I want to thank the staff at archive catalogue room of Ruian Municipal Archive for their assistance, patience and accommodation. Special thanks go to my friend Wu Zhenqiang of Zhejiang University for a letter of introduction that I needed for my archival research. I thank Zhu Zhiwei of Longquan Municipal Archive, the staff at the local state archives in Pingyang, Taishun, Wencheng, Wenling, Wenzhou, Xinchang and Yueqing, Ruian Municipal Library, Wenzhou Municipal Library and Zhejiang Provincial Library for helping me find documents. During my fieldwork in southern Zhejiang, I have been fortunate to get help from numerous religious institutions, friends, and relatives. Among my many interviewees and local guides, I especially thank Zhang Junsun of Wenzhou Municipality, Chen Meiling, Shi Liao Zheng and Ying Weixian of
Ruian, Dai Xuefu, Ding Bingkuan, Ding Yuzhen, Pan Yiheng and Zhang Shisong of Xincheng (Ruian), Wu Zhenwei and Zhu Chenlan of Mayu (Ruian), and Xia Mingxin and Zhou Zexian of Tangxia (Ruian). My friends Zhou Gang and Qin Yong helped arrange my visits to local temples, archives and the Ruian Religious Affairs Bureau. Wu Tianyue and Zhang Jieke not only shared their own researches but also made copies of historical records of local churches in Ruian and the Wenzhou region for me. Junliang Pan of the University of Paris VII shared with me documents on southern Zhejiang that he had collected.

My work has benefited from the comments of many teachers and colleagues. A preliminary version of chapter two has been published in an edited volume. My sincere thanks go to the volume’s editors Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Neil Diamant gave me his comments when an early version of chapter one was presented in the AAS annual meeting in Philadelphia. Henrietta Harrison read early versions of chapter one and chapter three and shared her insights with me. My friend Xiaohong Xu helped me shape some ideas for chapter one. At Harvard University, I am grateful to Jamie Jungmin Yoo, Li Ruohong, Lindsay Strogatz, Max Oidtmann, Roger Shih-Chieh Lo, Victor Seow, Wen Yu and etc. for their encouragement and friendship.

Many institutions have supported my studies, researches and writing. My M.A. study at University of Colorado was funded by the university’s Humanity Fellowship. My early years of Ph.D. study and summer researches were supported by Harvard Grants, the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies and the Asian Center at Harvard University. In
my final year of writing, I received a Harvard GSAS Dissertation Fellowship set by the M.T. Geoffrey Yeh Fund for Chinese Students.

My relatives provided invaluable support during my fieldwork in Ruian and Hangzhou. In Hangzhou, my cousin Zhe and my brother-in-law Haifeng shared their apartment with me. Zhe and Aunt Chunhua also cooked meals for me. In Ruian, my brother Xuan photocopied some documents from Ruian Municipal Archive and ran many errands for my research. I used my uncle Mingxiong and aunt Caicha’s attic for writing. Aunt Caicha and my cousin Huihua cooked me meals as much as they could. My brother-in-law Dong arranged and accompanied me during my visit to his village.

Finally, my wife Xuan has been by my side for the entire journey. Xuan read every version of the dissertation, helped polish my writing, and shared her thoughts with me. Her love, patience, and faith in me kept me going. Without her, this project would not have been possible.

This project is dedicated to my grandparents, Wang Jin'ai (汪錦楷) and Yan Xiuyan (嚴秀岩), Lu Zhengxi (陸正禧) and Wang Zhiqiu (王志秋), my parents Wang Jianyong (汪建永) and Lu Chunzhu (陸純珠), and the people of my hometown Ruian in appreciation and love. The stories told in this project are from them and for them.
Introduction

China like some other countries in the world is undergoing a momentous religious revitalization; religion is gaining increased influence in Chinese social and political life. *Falungong*, a nationwide new religious movement based on a mixture of Qigong exercises and Buddhist meditations deeply jolted the Chinese authorities when in April 1999 tens of thousands of its adherents protested outside Zhongnanhai, the residency compound of the central leaders, causing an immediate brutal crackdown. Since then the movement has gone international. Recently, ethnic tensions between Muslim Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang once again brought the religious question to the center of national politics. Less violent yet more impressive is the phenomenal surge of Protestantism since the early 1980s. A modest estimate by the Pew Research Center puts the Chinese Christian population in 2011 at fifty-eight million Protestants and nine million Catholics.¹ Some scholars even believe that China may soon become the world’s largest Christian nation.² Christianity is not the only religious tradition that witnessed growth. In the last three decades, an increasing number of people participated in daily worship in village temples and Buddhist monasteries and, boosted by a growing economy, numerous old temples and monasteries were rebuilt and new ones built.³

---


Such great religious reinvigoration in such a short time was simply unthinkable back in the late 1970s, when people had just experienced the greatest religious persecution in Chinese history during the Maoist period (1949-1978). Religious sites and properties were confiscated or demolished. Leaders and adherents were forced to renounce their faiths. Many were imprisoned or even killed. In March 1973, when asked to comment on the news that a few churches reopened in China, two Hong Kong bishops said they saw little reason to believe that a revival of Christianity was possible in the PRC. They felt that after twenty-four years of communist rule, organized religion had been totally suppressed. Their pessimism, though based on observations from outside mainland China, was certainly understandable. In 1978 when the Cultural Revolution was officially ended, the vast majority of traditional religious sites in the country remained closed, with many being occupied by nonreligious institutions and individuals. Some either had been destroyed or were on the verge of collapse. Observers could barely see traces of religion in public.

If the Maoist period only involved repression, disruption and suffering, how is such an astonishing surge in religious activities post-Mao possible? Further, how is the Maoist period still relevant to our understanding of Chinese religions and society in modern China and more broadly religious modernity and secularism in East Asia? In this study, I explore the diversified adaptation patterns adopted by rural religious organizations in order to preserve, reinvent and even expand themselves in the volatile post-1949 sociopolitical environment. My study shows that the Maoist period was much

more complex than we previously understood and that we are far from bidding farewell to the Maoist past. The Maoist period, I discover, was both destructive and constructive for religion. By stripping religious organizations of their traditional leadership and economic foundation, Maoist campaigns inadvertently accelerated the organizational reinvention of Chinese religions. Even more far-reaching, the Cultural Revolution dramatically stimulated a quick rise of Protestantism vis-à-vis other religions and fundamentally reshaped the religious landscape in parts of China, making China (despite its isolation at the time) no exception to the global trend of religious resurgence. Religion in today’s China and related phenomena, in particular the uneven distribution of religious revival, the development patterns of rural organizations, and state-religion relations, cannot be fully explained without reference to the Maoist legacy.

The focus of my study is the organizational dimensions of religion. I conceptualize religion as a repertoire of social forms, a critical way to build up communities and a vehicle to organize everyday life in Chinese rural society. I emphasize the significance of local processes in creating religious modernity in China. My study will illustrate the endeavors of local communities to keep and renew old forms as well as absorb new forms to perpetuate communal traditions and thus retain community autonomy.

The Maoist period is undoubtedly China’s most isolated moment in the twentieth century. The inflow of foreign aids and religious workers and the communication with overseas religious organizations were entirely cut off in the early 1950s. But this does not mean that transnational processes stopped shaping Chinese society. In the case of Chinese Christianity, its global linkage was temporarily severed during the Maoist period.
But the adaptation and integration of Christianity to social and culture environments of local society did not stop and even had significant development, before Chinese Christianity rejoined the currents of global Christianity in the post-Mao era.

Reconfiguration of religious life in twentieth and twenty-first century China, I contend, has as much bearing on local and global history as it has on national policies and currents. Therefore this dissertation will look at ways in which people were engaged with historical processes at local, national, and transnational levels, in order to bring forth a fuller understanding of changing religious life in modern China.

My inquiries are grounded on the experience of people in the Wenzhou region, especially Ruian County, of southeast China’s Zhejiang Province, a region historically rich in religious diversity and currently also famous for economic vitality. I chose Wenzhou because it represents the type of place in China where a confluence of local, national, and transnational processes profoundly reshaped local society over the course of the twentieth century. Through the history of Wenzhou, I discern a pattern of religious development that is crucial to the understanding of not only contemporary religious revival in China but also the Chinese religious experience in the entire twentieth century.

By charting the changing religious landscape in rural areas under Maoism and its legacy in contemporary Wenzhou, this dissertation takes part in three fields of inquiry. The first is the history of religions in modern China, which explores the evolution of religious traditions, their shifting roles in society, and the formation of the religious field in a period from the turn of the twentieth century to the present. My study reconnects history that has been fractured by the revolution year of 1949 and the reform year of 1978, allowing us to rethink continuity and discontinuity in modern Chinese religions. Second,
my research takes on a body of work on structure and organization of rural society in twentieth century China and argues for a new perspective for looking at changes to organizational environments in rural areas. Third, this study also has bearing on state-society dynamics in China, by showing the strong continuity of local governance on religion during the PRC.

The State of the Field

The Maoist Years and Chinese Religions

Religion in modern China recently attracted much scholarly attention, largely owing to the resurgence of religiosity in China in the last few decades. Studies of modern Chinese religions burgeoned. After thirty years of fruitful fieldwork, scholars are attempting to put religion back to a central position in Chinese history. Yet, a major problem that often surfaces is the fragmentation in the narratives of religion in modern China, making it difficult to use religion as a window or a thread to comprehend modern Chinese history. The history of religion since 1900 is conventionally divided by the years of 1949 and 1978 into three periods, with each featuring drastically different developments. The period between 1900 and 1978 is generally depicted as a period of continuing decay and decline, with the 1949 Communist takeover signifying a dramatic turn to total suppression and disruption of religion. According to the conventional

narrative, the period since 1978 on the other hand ushered in a new phase of dramatic religious revival, according to the conventional narrative.

The image of religious downfall between 1900 and 1978, as its ending year indicates, was strongly shaped by history under Maoism. Even since the Communist takeover in China in 1949, scholarly works had been colored by layers of pessimism. Chan Wing-tsit in his lectures in 1950 concluded that “superstition,”\(^6\) which he referred to as the religions of the masses and with which he had no sympathy, was definitely a passing phenomenon. The Christian missionary movement was becoming a closed chapter. But Chan still had some hope that the new regime would not deem Buddhism unnecessary since it at least provided some “spiritual comfort.”\(^7\) Published in 1972, Welch Holmes’s *Buddhism under Mao*, the last volume of his trilogy on Buddhism in modern China, was essentially a dirge for Buddhism in China.\(^8\) Contrary to the Communist government’s propaganda that Buddhism heralded a fresh start, Holmes saw the unmistakable demise of Buddhism. In previous volumes, he presented the period 1850-1950 as exhibiting strong continuity with the past. In the third volume, however, he marked 1949 and the Maoist rule as bringing about an unprecedented break with tradition as Buddhism was effectively eliminated as a factor in Chinese life. Here Welch concurred with many of his peers such as Joseph Levenson and Benjamin Schwartz who lamented the perishing of Chinese traditional culture under communism. Welch’s focus was Buddhism, in particular its monastic order. And his sources were mainly newspaper

---


\(^7\) Chan, *Religious Trends in Modern China*, 92.

reports and journal articles published by the Chinese government. Yet his concerns with the future of religion in China were widely shared by other specialists of Chinese religions. In another general survey published in 1969, mainly about Christianity, Richard Bush summarized trends of religious development in China as “a nation state, with one fourth the earth’s population, in which religion as an effective force seems to be all but nullified.”9 From another perspective, C.K. Yang projected in his monumental study of Chinese religions that communism as a secular ideology would replace the theistic faiths that were in decline, as consistent with the secularization trends he observed in the Republican era.10

The image of the downfall of Chinese religions, powerfully depicted in these early studies, deeply influenced later generations of researchers. Studies on traditional Chinese religious traditions (village temples, Buddhism, Daoism, etc.) during the Republican and the Maoist period today are by and large premised on the decline of religion: shrinking influence of and property holdings by religious institutions, and disarticulation of religion from politics and elites. This premise propelled scholars to concentrate on the twentieth century Chinese regimes’ obsession with defining, circumscribing, and suppressing religion, at both policy and policy implementation levels. Such inquiries produced some crucial works and findings. In particular, the conviction that secularization in China was not a natural process but rather the product of a top-


One problem with the paradigm of religious downfall is that it tends to assume internal coherence and homogeneity in Republican era developments. Tendencies and processes that apparently did not fit into the underlying currents of decline tend to be minimized, treated in different frameworks, or simply ignored. It is certainly true that during the Republican period village temples and Buddhist monasteries faced deep crises. They lost properties and patronage. Their rituals were prohibited and dying out. Their organizations were also disintegrating. Yet the Chinese religious landscape in the Republican era had manifested a variety of other trends and developments. Many in fact go directly against the decline paradigm and some are still influencing religious life today. Early studies such as Chan’s and Yang’s have noticed these trends and developments, ranging from the movement to promote Confucianism as a national religion, to institutional and intellectual reforms of Buddhism, and to the growth of traditional religious societies and the rise of syncretic new religious societies. What Chan called “the laymen’s turn” of Buddhism (the gravity of Buddhism turning from monasteries to local society), though interrupted in mainland China under Maoism, has clearly rejuvenated the religion in the form of humanistic Buddhism (\textit{renjian fojiao}) in Taiwan and other
overseas communities and eventually its influence made its way back to today’s mainland China. The local or national religious societies that Presenjit Duara has termed “redemptive societies” were hugely popular, whether measured by number of followers, areas of activities, or engagement with local and national politics. People assumed that they were totally suppressed under Maoism. Yet redemptive societies returned in new forms amidst the Qigong fever of the 1980s and 1990s. In particular the rise of Falungong urged scholars to rethink the rise of redemptive societies in the twentieth century and its implications to the making of religious modernity in China.

Even more noteworthy is the story on Christianity. Christianity used to be construed as a foreign religion and mainly treated in the context of Sino-Western relations. Many scholarships in the last two decades have called for studying Christianity as a Chinese religion. New studies have abundantly demonstrated that Christianity was taking roots in Chinese society in the Republican era. Despite anti-Christian waves, the nationalist projects to delineate the boundaries of “religion” and “superstition,” a

---


14 Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*.

distinction that was itself based on Judeo-Christian traditions, ensured the existence of Christianity as a legal religion in China. Independent church movements since the 1920s further integrated Christianity into Chinese life until the Communist takeover put its expansion temporarily on hold.\(^{16}\) The discovery that Chinese Christians and Western missionaries were closely involved at local and national levels in the nationalists’ nation-building and modernization efforts also goes against the image of religious decline and removal of religion from the political realm.\(^ {17}\) Finally, the undoubted surge of Christianity after 1978 also necessitates a reassessment of the evolution of Chinese religions in the entire twentieth century.

The paradigm of religious revival in the study of post-1978 China also has its weakness. A major problem with this paradigm is that current interpretations cannot adequately explain the rather abrupt turn from decline to revival around the juncture of 1978. In explaining causes of religious revival, many scholars have pointed to material incentives behind the restoration of temples and rituals against the backdrop of a growing economy.\(^ {18}\) Some maintain that the religious boom resulted from a profound crisis of meaning affecting contemporary Chinese society provoked by radical social and economic changes in the reform era.\(^ {19}\) Others construe the return of temples and rituals as

\(^{16}\) Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*.


cultural responses to the disintegration of collectives,\textsuperscript{20} and efforts to reconcile with the troubled Maoist past.\textsuperscript{21} All of these explanations seem plausible or at least have their own merits. Yet none of them directly addresses a critical issue, that is, on what bases did religious activities re-emerge in 1978? If, as we used to believe, religious activities experienced a linear downward decline after 1949 and were thoroughly suppressed, how could the surge of religiosity after 1978 take place so rapidly and irresistibly? Without a satisfactory answer to this question, the strong discontinuity that the revival theory implies can hardly be justified.

It is clear that any attempt to go beyond the dichotomy of pre-1978 decline and post-1978 revival has to reconsider religious conditions during the Maoist period and their connections to the pre-1949 and the post-1978 periods. We did not know much about religion in China under Maoism. Most works brush over the Maoist years as a period of pure darkness. In the new millennium, new studies based on fieldwork and archives have vastly broadened our understanding of religious conditions under Maoism. Steve Smith shows that powerful propaganda did not extinguish the traditional cosmology deep inside the Chinese psyche as it continued to guide their thoughts and behaviors, indicating that the CCP’s efforts to remodel society were far less successful as we used to believe.\textsuperscript{22} Thomas Dubois finds that different redemptive societies were


subjected to different destinies in the villages of Cang County in the north China plains.\textsuperscript{23} The Most Supreme and the Heaven and Earth Teachings, unlike other newly emerged teachings, were deeply ingrained in village life in Cang. They were never subjected to an active purge and, in spite of attrition in the Maoist years, were able to survive and thrive again in the post-Mao era. Also in north China, Henrietta Harrison demonstrates that in several Catholic villages near Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi Province, the crackdown and propaganda since the Socialist Education Movement in the early 1960s effectively curbed public practices of religion, but also reinforced Catholic identity and therefore laid the foundations for religious enthusiasm in the reform period.\textsuperscript{24}

In Shanghai of east China, Paul Mariani shows that in early 1950s Catholic leaders adamantly resisted the Communist Party’s assault and refused to renounce the Pope and the Church in Rome. Nevertheless, the CCP succeeded in dividing the Catholic community.\textsuperscript{25} In south and southeast China, Joseph Lee, Melissa Inouye, and Kao Chen-yang show that Protestants were at least equally active and perhaps even more successful in resisting and surviving state penetration, using a wide range of tactics. Kao and Inouye also suggest that in eastern and northern Fujian the revival of Protestantism actually started in the late stage of the Cultural Revolution rather than after the Cultural Revolution.

\textsuperscript{23} Dubois, \textit{The Sacred Village}, 147-149, 166-173.

\textsuperscript{24} Henrietta Harrison, \textit{The Missionary’s Curse and Other Tales from a Chinese Catholic Village} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), chapter 6.

Stephen Jones’ series of studies of villages in north China most thoroughly illustrates the survival of rituals and ritual organizations and also explores how they managed to survive. In some villages of Hebei, echoing Thomas Dubois’s discoveries, Jones similarly finds that intra-village redemptive societies were less impacted by political storms in the 1950s and fared better than their trans-village and trans-local counterparts. Some village ritual associations were able to reinvent themselves through new discourses on the functions of their organizations. The protection of village cadres was also essential. In a very short period of revival in the early 1960s following the Great Leap Forward and the Great Famine, new ritual musicians were recruited and trained, which ensured the continuation of ritual tradition in the ensuing years and therefore the revival in the early 1980s. In contrast to many other scholars who imply that the revival of tradition in the reform period was a substantive reinvention and a recycling of fragments of traditions that were entirely up-rooted under Maoism, Jones explicitly stresses continuity. “The restoration of ritual associations around 1980 was no reinvention, no piecing together of cultural fragments,” but “authentic transition.”

My study of religion under Maoism builds on the insights of these scholars. However, it also departs from previous studies in several fronts. First, I take a holistic

---


approach to Chinese religions. Rather than examining a single tradition as most studies do, I examine all major religious traditions, including village temple activities, Buddhism, Christianity, redemptive societies, etc., all together in one region. A holistic approach helps overcome the segregation in the study of Chinese religions. Local cults and rituals, Buddhism, and Daoism tend to be treated together and examined in similar frameworks, whereas Christianity and Islam have been treated separately in different frameworks. A holistic approach would allow us to see better the complexity in the changing religious landscape in modern China. Second, my primary concern is the organizational dimension of religious traditions. In this study I want to look beyond religion as practice and also look into the shifting role of religion in weaving the social and political fabrics of modern Chinese society.

Third, I stress the importance of triple levels of process, local, national, and transnational, in the making of religious modernity in Chinese local society. I acknowledge the merit of traditional views that identify Christianity as a world religion but emphasize the role of the local in the globalization of Christianity. The Maoist years were a critical stage when local actors reinvented traditional social forms and created new social forms to make the once foreign religion, Christianity, meaningful to them and their society. The Maoist period thus allows a close observation, under the unique circumstance of total isolation, of how the global is imbedded into the local.29 After the Cultural Revolution Chinese Christianity rejoined currents of global Christianity and

broader global economic and cultural processes. From this transnational perspective, three periods, the history before 1949, the Maoist period and the history after 1978 can all be connected.

This study will trace the trajectories of different religious traditions and the changing dynamics among them in Wenzhou, in particular Ruian, back to the 1930s and through the critical junctures of 1949 and 1978 to the present day. By looking back at the pre-1949 era, I hope to go beyond the 1949 divide and situate the trends and developments in the Maoist period into broader processes of the twentieth century.

Looking forward to the post-Mao era, my study engages in an important ongoing discussion on the unevenness of religious revival in contemporary China from a historical perspective. The religious revival in contemporary China is unevenly distributed across different places and different religious traditions. Variations in the level of religious revival exist between inland and coastal regions, between south and north, and between urban and rural areas. The most visible variations are found among different religious traditions and different groups within the same traditions. Among all religions, the pace and magnitude of the expansion of Protestantism, especially in rural areas, clearly outperform all others, and we do not yet have an adequate explanation for this phenomenon. Outside China, not many scholarly discussions have been devoted to the unevenness of religious revival in contemporary China. The only study I am aware of that focuses on this topic is Sun Yanfei’s dissertation.30 Her basic argument is that the uneven development resulted from differences in innate patterns of operation of different religions. The institutional features of Protestantism have not substantially changed from

the Republican period to the present. But its patterns of operation happened to fit current social and political environments very well, which is why the development of Protestant churches surpassed other religions.

In Chinese academia, especially in the mainland, the unevenness of contemporary religious revival is a hot topic. Given potential social and political implications of the unexpected rise of Protestantism, Chinese scholars, especially scholars of popular religion and sympathizers of traditional culture, have been deeply concerned and even worried about this tendency. They typically build their arguments upon a model that they called “religious ecology” (zongjiao shengtai), which, Philip Clart has aptly pointed out, is close to structural fundamentalism. Religious ecology in traditional China, they argue, was constituted of popular religion, Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism that, though having some competitions with each other, have maintained a harmonious co-existence for nearly two thousand years. But the attacks of village temples and lineage organizations in the name of anti-superstition since 1949 have severely damaged the balance of religious ecology and led to the sharp decline in influence of traditional religious activities, making rural society vulnerable to the penetration of Protestantism. With the rise of Protestantism, religious ecology in China today has lost balance. Therefore they call for the protection of traditional religious activities to restore the balance of religious ecology.

In this study, I demonstrate that the phenomenal growth of Protestantism in contemporary Chinese religious landscape originated in its developments during the Maoist period. What has driven the progress of Protestantism was not the coincidental match of the characteristics of Protestant church with the current frameworks of religious regulation. The rise of Protestantism was instead the result of organizational transformations of the Protestant church in its interactions with volatile sociopolitical environments in the post-1949 China.

I agree with Chinese scholars who advocated the balance of “religious ecology” that as an end result Protestant church did benefit from the government’s religious policies, though it was never the intention of the government. As for the processes that led to the rise of Protestantism, I think it is much more convoluted, full of twists and turns. It has to be noted that the Protestant church, like other religions, was also the victim of political campaigns in the Maoist period, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Yet political campaigns did not profoundly shake the economic and organizational foundations or the leadership of the Protestant church as they did to other religions. In some regions, quite to the contrary, the campaigns even simulated the dissemination and organizational transformation of Protestantism. The availability of Protestantism as religious resource in local society hence remarkably increased. In the early reform period, the government was eager to reconcile its relations with religions, especially its relations to Christianity, which is of Western origin, probably out of the purpose of improving its international image. Christianity, especially the Protestant church, therefore gained more leverage under that circumstance and was able to rapidly expand its territory and followers. For traditional village religions, on the other hand, the
discourse of “superstition” that secular nationalism advocated is still affecting the government’s attitude toward traditional village religion in the reform period even though the use of coercive measures has been largely reduced. This situation has certainly restrained the pace of the revitalization of village temple activities in the crucial stage of 1980s and 1990s.

Structure and Organization of Rural China

This study reveals changes to rural social structure and organizations in the PRC and more broadly in modern China, through the lens of religion. We used to believe that the Communist government fundamentally altered the structure of rural society after the land reform and collectivization, by tearing down traditions in all dimensions from family, economy, to religion. Vivienne Shue, for instance, contends that after cooperativization and collectivization in the 1950s, villages were increasingly turning into “highly self-contained units, in which economic life, social life and political authority were fused in a single, comprehensive organization…but they had little intercourse with one another.”

Helen Siu similarly argues that the communist revolution suppressed the networked traditional market system, which gave rise to cellularized communities cut off from each other, dominated by bureaucratized community leaders.

Studies in the last three decades, including studies of religions, have amply demonstrated the entrenchment and resilience of traditions. Special political and

---


economic arrangements during the Maoist years even reinforced certain traditions such as family and kin in some regions.\(^{34}\) My dissertation belongs to this body of revisionist literature on rural society under Maoism. In particular, it highlights the continued existence of religion-related organizations in the Maoist period. The structure of rural society, I contend, was never as simple as village government plus party organizations plus offshoot institutions such as the militias (minbing) and women’s associations. Religious and lineage organizations, intra-village and extra-village, continued to exist, some more covertly, such as ritual organizations and redemptive societies, and others publicly or semipublicly, such as Christian and Buddhist groups. Traditional organizations manifested surprising continuity in some places. In Ruian’s most populated rural areas that are not far from the county seat and the prefectural seat, people did not give up trans-village genealogy compilation activities even during the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution. In the later stage of the Cultural Revolution, trans-village and trans-local networks of Christian groups even experienced significant development. On the flip side, the extent to which the collectives confined the mobility of villagers was much weaker than we tended to think. My field investigation indicates that many left the collectives to make a living at other places as far as Yunnan Province and Northeast China. The end of the 1970s was without doubt a watershed in terms of the transformation of rural social structure and organizations. The collectives rapidly disintegrated whereas rural religious and lineage organization rebound even more quickly.

The continued existence and even growth of religious organizations during the Maoist period, and shifting power balance among rural organizations since the late 1970s force us to reconsider the evolution of rural social structure and institutions in China’s long twentieth century. Prasenjit Duara argues that state-building in the early twentieth century led to the collapse of traditional power networks in rural China, of which religious organizations such as village temple organizations or lineage organizations were a crucial component. According to Duara, state-building ironically also delegitimized the state itself, which created the opportunity for the intrusion of Communist forces. The repression and silence of religion after 1949 are assumed to be a continuation of the overall trend of the decline of religion along with traditional power networks. However, Duara fails to explain how the rise of trans-village redemptive societies and Christian churches since the turn of the twentieth century fits into this line of argument.

More importantly, the full-blown religious revival in contemporary China directly challenges the validity of this framework. A major problem with Duara’s framework is that it gives too much weight to endorsement by the government and patronage from traditional elites, the former especially, in determining the existence and roles of religious organizations. It thus neglects the capacity of local society to absorb and invent new social forms. An interesting fact is that while the government no longer “governs through deities” (or “shendao she jiao”, literally “establishing the teachings by ways of gods”), the discourse of “superstition” has also been fading away in the regulation of traditional village religion. The labels of “traditional culture” and “intangible cultural heritage” are more and more frequently used to encompass local ritual and temple activities. We see

glimmers of the old empire in the measures of contemporary Chinese government to reinforce legitimacy by portraying itself as the protector of local culture.

I propose that changes to traditional power networks in rural China in the past hundred or so years should be interpreted as renewal rather than collapse. I agree that the scale and influence of traditional village religious activities as a totality considerably declined. Many temples and rituals permanently disappeared. But as many recent studies have demonstrated, tradition is fluid.\textsuperscript{36} Rural communities have very strong capacities to absorb new elements to reinvent and perpetuate themselves. In Wenzhou after the land reform of the early 1950s, dragon boat rituals, the most significant annual ritual in the region, continued on and off into the mid-1960s or even later while traditional elites as a whole had been entirely eliminated. Dragon boat race ended up discontinuing for only ten odd years before it was restored in the end of the 1970s. The worship of local deities was carried on in either overt or covert ways, and in some instances did not cease even during the Cultural Revolution. Temple organizations re-emerged since the late 1970s. Old People’s Associations, which arose in the wave of temple reclamation and reconstruction, have long extended their functions to realms beyond religion. In some areas, such associations even started to command village politics. All of these exemplify how traditional power networks, rather than disintegrating, were stabilized and revitalized.

The best example of the renewal of traditional power networks is the rise of Christianity and redemptive societies. Christianity was a foreign and new social form for most Chinese villages in the early twentieth century. Redemptive societies, which arose in the Republican era, were also new to most villages. They were not and could not be

accepted without alteration. To take Protestantism as an example, it belongs to an entirely different tradition than China’s established religious system. Its success in rural China is closely interrelated to its integration with all sorts of local traditions. Christianity in China today, from practice, to organizational mechanism, to self-representation, is deeply permeated with the values, symbols, and ways of thinking of local society. The integration of Christianity into Chinese local society in fact generated a new social form, which is localized Christianity.

It is from these perspectives that we see the renewal of traditional power networks. Rural organizational environments in China are still in the middle of critical transitions. However, one thing is for certain, that is, Christianity has been permanently ingrained in the soil of rural China and has become one of the most significant features of religious modernity in China.

State and Society Relations in China

Last but not least, this dissertation is also about state-society relations in China. On state and society relations over the religious question, the model of domination and resistance was once popular. Under this model, the state dominates society with respect to religious issues and the latter can only choose compliance or resistance. This model is being challenged by many critics.37 One important objection raised by opponents of this model is that it is modeled upon special historical conditions and social structure of the

Maoist period. Those conditions and structures no longer exist today. The government, for instance, is increasingly reducing the use of coercive measures to handle religious affairs. This argument implies that there is no problem with applying this model to the Maoist period.

In this dissertation I argue that even during the Maoist period, state-society dynamics upon religion was much more complex than what the dichotomized model of domination and resistance suggests. State-religion dynamics in this period, as in other periods, were contingent on many variables, ranging from local social structure and history, to timing, and to behavioral patterns of local actors and state agents.

Conventional views divide what was before and after 1978 into two periods with distinct patterns of state-religion dynamics. I, however, see historical continuity in local governance on religion from the Republican period to the PRC and during the PRC. In particular, I observe that the blind-eye governance, or a “don’t ask don’t tell” attitude toward religious activities that lie outside the law but are nevertheless mostly tolerated, which scholars observed in the reform period, was in fact grounded in the Maoist period. Religious control under Maoism was certainly much stricter than in the post-Mao era. However, my study shows that it was also true that the attitudes of local cadres toward religious activities during the Maoist period often vacillated between turning a blind eye and outright suppression, depending on the political situations. In the reform era, there was an increasing swing toward turning a blind eye, but the same oscillation continued as the government still initiated attacks against religious sites and groups sometimes.

---

The Settings

The stories of this study took place in Wenzhou. I use Ruian, one of its eight counties and three municipal districts, as the center to narrate religious and social changes in Wenzhou and evidence from other counties and districts as compliments.


Wenzhou

Wenzhou is located in the southeastern coast of Zhejiang Province in southeastern China. A chain of mountain ranges named Yangdang covers much of the region in the north, the west, and the south while the eastern part of the region faces the East China Sea. Yangdang Mountains also form the boundaries of the region with Taizhou to the
north, Lishui to the east, and Fujian Province to the south. Three eastbound rivers: Ou, Feiyun, and Ao divide the region into four sub-regions in the east plains. Low hills and networks of small rivers further carved those sub-regions into patches of plains.

Wenzhou historically had been a safe haven for immigrants since Yandang Mountains separated Wenzhou from the rest of Zhejiang and northern Fujian. Local society today mainly consists of early immigrants and their descendants. Most migrants entered from neighboring Fujian Province by sea routes. For the migrants, bringing gods from their ancestral homes and adapting the gods locally have been instrumental for settling down and establishing new communities in Wenzhou. As typical in southeastern China in the late imperial era, ancestral halls, territorial cults and rituals created elaborate religious networks in the region. In the late nineteenth century, local deities remained crucial in politics. They were at times co-opted as a device to secure local governance and consolidate the dominance of local elites. In a major effort to curb conflicts between local groups and remedy governmental relations with local society, the Qing authorities, for instance, endorsed stories of Lord Yang, the most prominent territorial cult in the region, in order to pacify the local Qu Zhenhan uprising in Yueqing County in 1855 and conferred on him a new title as recognition. Both the Qing government and local actors recognized deities as symbols and sources of power. The local rebels invoked deities in the crises provoked by the Taiping rebellion. The Qu uprising was one case. Yet another one was the uprising of the Golden Coin Association in Pingyang in 1861, which had deep roots in the sectarian traditions of southern Zhejiang.39

Since 1900 village religious activities faced enormous challenges. When the government, both the Qing and Republican government, initiated series of anti-superstition campaigns in the name of modernization, and when Western style education and new media (newspaper, journals, etc.) inculcated local students with the discourses of science, democracy, and progress, local deities such as Lord Yang and their temples in Wenzhou became the target of demolition and encroachment. Local elites were deeply split over the issue of religion. Many pulled out from the arena of religion and some even went directly against it. The whole or part of some temples was turned into schools. Annual rites and temple processions in the prefectural seat and county seats eventually died out due to strict prohibitions and lack of patronage. In villages, rituals and processions still went on but much less frequently. All in all, the foundation of village religion was deeply shaken.\(^{40}\)

However, what is equally if not more important in shaping modern Wenzhou society were two concurrent transitional processes both inaugurating in the late nineteenth century: the introduction of Christianity and the emigration of Wenzhou people to elsewhere in the nation and overseas. A few years following the signing of the Treaty of Nanking between the Qing government and the British and French governments in 1860, which opened the entire China to mission work, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries began to set foot on the soil of Wenzhou. The city was made a treaty port under the Treaty of Chefoo in 1876, which further facilitated the missionary enterprise of Western countries in the region. In the ensuing one hundred and forty years, Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, firmly embedded itself into and became an integral part of

---

\(^{40}\) Lo, “The Order of Local Things,” chapter 5.
society and life in Wenzhou despite drastic resistance and conflicts in the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{41} The region is dubbed by some Christians as “China’s Jerusalem.” The economic accomplishment in contemporary Wenzhou has been sometimes connected with the strong presence of Christianity.\textsuperscript{42}

Almost around the same time when western missionaries arrived in Wenzhou, local people started to move outward, turning the region into a famous \textit{qiaoxiang} (home of emigrants). Wenzhou was predominantly a migrant-receiving district until the Taiping rebellion in the 1860s. The Taiping Rebellion caused serious reduction in population in bordering areas of Jiangsu, Anhui and Zhejiang. In response to the Qing government’s call for immigrants to reclaim and farm waste land, and also driven by insufficient food supply caused by population pressures in Wenzhou, people, mostly from mountains of Ruian and Pingyang, poured into border regions of Jiangsu, Anhui, and Zhejiang. The wave lasted for nearly forty years. A larger wave of emigration from Wenzhou came after 1876. From then on foreign ships began stopping at Wenzhou. In 1878 the China Merchants’ Steam Navigation Company established a branch office in Wenzhou, and started a regular line between Wenzhou and Shanghai. In the following years, the lines between Wenzhou and other areas such as Hong Kong, Guangzhou, Fuzhou and Taiwan were created. Inland river lines between Wenzhou and its counties were also started in the 1900s. These sea routes and inland river routes provided new ways of travel and facilitated the outflow of people from the district to the nation as well as to the world.

\textsuperscript{41} Mo Fayou, \textit{Wenzhou Jidujiao shi} (History of Christianity in Wenzhou) (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary Press, 1998); Li Shizhong, “Wanqing jiaohui shili de qieru yu difang quanli geju de yanhua” (The intrusion of Christian churches and the evolution of local power dynamics in the late Qing), \textit{Shilin} 5 (2005): 39-47; and Lo, “The Order of Local Things,” chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{42} Cao, \textit{Constructing China’s Jerusalem}.
Inspired by the success of Qingtian peddlers selling stone carvings in Europe, massive overseas emigration from Wenzhou emerged since 1910s. Japan, and then Europe and Southeast Asia were three receiving areas of immigrants from Wenzhou. This wave was interrupted by World War II and slowed down in the 1940s. Most migrants came back to Wenzhou during the war. Few of them stayed abroad. It was they who laid a foundation for the coming of numerous new migrants from Wenzhou in the post-Mao era. Today, Wenzhounese scattered throughout the country and the world have formed a truly transnational network centered on the hometown where population, money, and religious traditions flow in and out, constantly keeping the place a national hotspot economically and religiously.  


Ruian

Ruian is located in the middle part of Wenzhou. It has a 456,900 population by 1949, covering 1,360 square kilometers of land.\textsuperscript{44} There were 115 churches (belonging to five Protestant denominations and the Catholic church) and 317 Buddhist temples in the county in 1957, according to a government report.\textsuperscript{45} In 2010, the city had 595 registered religious sites including 214 Christian churches (Protestant churches and the Catholic churches), 228 Buddhist temples, and 153 Daoist temples.\textsuperscript{46} There is no statistic for communal temples around 1949. A survey of the city government in 2010 shows there were about 1200 “unregistered” village temples, that is, temples dedicated to the worship of local deities. The number of communal temples in Ruian in 1949 should be at least if not more than 1200.

Before 1949, two rituals appeared to be the most important among annual ritual processions: the annual ritual of dragon boat rowing or “hualongchuan” and the rainmaking ceremony or “taifo” (literally, carrying the Buddha).\textsuperscript{47} The former was held to prevent plagues and the latter was performed to make rain during drought. Both were believed to “bring blessings with great peace” (bao taiping).\textsuperscript{48} The imperial authority

\textsuperscript{44} As of the 2010 census, the city has about 1.19 million population covering 1271 square kilometers of land.

\textsuperscript{45} These numbers perhaps only refer to those churches/temples that were still active at the time. See “guanyu dangqian zongjiao huodong qingkuang de baogao” (A report of current religious activities), April 4, 1957, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-9-85: 65-68.

\textsuperscript{46} These numbers do not include the amount of temples/churches in Xianyan, Liao, and Meitou—three religiously very important towns that were incorporated into the municipal area of Wenzhou City in 2001.

\textsuperscript{47} Though dragon boat rowing was mainly performed during the spring in plain areas of Wenzhou, similar ritual of Great Peace Dragon [Boat] (taiping long) was observed in mountainous areas and the ritual of Dragon Lantern was observed in the winter. The ritual of Great Peace Dragon (boat) is very similar to dragon boat rowing in terms of ritual procedures, rituals texts, and purposes. The major difference is the main body of dragon boat in this ritual is made of paper. During the ritual, residents will carry this type of paper dragon boat to travel through the community.

\textsuperscript{48} The rainmaking ceremony has basically disappeared whereas dragon boat rowing remains the most important annual ritual in Ruian and continues to provoke prohibitions of local authorities.
basically treated communal rituals as “customs” (su) – antonyms of “standard” (zheng).\(^{49}\) A “su” like dragon boat rowing might cause disputes and conflicts. With the management of the state and the local elites, however, they rarely posed a threat to Confucian ideology or a political challenge to the dynasty. Therefore these communal rituals were generally tolerated. The turn of the twentieth century witnessed a critical change in the classification system and discourses on religion. In the new classification system under the Republic of China, communal religion was categorized as “superstition” as opposed to legally protected “religion.”\(^{50}\) Prohibition and surveillance of “saihui” (religious parades and fairs), such as dragon boat rowing, were routinized and “naturalized as a scheme of governance.”\(^{51}\) These changes in the government’s attitude toward communal rituals could certainly be felt in Ruian.\(^{52}\) Those maneuvers, however, were hardly effective and “only lined policemen’s pockets,” because local Nationalist Party committees did not gain enough support from local elites.\(^{53}\) Some elites moved out of temple activities to new power arenas such as modern education, but only a small portion

\(^{49}\) The dichotomy between “zheng” and “xie” are often cited by scholars as the state classification of religious practices in the late imperial China. My understanding is that “xie” primarily referred to those millenarian sects. It is necessary to separate those “su” practices from the category of “xie” because the word “xie” contains the meaning of “evil,” and thus cannot be tolerated. In fact officials often used the concept of “su” to refer to religious practices that were not anti-hegemonic and tolerable. A “su” could be categorized as “xie” once it is considered to be threats to the imperial government.


\(^{51}\) Nedostup, Superstitious Regimes, 178.

\(^{52}\) Lo, “The Order of Local Things,” chapter 4.

\(^{53}\) See also Zhang Gang, Zhang Gang riji (Zhang Gang’s diaries) (Shanghai: Shanghai shehuikexueyuan chubanshe, 2003), 306-307 and Lo, “The Order of Local Things,” chapter 5.
of temples were consequently converted into schools or other institutions. Village temples remained active in many areas of the county.

About 40.6 percent of Buddhist temples and 11.8 percent of communal temples experienced reconstruction during the period 1900-1937. Most cases of reconstruction took place after 1911. Against the wave of temple to school movement since 1898, a small portion of temples and ancestral halls were as a result converted into schools or other institutions. By 1937, there were only 10 communal temples being converted into schools or for other purposes, out of total 609 in “temple [miao]” entry of “Religion” section of the Republican Ruian gazetteer. The number likely only referred to cases of complete conversion. The coexistence of temples and schools were very possible the more common arrangement.

In contrast to the stagnation and even withering of Buddhist and village temple activities, trans-village redemptive societies showed strong vitality. Both national redemptive societies having no history in Ruian such as the Way of Former Heaven (Xiantian Dao) and indigenous redemptive societies such as the Big Sword Association (Dadao Hui) vastly extended their territories and followers amidst the social disturbance of the first half of the twentieth century.

54 These numbers are based on “Religion” section of Minguo Ruian xianzhi gao, a local gazetteer compiled in the period, 1924-1948. 143 out of 352 Buddhist temples and Daoist pavilions in “Buddhism” entry of “Religion” section in the gazetteer were reconstructed between 1900 and 1937, with 129 on the period, 1911-1937 and 14 on the period 1900-1910. 62 out of 609 communal temples in “temple [miao]” entry were reconstructed between 1900 and 1937, with 62 on the period, 1911-1937 and 14 on the period 1900-1910. See Ruian Xian xiu zhiju, Ruian xianzhi gao, daziben, 7-45, 58-75.

55 Ruian Xian xiu zhiju, Ruian xianzhi gao, daziben, 58-75.
As for Christian churches, the first half of the twentieth century was certainly a period of tremendous growth. The number of churches and chapels, both Catholic and Protestant, increased from 28 to 108 between 1911 and 1937, according to the Republican Ruian gazetteer. The Catholic church established 21 churches and chapels by 1949. Among all Protestant denominations, the Methodist Church was the earliest to arrive at Ruian and very likely the largest one by 1949. It had one headquarters church and four pastorals, consisting of twenty-one churches in the eve of the Communist takeover. The China Inland Mission was the second to arrive. The China Jesus Independent Church, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and the Local Assembly were all latecomers.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church began to evangelize in Ruian in the 1920s and was not able to build their first chapel in the county seat until 1930. They established a church in Mayu in 1925 and then turned their focus to the Huling District in the northwestern mountains where they established churches in the villages of Zhushan, Zhuyuan and Dongkeng during the 1930s and 1940s.

The China Jesus Independent Church and the Local Assembly grew out of the independent church movement in China in the early twentieth century, but emerged in Ruian during different periods. A group of former members of the Methodist Church created the first independent church in the county seat in 1914. However, the Independent Church expanded fastest in Huling in the following decades because they did not have to compete with established churches there. By 1949, they had established ten churches

---

57 Ruian Xian xiu zhiju, Ruian xian zhi gao, daziben, 1-6.

58 For example, Tangxia and Xincheng are both in the plain areas, and, were respectively the strongholds of the Methodist Church and the China Inland Mission. Mayu to the south of Feiyun River was the base of the
and gathering places in this district. The Shayang church at Mayu, which was a branch of
the Methodist Church, transformed into an independent church in 1935.59

The Local Assembly arrived in Ruian even later. Its establishment and
development occurred after the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese war. They first set
up a gathering place in the west gate of the county seat, which had a population of little
more than twenty people. In the 1940s, some former members of the Methodist Church
and the China Inland Mission founded their own local assemblies in Xincheng and
Xianjiang. To the Local Assembly, Huling was also a major place for evangelization.
They did not stop expansion in the district even during the civil war (1946–1949). Local
assemblies were established in the villages of Jiangshan, Shangyang, and Kengkouyang
in 1947. People in the town of Huling and in the three other villages also organized local
assemblies on the eve of liberation.60

In the changing organizational dynamics of the pre-1949, we surely cannot forget
the rise of two other major players: the Kuomintang (Nationalist party) and the
Communist party. Zhejiang was under the control of warlords between 1911 and 1927
though each region retained strong autonomy. Locals in Ruian established the county
branches of the Kuomintang and the Communist party almost simultaneously at the end
of 1926, less than a year before the Northern Expedition army of the KMT entered Ruian
in early 1927. In this short period, the Communists and the KMT worked hand in hand in

---


attacking established forces (in particular the powerful county chamber of commerce) and facilitating the arrival of the Northern Expedition army. Some Communists in Wenzhou were arrested and killed after Chiang Kai-shek unified China and ordered the purge of Communist influence and leftists within the KMT organizations in April of 1927. Many fled into and hid in mountainous areas. Amidst the famine and unrest of 1929 in southern Zhejiang, the Communists eventually coordinated a group of peasant militias, which was given the title of “the Thirteenth Division of the Red Army.” The Thirteenth Division staged insurgences and attacks widely in southern Zhejiang, including Taoshan and Mayu of Ruian, before its main force was eliminated in May 1932. The Communist organization and guerrilla war only resumed when another stream of Communist guerillas retreated from Jiangxi and entered into the mountains of southern Zhejiang in 1936. The Communist guerillas grew quickly over the years of Anti-Japanese war between 1937 and 1945. The guerillas for most of that period were based and operated in the western mountains of Ruian, especially Huling and Taoshan, where they eventually set off to defeat the KMT armies and took over the county seats and the prefectural seat in May 1949.61

The Source and Outline of the Dissertation

This dissertation combines archival research and oral history. It primarily utilizes county-level archives in southern Zhejiang that cover the period from 1949 to 1995. For the period from 1996 to 2014, I mainly use materials and interviews I collected from my

---

own fieldwork as well as other people’s field reports and studies. The majority of archival materials come from the archives of Ruian City (county-level city) because it is the focus of this study. But I have also collected archival documents from four other county archives (Pingyang, Yueqing, Wencheng, and Taishun) in the Wenzhou region, Wenzhou Municipal Archives and two county archives (Longquan and Wenling) in the neighboring Taizhou and Lishui regions. In order to draw comparisons and situate southern Zhejiang in national context, I have also extensively referenced new local gazetteers in both north and south China, which, in contrast to traditional gazetteers, predominantly cover the history of the People’s Republic. The documents I collected from local state archives range from statements and directives of religious policy at different levels, reports of implementation of religious policies, registers of religious organizations, religious surveys, investigational reports of religious and other related social activities, etc. These documents tell us, besides local governance on religion, fascinating details of religious life on the ground under Maoism and in the post-Mao period.

The use of governmental archives in the PRC is indeed a mixed blessing. Due to the need to control society, the Communist government was obsessively interested in collecting bits and pieces regarding the daily lives and thoughts of ordinary people. Therefore we can find voluminous records of opinions and remarks related to religion as well as records of religious behaviors. No government in Chinese history before has gathered and left as large a body of records on the social life of the commoners. While being such a precious opportunity for the study of history, the PRC archives also pose a big challenge to researchers. They are often deeply permeated by political ideologies of
the Communist party. Some information such as those contained in registers of religious organizations or religious surveys often resulted from coercive political environments. In other words, political conditions could have affected the content and accuracy of the information to be reported to the government. Therefore it requires extra caution and sometimes efforts to decode as the authenticity of information provided in official documents could be questionable. To overcome this issue, I employ cross-reference to check the consistency of official records, comparing records between different governmental apparatuses as well as comparing governmental records with accounts of witnesses or religious institutions. I discovered that the accuracy of official records tends to be higher than we used to assume. For most events that I was able to find non-official accounts, the basic details of official records accord with non-official accounts though the interpretations could be entirely different. Together, archival sources provide a window, though far from a perfect one, into facets of everyday religious life in the PRC, part of which even people in the communities might not have memories or records.

I will supplement archival documents with oral historical work. The purpose first is to present a more complete and balanced picture of religious life under Maoism by bringing to light both how religious practices and beliefs were perceived by officials and how villagers, believers or not, make sense of their own life experiences. It is also to deal with the uneven distribution of archival documents. The tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution between late 1966 and 1978 have left very few records in state archives as local government had been completely paralyzed and negated keeping and collecting information for quite a while. I use two types of oral historical work. One is interviews done by myself. In the summers of 2006, 2011-2013 I traveled to religious sites across
the entire Ruian city and interviewed villagers and rural officials. My oral historical interviews were mainly conducted in Xincheng and Dingtian towns of Xincheng District, Luofeng Town of Tangxia District, Mayu Town of Mayu District, and Anyang Town—the county seat. I was luckily able to find and visit some of those whom directly participated in or witnessed religious activities that appear in archival sources. Their accounts significantly flesh out some events that I have documents from archives. To take one example, the demolition of Rock Head Palace in Mayu in the wake of the central government’s call to eliminate superstition in 1983 was a high-profile case and was exalted by the county government as a model action leading the countywide anti-superstition campaign. Yet my interviews show that the actual situation in this case was much more fluid than a story of the government’s iron fist smashing restored “feudal superstition.” Before the demolition, people were allowed to move statues of divinities and other facilities to another temple in the same village that was deliberately not destroyed. Rock Head Palace was reopened and rebuilt in this new location later on.

Another type is oral historical work by religious adherents themselves that includes testimonies, memoirs, and records of religious institutions. Only a small number of them were formally published and hence available in local library collections whereas most of them were not. However, some of them are available on the websites of religious institutions. I also got this type of materials directly from religious institutions that I visited. Studies of religion during the Cultural Revolution in this dissertation mainly reply on testimonies and memoirs of Christian leaders. Oral historical work in general and Christian testimony in particular also have its issues, especially given the nature of the testimony of Christians is to preach by sharing life experience. Suffering, persecution,
solidarity among Christians could be unevenly stressed. Nevertheless, they provide valuable information that we otherwise would not be able to retrieve.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. My first and second chapters compare the trajectories of different religious traditions in the Maoist era, while situating my story in the context of long-term religious developments in the entire twentieth century. Chapter one sorts out the ways that people adapted their religions to socialism in the early and mid-1950s, showing a range of developments from contraction (local temples and Buddhist activities) to stagnation (Catholic churches) to growth (Protestant churches and redemptive societies). Chapter two approaches the survival of religious activities under Maoism from an institutional perspective—the fluctuation of religious policies along with political campaigns and its conundrum in local enforcement thereof. Chapter three zooms in on the experience of Protestants between late 1950s and late 1970s from a historical and comparative perspective. It traces the pre-1949 localization of Protestant churches in the Wenzhou region and examines the organizational innovations that enabled the Protestant churches, of all religious traditions, to survive and even thrive during the Cultural Revolution. Chapters four and five illustrate the various ways in which Maoist legacy and economic reforms shaped patterns of religious development in contemporary China. Chapter four demonstrates how the growth of Protestant churches during the Cultural Revolution increased their leverage in negotiating with the government to legitimize and institutionalize their organizations in the 1980s and 1990s, and how the interaction with the government brought about both growth and deep internal schisms. Chapter five argues that the temple reclamation movement in the 1980s and 1990s not only institutionalized and legitimized local temple activities, but more
broadly revitalized traditional forms of rural organizations. In particular, the Old People’s Association, which emerged in the temple reclamation movement, has gone far beyond the realm of religion and established itself at the center of village politics in many villages.
Chapter One

Adaptation to Socialism: Religious Organization and Transformation of the Rural Order in China in the 1950s

The period 1949–1958 witnessed a three-stage social revolution in rural China: land reform, cooperativization, and communization.1 These movements destroyed the power and position of traditional elites, fundamentally transformed traditional forms of economic and social organization, and brought peasants into a new collective economy. Against this tumultuous background, religious organizations in China encountered unprecedented crisis. Local temples and Buddhist monasteries during the land reform lost land, which was crucial to their existence. Huidaomen or redemptive societies were singled out as counterrevolutionary forces in the state campaign to build its legitimacy and mobilize the masses. Protestant and Catholic leaders had to face the choice of whether to comply with the new regime (by participating in the Three-self Patriotic movement) or not.

It was therefore a shared view among scholars in the 1960s and 1970s that Chinese religions were in the decline in spite of different opinions on level of devastation and different projections of futures for religion in China.2 Today the conventional wisdom is still that all religious traditions went into a uniform decline after 1949,

---
1 Land reform and to a less extent cooperativization had been initiated before 1949 in some areas of north China that the Communist Party controlled.

2 Richard C. Bush, for instance, wrote: “Religion as an effective force seems to be all but nullified.” See Richard C. Bush, Religion in Communist China (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), 10. Holmes Welch expressed similar sentiments in 1961: “Buddhist attitudes and devotion among monks as well as among laymen, will have been virtually eliminated. Buddhism, just a little less than two thousand years after it arrived in China, will be dead.” His tone was more cautious later on though. “All that can be said, perhaps, is that it is too early to write the closing paragraph to the history of Buddhism in China.” See Holmes Welch, “Buddhism under the Communists,” The China Quarterly 6 (1961), 14 and “Buddhism since the Cultural Revolution,” The China Quarterly 40 (1969), 136.
although no one, in view of the boom of religious activities in the reform period, would contend that religious traditions were completely destroyed.

Recent studies reveal “extraordinary diversity and complexity” in the historical experience of the early years of the People’s Republic—a period characterized by both revolutionary terror and optimism about the Communist regime.\(^3\) Studies of religion similarly reveal a subtler picture of religious life in this period. Both Stephen Jones and Thomas DuBois discover that religious activities in some villages in the north China plains were tranquil, and there was even a sense of hope, for a short period in the early 1950s. Control only tightened after the mid-1950s along with the campaigns of communization and the Great Leap Forward.\(^4\) These studies, together with other studies of cultural traditions in the Maoist period, have abundantly demonstrated the persistence of tradition in this period of high socialism.\(^5\)

This chapter joins previous efforts but will elucidate religious life of southern Zhejiang in a moment of crucial transition in a comparative light. I use official archives, most of which are still classified, oral historical interviews, and records of local religious organizations to sort out the ways that people adapted their religious organizations to

\(^3\) Jeremy Brown and Paul G. Pickowicz, eds., Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People’s Republic of China (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).


socialism in the early and mid-1950s in Ruian. My discovery differs from our conventional wisdom and re-casts religious developments during the Maoist period within the long twentieth century. Rather than a uniform decline of all religious organizations, my study shows, there was actually diversification. There were variations in trajectory both among different religions and among different groups within each religion. Redemptive societies continued to flourish for a short period after the Communist takeover. Activities of village temples and monasteries entered a period of contraction, but remained an important vehicle in village politics. Most surprisingly, the Protestant church was not only in overall good shape, but even gained considerable new converts and established new branches in some villages. These trends, I argue, were largely continuations of historical processes initiated in the Republican period. Such continuation makes the 1949 transition look much less drastic, as is consistent with recent studies attempting to break the 1949 divide in the history of the People’s Republic.6 Looking forward, after the Cultural Revolution, local temple and Buddhist activities in Ruian were fully reinvigorated and the Christian population exploded. Thus it is necessary to rethink the aforementioned historical processes from the long term perspective. Do they really indicate the breakdown of the cultural nexus of power? Or do they instead indicate the renewal of the cultural nexus of power against the background of state penetration?

---

Village Temples and Buddhist Monasteries: Decay and Contraction

Land Reform and Disintegration of Established Ritual Organizations

The encroachment on religious properties, including the conversion of religious sites and the appropriation of religious land to fund secular institutions, was not new. The process can be traced back to the turn of the twentieth century. But the impact of land reform in the early 1950s was much more profound than that of any previous anti-superstition/religion campaigns. The modern Chinese state saw communal religion and culture as “a principal obstacle to the establishment of a ‘disenchanted’ world of reason and plenty.” It also wanted to extract revenue from communal religion to finance its modernization programs. However, the governments in the first half of the twentieth century, including the Nationalist government, mainly targeted the land of communal temples but not all religious organizations. Rather than launching a political revolution to overturn the entire traditional structure of local society, the late Qing and Republican campaigns to convert communal temples and appropriate temple land were in the name of cleaning up superstition and funding modern education. The conversion of communal temples and its properties was much less violent and mainly led by local elites with the encouragement and endorsement of the government. The Communist government, however, was able to target land of all religious organizations with the assistance of its extended bureaucratic system and peripheral organizations.

---


9 Land reform took place in Ruian between February 1951 and March 1952. It occurred in other counties in southern Zhejiang roughly in the same period. Most land temple organizations lost in the land reform have not been reclaimed and perhaps will not be reclaimed in the future.
Prior to 1949, land holding was a common way to finance the operation and maintenance of temples and ritual activities in the villages of southern Zhejiang. Temples and Buddhist monasteries had a “temple common field” (miaozhong) and a “monastery common field” (sizhong). A temple common field might be purchased by one village, multiple villages, or a group of people and would be shared by these groups. “The head of affairs” (shoushi), who was usually chosen on a rotational basis among temple founding members and their heirs, was in charge of regulating the common field. The groups owning the common field would either rent it out or farm it themselves. The income from common fields was used to fund various temple affairs such as temple maintenance, temple fairs and ritual processions. In the mid-1940s, a significant number of village temples and monasteries in Ruian still had land holdings ranging from a few mu to several dozens of mu, despite the impact of the “temple to school” (miaochan xingxue) campaign since 1898.¹⁰

In the land reform of 1951-1952, like other types of land, most “common land” was reallocated to villager.¹¹ “Common land” included “ancestral halls, local temples, monasteries, churches, and other common land,”¹² according to the Land Reform Act (tudi gaige fa). Section two of chapter three of the Act specifically stipulated expropriation of public land that used to be at the hands of ancestral halls, communal


¹¹ It is unclear on what basis the common land was redistributed due to lack of records. As a general principle, the common land should be redistributed to residents of the villages where they were located regardless the origins of former owners.

¹² There were likely many situations that were not reflected in the statistics, given the complexity of land property rights before 1949. It is quite possible that some common land was counted as private land owned by individuals who actually farmed it.
temples, Buddhist monasteries, and other social organizations. According to statistical charts on changes to land holding before and after the land reform in three districts in Ruian, 80.89 percent of “common land” (gongdi) in Tangxia District, 66.2 percent in Xincheng District and 87.93 percent in Mayu District were immediately distributed to villagers during the land reform. The rest was not untouched but instead saved for “the purpose of additional allocation” (tiaojizhi yong).14

Monks and nuns (including some Taoist masters) who insisted on staying in their temples received on average 1.3 mu of paddy rice fields or other land per person.15 The government called on them to become self-supporting workers (zishiqili de laodongzhe). Benji Temple, a prominent local monastery in the suburb of Ruian, for instance, had more than forty mu of fields in 1933. The fields provided for not only the monastics living in the temple but also more than two hundred children in a makeshift shelter that had been established on temple grounds during the second Sino-Japanese war.16 After the

---

13 “Tangxia Qu qige xiang tugai tongji zonghe cailiao” (Comprehensive statistical materials of land reform in seven town[ship]s in Tangxia District), August, 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-3-51: 12; Xincheng Qu ge xiang tugai tongji cailiao (Comprehensive statistical materials of land reform in town[ship]s in Xincheng District), September 30, 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-3-52: 13; “Mayu Qu ba ge tugai xiang tongji cailiao” (Statistical materials of land reform in eight town[ship]s in Mayu District), December 31, 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-3-55: 6.

14 The type of land as a proportion in total lands seemed to vary from district to district but not to a great extent. Common land saved for additional allocation in Xincheng occupied 2.13 percent of total land in the district. This number was 1.9 percent in Mayu.

15 The average land that each monk and nun acquired is based the data from “the register of Buddhist [monks and nuns] in districts in Ruian County” in 1952 (“Ruian Xian ge qu Fojiao jie Fojiaotu mingce” (The register of Buddhist [monks and nuns] in districts in Ruian County), 1952, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-4-74: 12-25).

16 Li Bingjun et al., eds., Qiannian gusha—Benji si (A Historical Temple of A Thousand Years: Benji Temple) (Ruian shi yuhai wenhua yanjiuhui Benjisizhi bianxiezu, 2009), 47.
land reform, only two mu were left to two monks who resided in the temple and who now had to farm the land themselves.\textsuperscript{17}

Stripped of both income from their own land and the patronage of wealthy families whose properties were also taken away in the land reform, Buddhist monasteries soon ran into difficulties in their operation and maintenance. Jiaoxuan, head of the Buddhist Association in Yueqing County, another county in Wenzhou, had warned before the land reform that, “if temple properties were reallocated during the land reform, it would be impossible to keep the monks. Temples would be discarded and without care. Visitors would stop coming due to all manners of inconvenience…”\textsuperscript{18} His predictions unfortunately came true. Many monks and nuns were forced to leave and return to secular life. A governmental survey in 1955 that investigated 579 monks and nuns shows that 173 either claimed to have no capacity to farm their land or found it difficult to make a living by farming.\textsuperscript{19} In Ruian, the number of temples that had residence for monks and nuns shrunk to 256 in 1955 from the 383 in 1949.\textsuperscript{20} This number further dropped through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution to only 44 temples (with 92 monks and nuns) in 1982.\textsuperscript{21} The serious disruption of monastic Buddhism after the land reform should not be attributed to one single reason. But losing land as a major source of income

\textsuperscript{17} Li, \textit{Benji si}, 24.

\textsuperscript{18} “Wei Yandangshan sengzong qingqiu baocun sichan shi” (On the requests of Buddhists in the Yandang mountains to preserve temple properties), October 1950, Yueqing Municipal Archives 26-2-22:4-6.

\textsuperscript{19} Ruian Xian Fojiao jiben qingkuang diaocha mingce (A preliminary investigational list of Buddhism in Ruian County), July 1955, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-7-20: 105-149.

\textsuperscript{20} “Guanyu Fojiao qingkuang diaocha baogao” (Investigational report on Buddhism), July 14, 1955, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-7-137: 38.

\textsuperscript{21} “Guanyu Ruian Shi zongjiao wenti diaocha qingkuang de huibao” (Investigational report on religious issues in Ruian City), December 22, 1990, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-38-6: 38.
could partly explain the drastic fall of Buddhism in the Maoist period. Most Buddhist monasteries today no longer rely on income from land to maintain their daily activities.

The expropriation of religious land devastated the relatively closed temple and ritual organizations as they could not continue to operate without the income from land. Before 1949, membership in temple and ritual organizations in southern Zhejiang was often based on certain inherited economic privileges, the most common of which was the right to farm and regulate common fields. Wang Hengqing, a resident of Qiancang, Pingyang County to the south of Ruian, was a Household Head (toujia) of both the Earth God Temple and the Five Manifestations (Wuxian) Temple at Qiancang before the Communist takeover.\textsuperscript{22} Wang recalled that his family had been farming four \textit{mu} of the common fields of the Earth God Temple since the time of his grandfather.\textsuperscript{23} These economic privileges were no longer valid after the land reform reallocated common fields and, more generally, flattened wealth inequality. Ritual organizations consequently dissolved. The hosting of communal rituals declined under such circumstances, though individual visits to the temples might have continued. There were two major annual rituals in Ruian: \textit{taifo} (or “touring the deities”) and the dragon boat race. The government turned the temple fair, where the \textit{taifo} procession used to be held, into a mercantile exchange (\textit{wuzi jiaoliuhui}). The \textit{taifo} ritual was soon discontinued. Dragon boat rowing, however, continued on and off into the early 1960s.

\textsuperscript{22} Zhang Fen, “Pingyang Qianchang chenghuang miaohui” (City god temple fair in Qianchang, Pingyang) in \textit{Pingyang Xiang, Cangnan Xiang Chuantong Minsu Wenhua Yanjiu} (Studies of Traditional Folk Culture in Pingyang and Cangnan), eds. Xu Hongtu and Kang Bao (Paul Katz) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2005), 108.

\textsuperscript{23} Zhang, “Pingyang Qianchang chenghuang miaohui.”
A Typology of Temple Conversion

The transformation of ritual space, however, was quite slow and complicated, unlike the confiscation of land from village temples and monasteries, which occurred almost all at once. This process is crucial not only to understanding how people in the local communities adapted their religious practices and beliefs to social changes and state penetration in the Maoist period but also to understanding the resurgence of religion in the reform period.

The land reform statute did not stipulate the distribution of buildings of religious institutions. Yet, not surprisingly, many cases of “policy violation” appeared in government reports.24 Over the years, local temples and Buddhist monasteries were taken over under the pretext of various state and local initiatives. The government, for instance, seized temples in the name of setting up state granaries (to satisfy the need for grain requisitions), governmental offices, and supply-and-sell co-ops (gongxiaoshe). Temples and monasteries were also occupied by local communities themselves for various nonreligious purposes such as hosting schools of various types, offices of the village government, and warehouses of cooperatives and/or communes.

In order to better illustrate the process of temple conversion, I classify it into five stages. This classification is primarily applied to analyze temple conversion during the Maoist period, that is, 1949–1976. However, as I will show below, it is also useful to

---

24 For instance, twenty-eight Buddhist temples were reported as damaged and occupied as corrals by local cooperatives. See “Wei ju gedi siyuan deng baogao ge qu xiangcun nongyeshe wei xiangying zhengfu fazhang xumu haozhao, fenfen jiang gedi siyuan fangshe renyi shunhuai qingxing yanzhong, kaiju xiangqing xing xunsu zhizhi yimian kuoda jufen you” (On rural agricultural cooperatives that, according to monks and nuns living in the temples in the respective districts covered thereby, recklessly damaged temples one after another in response to the governmental call to develop animal husbandry. [We] list details [below], please promptly stop [them] in order to prevent further disputes), August 11, 1956, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-8-109: 81-92.
illustrate what happened to local temples and monasteries during the Republican period. For some temples, conversion had been initiated long before 1949 but was not yet completed by then.

The first category refers to the stage before conversion was to take place. In this stage activities were already reduced to a minimal level due to the increasingly difficult political and economic environment. It was possible in limited instances, however, that conversion had never occurred during the Maoist period.

In the second stage, conversion had been initiated but was incomplete. Ritual activities co-existed with activities of secular institutions. The most typical case was the coexistence of ritual space and school space. Schools might hold a large part of the temple while the worship of deities continued but was confined to a smaller part of the temple.

The third stage refers to the period when secular institutions had occupied, restructured, or demolished the entire temple. No accommodation was given for religious practices. This occurred typically when governmental departments expropriated a temple for their own use, for instance, when a temple was turned into a state granary.

The fourth stage witnesses the creation of substitutive space after the temple space had been completely seized or destroyed. The creation of substitutive space was a strategy of compromise necessitated by the impossibility of using the temple as a stable ritual space (for various reasons, e.g., the political environment or failure to obtain formal consent of occupants).

The fifth stage is the final stage, in which a new temple was built either in the original location or in a different one. Given the political conditions in the Maoist period,
this certainly would have been a rare occurrence. Both the fourth and fifth stages are post-conversion stages that allowed the continuation of ritual space.25

The first stage of temple conversion was most commonly seen in the 1950s, especially before the Great Leap Forward in 1958. Temples might remain open, but the organization of communal rituals became very difficult after traditional leaders were purged and common land was taken away. Huaguang temple belonged to Xianyan village in Xianyan town, Tangxia District. Emperor Huaguang, the main deity, was believed to be extremely efficacious. A temple fair used to be held on the seventeenth day of the first lunar month of every year, when people carried the palanquin in which the statue of Huaguang was seated for a tour of the neighborhood. On the first day of the sixth lunar month, old people gathered in the temple to recite scriptures (baijing) in order to obtain the god’s blessings. Villagers supported the temple by sending rice monthly (song yue mi). After 1949, cadres turned two other smaller temples in the village into a factory and a cooperative. Their attitude toward the Huaguang temple was to leave it alone: “do not interfere” but also “do not repair if damaged.”26 Yet the annual temple fair no longer took place after 1949. Rituals of the Dragon Boat Festival used to take place in the temple, but

25 Not every temple went through all five stages or experienced each stage simultaneously. On the contrary, very few temples went through all five stages. And temples often experienced these stages at different paces. Although major state initiatives and campaigns might have affected them all, the actual consequence for any particular temple was still contingent on a lot of other variables such as location, size, the level of resistance from within the communities, etc. Hence we should not understand the five stages too literally. On the other hand, however, the complication of multiple variables for individual cases should not undermine the merits of using the five stages to comprehend the general progression of temple conversion.

26 “Xianyan Qu Xianyan cun Huaguang miao shijian diaocha” (Investigation of the Huaguang Temple incident in Xianyan village, Xianyan District), July 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-5-113: 17. The forced destruction of temple with the size and regional influence as Huaguang Temple could be much more damaging to Party-people relationship than the destruction of those small village temples. This may explain village cadres’ attitude toward Huaguang Temple. On the other hand, the end of the festival could have the bearing on many elements such as the prohibition of the government or lack of money and leadership (due to the crackdown on traditional elites during the land reform, etc.).
these also ceased after 1949. Only some old people frequented the temple, which came to be used for meetings and recreational activities.

In April 1953, however, Wang Muyong, the principal of Xianyan Elementary School, with the permission of cadres in the southern part of the village only, instigated students and militias to demolish almost all the statues in the temple and planned to remodel the entire temple into a school. In the two months following the demolition of the divine statues, the temple was remodeled for the elementary school. Most villagers believed these things were ordered by the government, so they did not dare to speak out. Only some old people had covert discussions to express their resentment. One night in June, a worker from a rock mining company from Qingtian lodged in Huaguang Temple. The next day, he told the residential temple manager that he saw a man wearing a white robe and heard the sound of horses in his dream. Upon hearing the story, panic became widespread among villagers who feared that Lord Huaguang (Huaguang ye) had abandoned the temple and the community. People besieged the township government, requesting to punish Wang Muyong, and attacked town and county cadres dispatched to deal with the situation. The county government decided to delay moving into the school and ordered the repair of the damaged statues. 27 Unlike Huaguang Temple and most others, a very small portion of temples had never been occupied. These were usually local temples and monasteries in the mountains. After monks, nuns, or other residential managers left, these temples without maintenance could collapse very quickly anyway.

---

27 These measures were temporary. When I visited Huaguang Temple in 2012, I learned that the school moved into the temple later on, but it moved out in the 1980s. A new school was built right in front of the temple. Of course, their doors do not face each other.
Sometimes, villagers themselves dismantled decaying temples and took useful parts for other purposes.

In the second stage of temple conversion, ritual and secular activities stayed side by side, sometimes in fragile peace with each other. This phenomenon was most commonly seen before 1958. Nonetheless, in some cases the coexistence persisted after 1958 and even extended into the 1970s and beyond. The coexistence of temple and secular institutions in many cases actually traced back to the Republican period, when it was very common for temples to concede some space to a school or another institution without discontinuing the operation of the temple itself, and simply continued after 1949. Amidst the wave for new education in the Republican era, the manager of the Universal Salvation Palace (*Tongjigong*) in the county seat of Ruian voluntarily lent two of the three rows of rooms in the temple to the Southern City Elementary School. They moved the statues of gods and other facilities to the remaining row of rooms where the main deity continued to enjoy incense fires. The elementary school did not move out until a few years after 1949. The part of the temple formerly used for the school was then remodeled for a lock factory. The factory returned less than half of its space to the temple in 1993 and did not entirely move out until recently.²⁸

In this case, it was unclear if the temple was allowed to operate after the lock factory moved in. In another example, it was said that the temple and school coexisted with some tension for four decades after 1949. The Great Yin Palace (*Taiyingong*) was the most famous temple in the northeastern district of Huling. This temple was dedicated to the worship of Princess Chen Shisi, better known as Lady Linshui in Fujian where she

originated, as well as some other local deities. It was located at the center of Cheng’ao village where two rivers met. The temple was first erected during the Yuan Dynasty and later enlarged to three hundred square meters. A school was set up within the temple after 1949. According to the Great Yin Palace’s own historical account, “for forty years, the palace’s religious activities and the school’s educational activities were constantly in conflict.” By 1979, a new Great Yin Palace was built at the entrance to the village in order to permanently resolve the problem.29

The tension between temple and secular institutions could collide to the point of needing to request interference from the county government. Hongyan Palace (Hongyan dian) in Middle village, Xincheng District was turned into a township school after 1949. Villagers, however, continued to use as a ritual space the school’s auditorium, which likely had been the main hall of Hongyan Palace before the conversion. Villagers emptied the cabinet previously built for divine statues and set up incense tables. The school principal Jin Xuezhuan first informed the township government, condemning the villagers for infringement on the school’s gathering place. He then convened a meeting of Youth League members and village cadres with the hope of mobilizing them to remove the incense tables. However, uninvited villagers occupied the meeting and turned the situation chaotic. Some even instigated children to protest the plan to remove the incense tables, according to Principal Jin. No resolution was reached. In December 1953, Jin happened to attend the county’s Second People’s Congress. There he submitted a proposal requesting the county government’s help to settle the dispute. After negotiations

29 Zhou and Ruan, Wenzhou Daojiao tonglan, 219-220.
among villagers, the school and township government reached agreement and the incense tables was finally removed four months later.\footnote{In one rare case, the government was forced to return the temple. East Hall Palace at Lower village, Xincheng was converted into barns by the county government that needed storage for their grain procurement. During a rainmaking riot in 1953, however, people poured into the temple and moved out the stored bran. After the incident, the county government decided to permanently remove the granary from the temple. See “Xincheng Qu guanyu Dongtang miao bei pohuai de baogao” (Report on the damage to East Hall Temple), July 30, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 32-4-7: 4-6 and “Wei baogao benxian Xincheng Qu liangku feng zhun chexiao baqing beicha you,” (On the request for permission to revoke the Xincheng granary), August 25, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 32-4-3: 2.}

In a few cases the ritual activities and other institutions co-existed peacefully. These cases are more often featured in villagers’ own accounts. Official documents tend to reflect cases involving disputes and conflicts. The Great Yin Palace in Tangkou Village, Tangxia District was taken over to host the village school after 1949. The temple’s internal space was divided into several classrooms. However, statues of gods were never demolished or moved out of the temple, just gathered into a corner within the temple for villagers to worship.

In the third stage, ritual activities within the temple discontinued, either after having been expelled or because they gradually died down, and occupants took over the entire temple. It was not uncommon for temples to be leveled to build new structures for the new occupants. This often happened to temples that were confiscated or expropriated under the order of the government, for instance, for building granaries, county-level schools or factories. In such cases, there was nothing that the temples could do to salvage their space.\footnote{“Wei benxiang xiangxiao litang shang baiman fogui yuanbaozhuo fangai xuesheng jihui buufen mixin nongmin zhishi xuesheng kangyi yidong qing zhengfu xiezhu jiejue you” (On shrines and sacrifice tables occupying the auditorium of a town elementary school in Xinzhou town, Xincheng that obstructed school meetings; some superstitious peasants instigated students to protest against the action to remove shrines and sacrifice tables, we ask for the assistance of the government in settling [the problem]), 1954, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-6-69: 135–136.} The Sagely Longevity Temple (\textit{shengshousi}), which was just steps away
from the aforementioned Huaguang temple, despite being the most prominent Buddhist temple in the Wenzhou region and supposedly enjoying protected status as legal religion according to the constitution, was repeatedly used to host schools. Xianyan High School and Xinyan Elementary School, some cadre schools and a night school all set up classrooms in the temple. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the county Buddhist Association filed multiple reports requesting that the schools move out, but all their requests were rebuffed in the name of developing education.

The fourth stage of temple conversion is when ritual space was relocated or a substitutive space was created if relocation was impossible. During my visits, I learned from villagers that it was very common to gather the statues of gods and other religious facilities in a different, usually remote, location where worship went on secretly or semi-publicly. People in Hantian village, Tangxia moved all the statues of gods and incense burners from three village temples—the Great Yin Palace, the Jinfu Temple, and the Three-Treasures Hall (Sanbao tang)—into an old house on top of nearby Phoenix mountain during the 1958 campaign of “developing industry in a major way” (daban gongye). Doing so prevented them from being seized for industrial use.

In the 1960s, however, it became increasingly difficult to protect temples and their religious facilities from confiscation or destruction. A substitutive space was then created to carry on the worship of deities. An incense burner was an essential device for setting up a substitutive space to carry out what people would do in domestic worship. Burning incense, according Stephan Feuchtwang, was a medium of communication and a formality of deference that invited the visit of the featured god. Incense fire (xianghuo)
was also treated as a symbol of a territorial unit, a family or a village. Thus burning incense was also one way to re-affirm the bond between the community and the family and their deities. The temple of the Eastern Marchmount (Dongyue miao), located at the center of Tangxia town, was first occupied by a supply-and-sell co-op and used as a timber shop. It was then torn down to build a food market in 1970. A corner, however, was left to erect an incense burner for worship. Incense fire, it was said, was still needed on the first and fifteenth day of every lunar month (a typical metaphor for efficacy of the deity and the presence of many worshippers) for prosperity. When an incense burner was not even allowed, people simply inserted incense sticks into the ground outside the temple. This is precisely what people in the Lower village did during the early years of the Cultural Revolution when the East Hall Palace was completely locked up.

The fifth stage is the last phase of temple conversion when the temple was rebuilt after demolition or collapse. Sometimes the new temple was built in a different location. The Great Yin Palace of Shigang Village was seriously damaged during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. Red Guards tore down statues of gods and other religious objects and facilities, and the temple was turned into a factory. In 1972, a pious believer Huang Jinwu led a movement to rebuild the temple. Despite economic difficulties, a temple was soon erected in a new location in the village with the people’s efforts. In 1972, Jiaoshi Village in the suburb of Ruian rebuilt East Mountain Pavilion, which had been destroyed

---


34 Chen Songlin, Interview by author. Xincheng, May 1, 2013; Zhou and Ruan, *Wenzhou Daojiao tonglan*, 158.

in 1957. In a rare case, the Western Patriarch Palace (Xizu gong) in the Ruian county seat was rebuilt as early as 1957, but it was later demolished during the Cultural Revolution. The reconstruction of temples was certainly not a widespread phenomenon and predominantly took place after the early 1970s when the frenzy of political campaigns had died down. But the small wave of temple reconstruction should be regarded as a transitory stage when religiosity was on the rise and temple activities were gradually recovering. The wave of massive reconstruction of temples soon emerged in the 1980s.

The typology of temple conversion that I laid out above indicates that temple conversion under Maoism was far from a clear-cut process though it was much swifter than temple conversion in the Republican era. The five-stage developments underline complex dynamics surrounding the control of temple space that are similar to what we observed in the pre-1949 period. Some aforementioned cases in fact show strong continuity with respect to the struggle for the control of temple space across 1949. It is via those complex dynamics of conflicts, resistance, and compromise on the ground that we see how ritual space was retained or recreated to allow the continuation of local religious traditions in the Maoist era.

*Rituals and Everyday Life in Socialist Villages*


Over the years of the Maoist period, when traditional elites disappeared and state-fostered cadres distanced themselves from religion, religious explanations and rituals were still invoked when dealing with various issues in village life.

During the summer of 1953, when villages in Ruian and the entire Zhejiang Province encountered the first major natural disaster after 1949, people in Ruian unanimously ascribed the drought to the destruction of temples and statues of divinities. Villagers, for instance, said that “Pusa (literally deities) do exist. The government is wrong not to believe in pusa… no rain in the past [months] was due to the fact that the government did not believe in pusa and destroyed too many [statues of] pusa.”38 The fear and hatred against antireligious policies in turn propelled rituals performance and temple reclamation.39 Massive performances of rainmaking ceremonies were found everywhere in the county and the province. In the aforementioned case of Huaguang Temple, villagers shocked by the story indicating the departure of Emperor Huaguang rushed to

38 “Guanyu benxian gedi fasheng quanzhong xing zhaofo qiuyu ji saodong shijian de baogao” (Report on (the incidents of) conjuring up deities to make rain and disturbances throughout the county), August 5, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-5-3: 77. Similarly in Yongkang County, Jinhua, people blamed the Communist Party for causing the severe drought. Temples and statues of divinities were destroyed. Therefore, the deity no longer took care of the community: “Drought occurred because The Third Prince (santaizi, a Buddhist and Taoist god) did not submit a memorial to the throne in heaven to ask for rain [on behalf of us] and the Old Dragon King of Jing River (jinghe laolong, a local deity) did not ascend to heaven to produce rain…” (Lü Shanxin, “Taiping xiang qiuyu mixin shijian huigui” (Memoir of the incident of rainmaking superstition at Taiping town), in Wushi niandai de Yongkang (Yongkang wenshi ziliao di shisan ji) (Yongkang shi zhengxie wenshi weiyuanhui, 2001), 357).

39 The widespread search for holy water (shengshui; xianshui or divine water) and elixir (xianyao) in the 1950s can be understood in the same vain, which similarly reflects a grave concern for losing the patronage of the divine. The difference is that in the search for holy water people’s actions were much less violent. And also the search for holy water was more of individual attempts whereas the actions to reclaim temples were often collective efforts for the well being of both individuals and the community. See Li Ruojian, “Minjian zongjiao de wange: 1950 nidai chu de ‘shui fengbo’” (An Eulogy of Popular Religion—The Water Incident in the 1950s). Ershi yi shiji, 10(2010): 112–122; Smith, “Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts.”
look for the principal who led the destruction of the temple.⁴⁰ People besieged county officials sent to resolve the case and forced them to promise to stop converting the temple. They also recovered the statues’ eyes, which had been stolen, and arrested those who had participated in the destruction of the divine statues.

While the state initiative to eliminate ritual space provoked and created a cultural setting for the return of deities, discontent with other state initiatives, the failure of these initiatives and uncertainty caused by such failure further led people to cling to entrenched ritual practices and beliefs.⁴¹ In 1957, a year that witnessed mounting popular unrest in the countryside, some communal rituals that had been discontinued were restored. For instance, in Shangyu County in July of that year, thousands of people from both Shangyu and Yuyao Counties, Ningbo gathered at Baiguan Town (the county seat of Shangyu County) to welcome the deity of the Ninth Gentleman (Jiuxianggong pusa).⁴² The procession had ceased ever since 1949 but was now performed to express resentment over communization and the unified purchase-and-sale (tonggou tongxiao) policy.

In the 1960s and even during the Cultural Revolution, religious explanations of natural and manmade calamities continued to mobilize collective actions in Ruian. There were calls for temple reconstruction in the aftermath of the Great Famine (1959-1961).⁴³

---

⁴⁰ A similar story of the departure of deities was reported in the Lower village, Xincheng where people said that “the bran has choked the gods and sent them away” (longkang ba fo mengzou le) because East Hall Palace, the major temple in the village, was converted into a granary (Ruian Municipal Archives 32-4-7: 5).

⁴¹ Smith, “Local Cadres Confront the Supernatural” and “Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts.”


⁴³ When the cholera epidemic was rampant in the county in summer of 1962, a possessed woman at Xingguang Brigade, Tangxia, warned people in a pubic meeting that the “Buddha of West Heaven has descended. [He said] first of all you do not observe a vegetarian regimen. Second, you do not practice moral teachings. Third, you carelessly destroyed temples. [I will] take the lives of all of you…if you want peace, you have to rebuild all the temples, big or small.” See “Huli daxian yuanxing bilu le! Yige fanzui
In some cases, people did succeed in rebuilding temples. In 1967, the second year of the Cultural Revolution, when armed fights (wudou) between cliques reached the climax, another long drought hit Zhejiang. People again gathered at East Hall Temple of Lower village to pray for rain. But they soon met with interference. This time the entanglement of religion with politics could not be more pronounced. One faction attacked another faction for supporting superstition, which then led to the fight between the two factions. The leader of one faction was killed, and the suppression of the rainmaking ceremony turned into violence. After an old man was accidently shot to death, people besieged the town government, clamoring for resolution.

In sum, the conversion of properties of village temples and Buddhist monasteries, which began in the turn of the twentieth century, sharply accelerated and rose to its peak after 1949. Village temples and Buddhist monasteries, for the first time in history, lost almost all the land they previously possessed to fund temple operation as well as their former major patrons, traditional elites who were purged as a class in the land reform. Severe disruption of temple activities and contraction of communal ritual traditions resulted. While local communities could not resist the loss of land due to political sensitivity, they were able to maneuver or even resist in some cases in terms of ritual space. The conversion of ritual space set in temple buildings was overall slower and

---

uneven, varying from one place to another. By minimizing, combining, and creating (new) ritual space, local residents carried on village temple and lay Buddhist activities, which, albeit in the simplest forms, laid a firm foundation for the revival after the late 1970s. It should also be acknowledged that, although communal ritual traditions were continuously needed and performed, the decay of and contraction of Buddhist and village temples activities meant that their availability as religious resources was in decline, which set the stage for shifting power dynamics in the local religious landscape that the rest of the dissertation will reveal.

Redemptive Societies: Entanglement with the Communists and an Ephemeral Surge

After 1949

There were various redemptive societies that were still active in southern Zhejiang by the late 1940s.45 I classify them into two types: local branches of national organizations such as Yiguandao and Tongshanshe; and indigenous societies such as the Seven Stars Teaching (Qixing hui), the Yellow Yang Teaching (Huangyang jiao), and the Big Sword Association (Dadao hui). National organizations generally came to the region no earlier than the 1920s. Some, such as Yiguandao, did not come to Wenzhou until the Anti-Japanese war (1937-1945). They were usually based in county seats or their proximity. As elsewhere in the country, these societies engaged in meditation and morality cultivation and tended to appeal to businessman and the local gentry.46


46 Chen Murong et al., eds., Qingtian xianzhi (Qingtian Gazetteer) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1990), 64; Yang Dianzhong et al., eds., Yueqing Xian gong’anzhi (A History of Public Security in Yueqing)
Indigenous societies pervaded the countryside and enjoyed much greater popularity among ordinary peasants, who constituted the bulk of believers of redemptive societies. Entry into indigenous societies was simple. To become a member of the Yellow Yang Teaching, for instance, people only had to take a vow before an incense table with the guidance of a teacher and the presence of an introducer. Sometimes they were asked to submit a membership fee. Disciples of societies met at various dates (e.g. the birthdates of Guanyin, Buddha and the Yellow Yang Master, founder of the teaching) to recite scriptures and have a purification feast (dazhai). Like those national organizations, teachers of indigenous societies used revelations, scriptures, and various other techniques.

The eschatological messages of the Yellow Yang Teaching came from the famous apocalyptical Wugongjing (or Scripture of the Five Lords) as well as local culture, especially the “Baked Cake Ballad” or “Shaobingge” allegedly written by a local dignitary Liu Ji (a.k.a. Liu Bowen) (1311-1375), a famous minister in early Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The major prophecy of the Yellow Yang Teaching was the ending of three kalpas (originally a term in Buddhist cosmology referring to a long period). The Yellow Yang Teaching was advertised as being able to help people avert the catastrophe at the end of the kalpa. One of their messages said: “On September 23, it would be a gloomy day. Seven days and nights [thereafter would be] rainy and dark. Only pious people

---

47 “Pingyangkeng Qu fandong huidaomen qingkuang chubu diaocha zongjie baogao” (Concluding report on the preliminary investigation of counter-revolutionary redemptive societies in Pingyangkeng District), October 30, 1952, Ruian Municipal Archives 45-2-4: 86-87. See also Zhan, Qingtian Xian gong’anzhi, 177–178.
would be saved. People who do not believe would lose their lives. There is a cave at the foot of the Yellow Yang Mountains that can hide eighteen thousand people. Only those who arrive early would have a place and those who arrive late would die on the road.”

Indigenous societies were loosely organized without a coherent and unified hierarchical structure. Although within each local group under the same society, there was hierarchical arrangement of various forms, such as center-altars (zongtan) and sub-altars (fentan), these groups were basically independent of each other without tight ties. The Yellow Yang Teaching, for instance, had many factions dispersed across a few counties in Wenzhou. Huang Yaopan, from Shantouxia Village, Mayu District and a former follower of Non-Action Teaching, allegedly created the Yellow Yang Teaching during the Guangxu reign of the late Qing period after he secluded himself for meditation in the Daluo Mountains of Tangxia District. In 1922, the Yellow Yang Teaching split into two factions: the Zhu (Qimei) and Li (Binwen) factions. Both brought the teachings to nearby Yueqing County. In 1928, Peng Chongcai, a former follower of the Yellow Yang Teaching, formed his own teaching, Peng Yang Teaching, in Xianjiang District. In the late 1920s, Chen Changman also formed his own faction in Mayu. He took over Tianfu Temple in Aodi Village of Shuntai Township and rebuilt the temple into a regional center of pilgrimage.

The expansion of indigenous societies in the mountains of southern Zhejiang came to be eclipsed by the rise of the communist guerrillas. A group of Communist forces led by Su Yu and Liu Ying went east into Zhejiang to fight guerrilla wars in late

---

48 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-8:56.

49 Tan is literally an altar. Here it refers to a branch.
1935, after the Red Army troops in the border area between Jiangxi and Fujian Provinces were defeated by the KMT army. They eventually took roots and set up revolutionary bases in the mountains around the borders of a dozen counties in Wenzhou and Lishui, where government troops were less heavily garrisoned and the people were more accessible. Within Ruian at that time, the Communists were most active in the Gaolou, Huling, and Daluo mountains north of Tangxia District. The majority of the southern Zhejiang guerrillas left to join the New Fourth Army in 1938 against the background of the Communist Party’s collaboration with the KMT in fighting against the Japanese. Despite the imprisonment of Liu Ying and his death in Wenzhou in May 1942, the Communist force was able to expand to the coastal plains of southern Zhejiang. By the eve of 1949, the southern Zhejiang guerrilla had reached an area covering eleven counties in Wenzhou, Lishui, south of Taizhou, and some counties in northern Fujian.

Redemptive societies happened to be on the rise in the same areas as the Communists. Geographical proximity necessarily resulted in entanglements between communist guerrillas and redemptive societies before 1949. When communist guerrillas frequented Shuntaizi, they used the aforementioned Tianfu Temple to cover their activities. Eventually Chen Changman decided to abandon the temple “out of anger against” the guerrillas. He left for Dragon Pool Temple, in the Daluo Mountains, Tangxia in 1946, where the Yellow Yang Teaching allegedly originated. Xie Qingxian, a disciple of Chen,

---

50 A few hundred peasants had formed a Southern Zhejiang Red Army in the Wenzhou region in 1928. They were led by Lei Gaosheng from Mayu District. But before the arrival of Su and Liu's troops, they had been defeated and went underground. A meaningful episode was that Christian Church was very active in Lei’s village. Many kin of Lei were Christian. Lei’s son and his family converted to Christianity a while after Lei’s death in 1930.

soon followed Chen’s steps to the Daluo Mountains. He soon founded his own faction, which became the largest Yellow Yang Teaching faction after 1949.

The entanglement of the Big Sword Association, a militarized redemptive society, with the Communist force was particularly complicated. The Association emerged from the 1940s uprising to resist excessive taxation and forced draft. It was most active in Pingyang (the counties of Pingyang and Cangnan today), but also spread to the western and southern parts of Ruian, that is, the districts of Mayu and Gaolou. Similar to what Duara and Esherick have discovered on the north China plains, the Big Sword Association was deeply rooted in the martial arts and sectarian traditions in the region, especially Pingyang. After brutal suppression led by the KMT government, which caused the death of a few thousand people, the remaining groups of the Big Sword Association swayed among the KMT government, the Communist guerillas, and the Japanese occupation forces. Communist guerillas took considerable effort to absorb the remnant forces of the Big Sword Association. They succeeded with part of Cai Yuexiang’s group and also maintained close relations with some other groups of the Association. To local authorities at the time, the political dimension of the Association had become even more pronounced than its religious pursuits. Dong’s group in Pingyang was cracked down as a counter-revolutionary organization in June 1949. The Ye Jilang

52 Ruian Municipal Archives 45-2-4: 83-89.
55 Tao Dagong, ed., Dadao hui shimo (Cangnan Xian wenshi ziliao di qi ji) (A concise history of the Big Sword Association (Cangnan Historical Matierals, volume 7)) (Cangnan: Cangnan Xian zhengxie wenshi ziliao weiyuanhui, 1992).
faction in Gaolou District, the largest group of the Big Sword Association in Ruian, refused to disband and was crushed in a battle against government forces in September of that same year.

Non-militarized redemptive societies continued to operate after 1949. In fact, with their eschatological messages, these non-militarized societies seemed to view the transition as another moment for expansion. In a report to the Wenzhou Party committee three days before the creation of the People’s Republic (the Ruian county seat was taken over by guerilla forces in April), Ruian officials noticed that reciting the Scripture of Five Lords was extremely popular in Gaolou District. In Dongmei Township, rumor had it that “the Communist Party only has [a reign of] two and half years whereas reciting the Scripture of Five Lords can bring a blessing of seven years.”

In March 1950, the Yellow Yang Teaching leader Zhou Jiyu tried to promote a person named Lin Renji in Fengxiang village, Gaolou. It was said that Lin was the real master who was an incarnation of a bird and knew the future and that when he arose to lead the people and ascended the throne in June, there would be a wave of birds coming and the wave would kill anybody who did not join the Yellow Yang Teaching. Believers were also told that there was no need to worry about grain requisitions, as grains stored in county granaries would grow wings and fly back.

The Yellow Yang Teaching spread most rapidly in Ruian after 1949. After a short silence between April and July 1949, Xie Qingxian continued to develop his organization.


57 Ruian Municipal Archives 45-2-4:15-16.
He opened a new altar for preaching at Pingyangkeng Village, Mayu. Four disciples dispatched by him established new altars in Jianglong Township in October 1949 and in Fengxiang Township of Gaolou in March 1950. The expansion of Xie’s group caused some concerns among the local authorities who raided a meeting in the spring of 1950 and arrested Xie. By then, Xie’s organization was estimated to have more than seven thousands followers in Tangxia District alone. If true, this number would have been over ten percent of the population of the district at that time. The growth of Xie’s group took place immediately after 1949 but the pace of the Yellow Yang Teaching’s expansion seemed to have slowed down after Xie’s arrest. In the following case study, however, I will show the expansion of another redemptive society, the Seven Stars Teaching, in Wencheng during and after the ferocious land reform campaign.

A Case Study: The Seven Stars Teaching

According to official reference materials for the propaganda department, the Seven Stars Teaching was an indigenous religious group that originated in Dayang Temple in the border region of Lishui, Jinyun, and Qingtian Counties in southern Zhejiang. It initially appeared as the “Dayang Mountains Teaching,” or alternatively the “Twelve Pace Teaching” and the “Non-Action Teaching.” Its history traced back to at least the early nineteenth century. People were drawn to its use of “exorcism and

58 “Ruian Xian renmin zhengfu bannian minzheng gongzuo zongjie” (Semiannual summary of civil affairs by the Ruian County government), 1950, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-2-6: 7.

59 It is unclear whether these names were self-referential or state-imposed labels. Most names of popular sects appearing in official documents of the late imperial period, according to Barend ter Haar, were just generic terms or labels. This discovery may also apply to redemptive societies in the twentieth century. See Barend J. Ter Haar, The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1992).
The teaching also utilized the famous apocalyptic Scripture of the Five Lords to deliver its messages. Followers of the Seven Stars Teaching additionally engaged in elixir refining (liandan). Yang Shizun, the founder of the teaching, led a revolt and attempted to attack the Wenzhou prefectural seat in 1838. The Seven Stars Teaching went underground after crackdown of the uprising and did not resurface until the turn of the twentieth century. It then expanded further south to Wencheng County (back then the Western Region (xiqu) of Ruian County). By the eve of the second Sino-Japanese war, several discrete denominations had been established in the name of the Seven Stars Teaching, each having its own network of altars that covered all the bordering mountains of Wencheng, Qingtian and Jingning. As with the Yellow Yang Teaching, the growth of Communist guerillas in this region in the 1940s restricted the expansion of the Seven Stars Teaching and even silenced it for a period of time. Indeed, Huangliao Township of Nantian, where the Seven Stars Teaching had been most active, had also been a base area for the Communist guerillas since the mid-1930s. Long Yue and other leaders of the southern Zhejiang Communist guerillas had all stayed in this township. As two forces operating and competing for influence in the same area who all faced the attacks of the KMT army, their relationship was neither entirely hostile nor entirely collaborative. They simply acted on their own interests. Therefore it was not surprising that some of the Seven Stars Teaching’s leaders had even joined the Communist guerillas. 

60 “Fandong Qixinghui cankao ziliao” (Reference materials on the counter-revolutionary Seven Stars Teaching), 1952, Wencheng County Archives 1-4-8: 49.

61 Wencheng county was formed in 1946 with the joining of several other areas of Qingtian and Taishun Counties) and Jingning County.

62 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-8: 51, 55.
When Communist guerillas were transferred to newly liberated areas on the plains, various groups of the Seven Stars Teachings resurfaced to occupy the mountains once again. Zhou Shouzhen and others re-established a central altar in Kutou Village, Huangtan. Inventing a new technique called *kexianjin* or “inscribing divine towels” (with talismans), they soon set up six sub-altars in Huangtan District. Li Rongyin’s faction, which was based in Huangliao Township, Nantian District, expanded even more quickly. By April 1950, Li had to upgrade the original central altar to a master altar (*zhutan*) plus four central altars, which oversaw twenty-six sub-altars and two minor altars (*xiaotan*). Li was even enthroned by his assistants and disciples. When the land reform was taking place ferociously in late 1951, Zhou and a few other leaders were arrested and executed for allegedly attempting to incite an uprising. Yet Li’s and other groups of the Seven Stars Teaching continued to grow. In November 1951, Hu Zhilong and Hu Zhiping from Jinyan Township, Nantian, traveled to Puzhou Township, Beishan District of Qingtian County. The Hu brothers’ network of altars extended to thirty-two townships.

The expansion of the Seven Stars Teaching somehow did not cause deep concern for local authorities until early 1952. On May 9 of that year, soon after the completion of the land reform in the region, hundreds of followers of the Seven Stars Teaching marched from all directions from the border regions of Wencheng, Qingtian, and

---

63 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-8: 51–52.

64 Zhan, *Qingtian Xian gong’anzhi*, 173.

65 Prior to the May 9 incident, it is likely that few local cadres considered the Seven Stars Teaching to be a threat to the government. During the crackdown after the incident, superior officials had to explain to village and town cadres why the teaching was counter-revolutionary. The former acknowledged that they previously considered the Seven Stars Teaching at most as a much less harmful “superstition” group. “They know very little about the counter-revolutionary behaviors [of the sect].” See “Guanyu Wencheng, Qingtian, Jingning san xian fandao diqu qu xiang ganbu kuoda huiyi zongjie” (Summary of the expanded meeting of district and town[ship] cadres on counter-society work at three counties of Wencheng, Qingtian, and Jingning), August 6, 1952, Wencheng County Archives 1-4-9: 16–19.
Jingning toward the Liu Ji Temple in Nantian. They wore white vests and white turbans inscribed with talismans, carrying flags of the Seven Stars Teaching and shouting slogans: “imperial master Liu (Liu Bowen a/k/a Liu Ji, a Ming minister and native of the region) has descended to save us. We will offer sacrifices to the great master Liu who will bestow upon us precious swords and open the embroidered pouch (jinnang, which was supposed to contain the revelations of Liu).”66 While they were holding ceremonies inside the temple, the temple was besieged by public security officers and soldiers. The incident got settled rather peacefully. Seven Stars Teaching followers were barely armed and not ready to resist. Only one person was killed when he attempted to flee and a few were injured. Most of the protestors were arrested.

The Wenzhou Prefectural Commission, which by then had realized the seriousness of the situation, sent its cadres to the region where they joined major cadres from those three counties to form an “anti-society” (fandao) command center. The command center became a temporary administrative headquarters of eighty-seven townships of seven districts in the three counties that were involved in activities of the Seven Stars Teaching. The center was disbanded five months later in late October, after having succeeded in its mission. According to official statistics, 7,398 people, perhaps under coercion, registered with the government to quit the Seven Stars Teaching. More than one thousand and four hundred people were either imprisoned or executed.67

The May 9 incident was classified in official propaganda as a landlord-manipulated counter-revolutionary riot for the political purpose of stigmatizing the latter,

66 Zhan, Qingtian Xian gong’anzhi, 174.

67 “Zhunbei jieduan gongzuo baogao” (Work report on the preparation stage), September 2, 1952, Wencheng County Archives 1-4-9: 30.
although the government never found any direct evidence that could implicate those former landlords. Yet in internal investigation reports, officials acknowledged that it was mainly other factors including the discontent with the Communist Party among local residents that drove people to join the Seven Star Teaching and eventually led to the occurrence of the May 9 incident. First of all, villagers in the mountains had a very strong sense of being left behind when the Communist guerillas moved to the cities in the plain areas. Villagers in the border region of Wencheng, Qingtian, and Jingning gave support to Communist guerillas and participated in peasant associations and militias, hoping to improve their impoverished lives upon the success of the revolution. But life did not get better after 1949. During visits to villages officials learned of ballads such as: “Thunder hit the mountains, but the rain fell on the plain areas [instead].” “The KMT could not provide for us, the CCP could not support us, to survive we can only depend on Buddha.

The May 9 incident was likely a concerted action because it involved the participation of Seven Stars Teaching followers from different districts who apparently belonged to different denominations. Besides Zhou/Li’s organization in Nantian, there were other independent networks of altars in Yuhu, Beishan, Xikeng, and Bohai. But, whether this incident was a contrived counter-revolutionary riot is questionable. The gathering at Liu Ji temple was possibly part of a long journey to evade incoming catastrophes. When preparing the march to Liu Ji temple, Seven Stars Teaching followers were told starting with the day of May 9, “There will be seven dark days and nights. The only way to survive calamities is to get the divine books and precious swords from the Liu Ji temple and cross the Yellow Yang Mountains” (Wencheng County Archives 1-4-9:61). The government kept searching for the counter-revolutionaries behind the scene. However, they could not find a substantial linkage between the Seven Stars Teaching and the KMT guerrillas. It is unclear who actually coordinated the May 9 action. Available archival sources never exactly indicate who was behind the scene. The Wencheng gazetteer and the Qingtian gazetteers, each provides very similar summaries of the story, but only a few names of leaders who were caught in the temple on the day of May 9 match in the two versions. What all versions share is that there was a reorganization of tan (altar) networks into a more militarized group with five branches and one command center in order to suit the demand of uprising. The Wencheng gazetteer says that Li Rongyin and an ex-KMT military Fu Shaodai at Nantian, Wencheng, masterminded the entire incident. The Qingtian gazetteers, however, show that the incident was “manipulated” (caozong) by Hu Zhilong and Hu Zhiping, two counter-revolutionaries in Beishan District of Qingtian. The similarities and discrepancies between these versions suggest that the May 9 incident was perhaps deliberately used to frame the Seven Stars Teaching as a political group with the intention of subverting the communist regime. See Zhu Li et al., eds., Wencheng xianzhi (Wencheng Gazetteer) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 723; Zhan, Qingtian Xian gong’anzhi, 173-174; and Chen, Qingtian xianzhi, 540.
and submit ourselves to the will of Heaven.”

Second, the disparity in the land reform only deteriorated the situation. The official reports noted that in many cases cadres dominated the distribution of land to favor their own families while not giving a fair share to other villagers. Other cadres used the land reform to launch personal attacks against other villagers.

On the other hand, to many residents in the mountainous region, the discourses of the Seven Stars Teaching directly spoke to them. To women, for instance, the teaching said that “believing in [the power of] Heaven would win you the status of eighteen fairies.” To families whose members were sick, they said: “believing in [the power of] Heaven would bring you peace.” To poor peasants, they said: “believing in [the power of] Heaven would help you cross over to Jingzhou (an imagined land in ancient Chinese myth) to have a life of great peace.” They assured the relatives of PLA soldiers that joining the Seven Stars Teaching would bless their sons and prevent them from being killed in battle. Some propaganda of the Seven Stars Teaching directly commented on campaigns and policies of the Communist government. On the land reform, they said that “landlords’ land results from the good deeds of their ancestors. Thus we should not distribute [their land]”. Otherwise, they warned, “you would not be able to eat grains grown in the distributed land,” implying divine punishment. On the anti-counterrevolutionary campaign, they said, “we should behave with a good heart. Do not hurt other people.” On the “resisting America and assisting Korea” campaign, they

---

69 “Liuyue ershizhi liuyue ershiwu ri qingkuang baogao” (Report on the circumstance between June 20 and June 25), June 25, 1952, Wencheng County Archives 1-4-9: 85.

70 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-9: 61.

71 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-8: 56–57.
commented: “America is winning a great victory in Korea. The Communist Party therefore needs to conscript adult males. All males between the ages of eighteen and forty-five will be sent to Korea to lose their lives [for the nation]. Making a donation is just a Communist Party trick. It is essentially a local levy (juan).” Regarding taxes, they said “the Communist Party imposes ten thousand [types of] taxes. In the past, we farmed for landlords, but now we farm for the Communist Party.”

The brutality against the followers of the Seven Star Teaching during the land reform might have also stimulated the sects’ growth, officials implied. A report points out that the land reform work teams “seriously violated policy, [and mistakenly] expanded the scope of the strike.”73 Some denominational leaders were arrested and executed as “bandits” during the “encirclement and elimination” (weijiao) campaign that was concurrent with the land reform. Followers were coerced to confess and condemn sect leaders in struggle meetings. There were “excessive arrests and excessive strikes.”74 Even some who seemed to have no history with the Seven Star Teaching were attacked. Many who were affected, follower or not, were frightened and hid deep together in the mountains.

*The Massive Crackdown on Redemptive Societies and the Aftermath*

---

72 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-8: 56–57.

73 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-9: 53; “Guanyu Wen Jing Qingbian fandong huidaomen Qixinghui wuzhuang baodong ji chuli qingkuang” baogao (Report on the Seven Stars Teaching’s armed uprising in border areas of Wencheng, Jingning, and Qingtian counties and its handling), June 15, 1952, Wencheng County Archives 1-4-9: 61.

74 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-8: 56.
After the establishment of the “anti-society” (fandao) command center, in the border region of Wencheng, Qingtian, and Jingning, counter-society groups were established at various levels from district to village to mobilize villagers to inform on followers and to force followers to register themselves with the government. The command center organized supervision and training camps (guanxunban) to brainwash the teaching leaders. The most creative and interesting propaganda measure was a tour throughout the villages of drama performances, the script of which was based on the May 9 incident. Some former top leaders of the Seven Stars Teaching were asked to wear costumes of emperors and ministers and reenact the incident.75 The Seven Stars Teaching was at first accused of being a counter-revolutionary group. In early August, the focus of propaganda suddenly turned to the obstruction of agricultural production. Cadres who were under pressure themselves put more pressure on ordinary followers and teaching leaders to confess, which led to several suicides. By the end of September, the government made massive arrests and organized public inquisition meetings. Official records state that 1,433 people were either arrested or killed.76

Similar but less violent processes of counter-society work took place in Ruian and other counties. By spring 1953, all redemptive societies were outlawed in southern Zhejiang. At the end of that year, a total of 3,163 society leaders and approximately


76 Wencheng County Archives 1-4-9:30.
61,500 followers registered with the government in twelve counties under the jurisdiction of the Wenzhou Prefectural Commission.\footnote{Zhao Jiazhu, ed., \textit{Zhongguo huidaomen siliao jicheng} (A Comprehensive Compilation of Historical Materials on Redemptive Societies in China) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2004), 465.}

Local gazetteers show pockets of Yellow Yang Teaching activities in the late 1950s and 1960s where people continued their efforts to escape to Heaven. In the early 1980s, there was surprisingly a short surge of the Yellow Yang Teaching in parts of Yueqing. Revelation teacher Chen Libin of Haiyu Township mobilized three hundred followers in seven towns and townships to rebuild a series of local temples: the “Jade Emperor Palace,” the “Saint Mother of Black Dragon Palace,” and the “Evergreen Pavilion.”\footnote{Yang Dianzhong et al., eds., \textit{Yueqing Xian gong’anzhi} (A History of Public Security in Yueqing) (Beijing: Haiyan chubanshe, 1993), 36.} They took advantage of these temples to open altars for preaching and practice exorcism to cure illnesses for village residents. All these suggest a certain level of integration of the Yellow Yang Teaching into communal religious life.

Due to lack of access to governmental archives, we only have brief records in openly published materials regarding what happened to the Seven Stars Teaching after 1952. The records we do have nevertheless allow us to take a look at the Seven Stars Teaching’s trajectory in the ensuing decades. In autumn 1953, less than a year after the crackdown, nine central altars restored activities involving 1081 followers. A year later, in autumn 1954, Li Xiuzhuo, a former teacher of the Seven Stars Teaching, launched sixteen “central altars of the world” (\textit{shijie zongtan}). Thirty-four teaching leaders were arrested and Li was sentenced to death. 426 people registered as quitting the Seven Stars Teaching. Fu Zhengpu, a self-styled “third generation emperor” of the Seven Stars
Teaching, led a riot in 1955.\textsuperscript{79} Zhang Zhongchang, one of the most important early leaders of the Seven Stars Teaching, was released from prison and returned to his hometown in Zhangdan Brigade in Qingtian in February 1961, which happened to coincide with the Great Famine. He soon reconnected with old teachers and followers, and even developed more than 180 new followers. Their networks extended across seven brigades and one town in three districts before being suppressed. In early 1967, Wu Qingyan, a self-styled “emperor” of the Seven Stars Teaching and the leader of a central altar, interpreted the outburst of the Cultural Revolution as a message from Heaven (\textit{tianji}) that he should secretly resume activities. His strategy was to reconnect with old followers and to develop new followers among relatives and friends. Their organizations spread to fourteen brigades of four districts until being exterminated by the government in October 1977. In the final period of the Cultural revolution, followers in Qingtian, after meditation training in the neighboring Ouhai County, came back to revive the Twelve Steps Teaching, a faction of the Seven Stars Teaching. They created new altars and attracted disciples in the name of “religious freedom.” Their activities involved five districts and towns in Qingtian until early 1987 when the county government again ordered a clampdown.\textsuperscript{80}

In short, redemptive societies were probably the most vibrant and fastest growing religious tradition before 1949. However, only redemptive societies were explicitly targeted as an enemy of the new regime. Their growth trend extended into the early 1950s before suddenly coming to a halt in mainland China as a result of massive crackdown by

\textsuperscript{79} Zhu, \textit{Wencheng xianzhi}, 724.

\textsuperscript{80} Zhan, \textit{Qingtian Xian gong’anzhi}, 179-180.
the Communist government. Their silence under Maoism was another major change that the Communist rule brought to the local religious landscape in rural China. Much still needs to be studied about redemptive societies. It is noteworthy that the trajectories of national redemptive societies and indigenous redemptive societies began to diverge in Ruian after 1949. The latter, which was much more integrated into local soil, experienced a short surge in the early 1950s and resurfaced at times since then, making them an interesting player to observe for the future of local religious life in China.

**Christian Churches: Persistence and Progress**

Christian churches of southern Zhejiang also faced the issue of adaptation to the new regime, involving various political choices, including what attitude to adopt toward the “Three-self” movement. Though Christian churches did not find the Communist Party to be a stranger entirely, this time they were no longer confronted with a competitor but rather a new ruler. Christian churches had to tackle intense state surveillance for alleged connections with imperialism and “counter-revolutionary activities.” Church activities were silent for a year or so due to the land reform, but were then resurrected. In many areas the Church even made remarkable progress until the Great Leap Forward unexpectedly put the development of Christian churches on hold.

**Trajectories of Christian Denominations: Persistence and Expansion**

---

81 Communist Party activities were very active in Huling. For instance, some villagers in Zhuyuan village, participated in both the party and the Church, a few of them were even Party cadres. Eventually, they were forced to choose between the Church and the Party. After 1949, five or six ended up withdrawing from the Party. See Shu 2002, chapter 15.
There were five Protestant denominations (the Methodist Church, the China Inland Mission, The Seventh Day Adventist Church, The China Jesus Independent Church and the Local Assembly) and the Catholic church in Ruian before 1949 as I have introduced in the introduction. When the Communist guerillas entered the county seat in May 1949, activities of many local churches slowed down, but most did not immediately stop assembling. Some, such as the China Jesus Independent Church in the Gaolou District of the western mountains, even preached more actively. In the same area, the church of the China Inland Mission in Taoshan District began to rebuild a new chapel on the eve of 1949. They had completed the auxiliary buildings but were yet to start to build the main hall. Concerned with the tightened political atmosphere, the church suspended the project and church meetings. In the plains, the main church of the China Inland Mission in Xincheng District was forced to stop gathering for a year and half after the pastor of the church Pan Bofeng was executed in 1950 as a landlord and former township head.\(^{82}\)

During the land reform, all church activities came to a halt at the order of the government, and none was informed about when they could re-open their churches. Some churches resumed assemblies at the end of the land reform without formal approval from the government, but most did so only after the land reform was over. In any event, by January 1953, almost all Protestant congregations had restored routine activities. A few congregations did not resume gatherings because they could not find a meeting place or their ministers had not returned. The recovery of the Catholic church after the land reform proceeded at a much slower pace, perhaps because they were afraid of allegations

of connections with the Legion of Mary. The Communist government considered the Legion of Mary an anti-communism group and ordered a nationwide clampdown in 1951 and 1952. In January 1953, ten Catholic churches were reported as not yet having restored their activities, and five remained closed in July 1955.

The government took multiple surveys in the 1950s in order to track changes in the religious field, which provides a window, though not a perfect one, into the experience of Christian churches in Ruian between the institution of the land reform and the Great Leap Forward in 1958. These religious surveys vary in levels of detail. The most detailed surveys include a brief history of each individual church, the name of its leader, the church’s financial statement, a summary of recent events, and information about membership (e.g., total number, each member’s origin (village name), gender, age, baptized or not, family relations, class, education and occupation). Less detailed surveys only contain the location of individual churches, the leader’s name, and the total membership of the church. These surveys may not be accurate and can even be problematic for various reasons. It is unknown if officials edited these surveys and made any adjustments, especially of the membership numbers before putting them together into a final form to present to their superiors. The definition of “church member” (xintu or jiaotu) also raised ambiguities. In spite of these reservations, these surveys, when supplemented with the historical records kept by local churches and information provided

---

83 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-5-62: 14-15. A consequence of the crackdown on the Legion of Mary was that the narrative “the Catholic church is just the Legion of Mary, therefore counter-revolutionary” became popular among cadres and non-Christians, which then made the properties of the Catholic church more frequently the target of appropriation. This partially explains why the Catholic church moved much slower than the Protestant church to reorganize activities after the land reform.
by witnesses in interviews, can provide a basic sense of the trajectories of different Christian denominations.

Three comprehensive surveys of local Christian groups were taken between 1951 and 1957, and a further survey of the China Jesus Independent Church was taken on the eve of the Great Leap Forward. The first survey took place in July 1951, concurrently with the implementation of the land reform in the county. To put it in national context, on December 28, 1950, the central government issued an instruction on the regulation of religious organizations that received subsidies from the U.S. and/or other Western countries, requesting those organizations to register with the local government. The National Committee of Religious Issues was formed one month later to institutionalize the control of religion. The second survey was completed in January 1953. By then, most churches had restored activities, with or without official permission. In other words, the January 1953 survey was intended to assess the actual situation of local churches.\(^8^4\) The surveys taken in 1955 and 1956 might have been related to the campaign of “clear up counter-revolutionaries” (sufan), which took place between 1955 and early 1957. The Catholic church and the Local Assembly were major targets of the strike, as elsewhere in the nation.\(^8^5\) Both Catholic and Protestant leaders, including Father Huang Haoran of the headquarters of the Catholic church in Ruian, and Rev. Du Zhulai of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Zhuyuan, Huling were arrested for openly resisting the Three-self

---

\(^8^4\) A column in the registration form that did not appear in the previous survey is “whether gatherings have recovered or not.”

movement. Thirty eight churches and gathering places were shut down. In early 1958, two churches, one a local assembly and the other a branch of the Methodist Church, submitted their information in early 1958, likely because they for some reason had not provided it in previous years. The government also asked China Jesus Independent Church to provide membership numbers for their divisions.

I classify church-membership changes into four categories: decrease, stagnation, fluctuation but overall increase, and steady increase. The category “stagnation” designates Christian groups whose membership fluctuated less than twenty percent. The twenty-percent mark reflects the fact that every group falling within the “stagnation” category generally witnessed a membership fluctuation of far less than twenty percent (generally tending to fluctuate only slightly above or below zero percent, with a maximum fluctuation of around sixteen percent). Christian groups whose membership decreased more than twenty percent fall into the category “decrease.” The categories “steady increase” and “fluctuation but overall increase” indicate Christian groups whose membership increased more than twenty percent. Twenty-six churches among 119 churches surveyed do not fit into any of the four categories. Eleven of them only appear in the surveys in 1951 and 1953, including three Catholic churches and four China Inland

---


87 “Huyuqiao difang jiaohui hukou ce” (Household register of local assembly at Huyuqiao), 1958, Ruian Municipal Archives 82-8-6: 1–11. Zhonghua Jidujiao Xundao gonghui Wenzhou jiaoqu Ruian lianqu ge zhihui fuzeren ji xintu mingce (List of division leaders and followers in the Ruian affiliated district of the Wenzhou ecclesiastical district of the Chinese Christian Methodist Church), 1958, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-10-75: 29–40.

Mission churches. These are relatively small groups with an average membership of thirty, so it is possible they merged with other churches or were not registered. The remaining fifteen groups are all Protestant congregations that only appear in the surveys after 1953. Fourteen of these are from the districts of Tangxia and Huling where Christianity, based on other data, had the strongest growth. Groups that do fall within the four categories consist of 92 churches of a total of 119 churches surveyed. 23 churches comprise the categories “decrease” and “stagnation” with 15 in the former and 8 in the latter. The categories “steady increase” and “fluctuation but overall increase” contain 69 churches with 58 in the former and 11 in the latter. The sharp contrast between the two groups of categories indicates an overall growth trend, if not a remarkable growth, of the Christian population in Ruian in the early and mid-1950s.

The Catholic church had one main church and twenty parishes in 1949. Ten either stagnated or decreased while eight experienced steady increases in membership. Three did not appear on surveys after 1953. Given the harsh circumstances after 1953, these three churches probably never resumed activities until the 1980s. Official reports characterized local Catholics and their leaders as very hostile to the regime and obstructing state initiatives. Catholics in Mayu organized protests against “unified sale and purchase” (tonggou tongxiao) policies in 1954. Priests of the Catholic church in Taoshan and Mayu called on Catholic youths to resist the draft, which they compared to the “chouzhuangding” (forced conscription) by the Nationalist government.89 In September 1955, the county government suddenly made a round of arrests of Catholic leaders, coupled with intense propaganda meetings, which, perhaps not coincidentally,

---

89 “Ruian Xian zongjiao qingkuang gongzuo qingkuang baogao” (The situation of religious affairs in Ruian County), July 15, 1955, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-7-35: 2–3.
happened soon after Cardinal Kung Pin-mei, the Roman Catholic Bishop of Shanghai and three hundred other Catholics were arrested and imprisoned.\textsuperscript{90} This suggests that action by the county government had both local and national dimensions. The arrests aroused wide panic among Catholics. Some even interpreted it as the beginning of an effort to eliminate Catholicism (mie\textit{jiao}).\textsuperscript{91} Statistics, however, show a rather interesting change to the Catholic population after 1955, which is different from what we would otherwise expect. The number of Catholic church members was 2819 in 1953 and then grew to 2895 in 1955. Membership did not drop but rather increased to 3105 in 1956. We cannot speculate about the reasons for this change due to lack of information. However, it is consistent with an overall stagnation trend of the Catholic church before 1958.

The Methodist Church was the earliest among all Protestant denominations to arrive at Ruian and very likely the largest one by 1949. It had one headquarters church and four pastorals, consisting of twenty-one churches. However, it was the only Protestant denomination that did not establish new branches after 1949. Each of the other Protestant denominations created at least one or two new branches.\textsuperscript{92} The membership of nine branches either stagnated or decreased whereas six branches showed steady increase. Five branches’ membership dropped in 1956 although increased overall, suggesting that the massive arrests of Christian leaders in 1955 might have also targeted some Protestant churches.

\textsuperscript{90} Mariani, \textit{Church Militant}.

\textsuperscript{91} Ruian Municipal Archives 1-7-103: 72–74.

\textsuperscript{92} Ruian Municipal Archives 1-7-35: 2.
The China Inland Mission was the second to arrive at Ruian among all Protestant denominations. The China Inland Mission churches for some reason did not appear on the 1951 survey. The information they provided for the 1953 survey was also incomplete. Clearly the membership numbers of each church was just an estimate. A few sizable churches in Tangxia district, for instance the church in Hai’an, the first China Inland Mission church in Ruian, were intentionally left out by whoever submitted the register to the government. In other words, changes in nine churches cannot be traced. Sixteen of the seventeen branches of the China Inland Mission that are traceable show a steady increase in their membership. According to this information, the total membership of the China Inland Mission in 1956 was almost four times what it was in 1953, though accuracy of this information is questionable.

The Seventh Day Adventist Church seemed to lose ground after the land reform. Among its eleven branches, the Jiaopu church in Pingyangkeng and the Dongkeng church in the Huling District, did not restore activities. However, membership in its seven other churches in other locations almost doubled and even tripled. They established a new church in Xiwukeng of Huling District that was reported to have more than two hundred participants in 1956.

Among all Christian denominations that experienced growth, the China Jesus Independent Church and the Local Assembly, especially the latter, grew the fastest after 1949. Among the fourteen independent churches listed in the surveys, seven experienced steady increase in membership and for one, membership fluctuated, but overall there was an increase. Only seven churches appeared on the surveys after 1953, but most of them were new establishments. For instance, the Duikeng and the Huang’ao branches of the
China Jesus Independent Church in Huling are recorded in both local church history and official documents. “Christian families in Duikeng Village of this township [Chuanhe] developed from one family before 1949 to fifty-five families with a total of 234 people [in 1955]. What is even more serious is that it [Christianity] infiltrated our party’s grass-roots organizations in the countryside. Five Party members and nine Youth League members joined Christian churches.”\textsuperscript{93} The China Jesus Independent Church set up a gathering place (\textit{juhuidian}) in Huang’ao, Xianfang Township in 1938. There were only seventeen Christian families in the village in 1951. However, by March 1955, the number increased to eighty-one with 348 people, consisting of more than half the population of the village. Three of the eight Party members converted to Christianity.

The expansion of the Local Assembly was even faster. Solely in Chuanghe Township, Huling, between the second half of 1954 and July 1957, its chapels increased from three to six. Local churches’ own historical records show a similar development. Between 1951 and 1958, the Local Assembly created eleven new gathering places (\textit{juhuidian}) in Huling, Tangxia, Xianjiang, and Mayu districts.\textsuperscript{94} Statistics in religious surveys indicate that nineteen among the twenty-three churches of the Local Assembly experienced steady increases in membership. Only two churches did not have an apparent increase in membership. Between 1951 and 1956, the total membership of the Local Assembly increased by eighty-six percent. Although the development of the Local Assembly cannot be precisely measured without further information, a witness’s account

\textsuperscript{93} Ruian Municipal Archives 1-7-35: 3-4. This number two hundred and thirty-four likely included all non-Christian family members. The number that this church provided for the religious survey in 1955 is 50. In the registers submitted by individual local churches they did not include the family members of Christians among their church constituents.

\textsuperscript{94} Ruian jiaohui, \textit{Ruian jiaoshui shi}, 13.
confirms that the general atmosphere for the Local Assembly at the time was encouraging even though political control was increasingly tightening. A group of Christians from the Lower village church in Xincheng, the headquarter church of the China Inland Mission in Ruian, quit the church and created their own assembly in a cloths factory at Qianbu Village in 1940. Wu Fuqing, who is now eighty-seven, participated in the activities of the church in Qianbu when it was set up. He recalls that because the cloths factory was not large enough to accommodate more people, they sought a permanent and larger place to meet.\(^95\) They collected donations amounting to 100,000,000 RMB (about 10,000 RMB after the currency reform in 1953) and were ready to erect a new church in 1953, but were stopped by the government.\(^96\) The new church was about half-constructed in 1958 when the Great Leap Forward intervened, and they had to stop again. Shu Chengqian, a pastor of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, recorded a very similar story in his memoir. In 1957, having collected all the necessary construction materials, the Zhuyuan church was ready to build the new church that the congregation had longed for a while. When the Great Leap Forward came, the government confiscated all their materials and even took the land that they intended to use to build the church. The materials and the land were distributed to villagers to build new houses.\(^97\)

The growth of the Christian population before 1958 was very likely not unique to Ruian. At least in some areas of Pingyang County, which borders Ruian to the north,

\(^{95}\) Wu Fuqing. Interview by author. Ruian, May 7, 2013.

\(^{96}\) Xianwei pizhuan xianwei xuanchuanbu xian gonganju dui Tianzhujiao shengmu nian huodong de ji dian yijian (The county party committee issues several opinions by the propaganda department and public security department on the Catholic church's celebration of the Assumption of Mary), June 1, 1954, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-6-12: 4.

\(^{97}\) Shu Chengqian, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi (Memoirs of Fifty Years Life in Church), unpublished manuscript, 2002, chapter 15 (section 1).
local churches also experienced strong increases in the early and mid-1950s. The Christian population in the towns of Qiaodun, Lingxi, Zaoxi grew from 237 before the land reform to 352 in 1954.98 A comparison of the membership numbers of the Local Assembly in Mocheng Township in the suburb of the Pingyang county seat in 1951 and 1954 similarly shows increase. Protestants of the Local Assembly in Mocheng had only sporadic meetings immediately after 1949, but church gatherings became active after the land reform. Before 1954, church gatherings were only active in a few villages, but after 1954, there appeared regular meetings by small groups throughout the entire township. Two Local Assembly churches in Mocheng had 308 baptized members and 305 inquirers (mudaoyou) in 1951. The number rose to 363 baptized members and 414 inquirers in 1954. Among these, 111 participated in the Church’s activities after 1951, with most being inquirers.99

*The Persistence and Progress of Christian Churches: An Explanation*

Economically speaking, the 1949 transition did not affect Christian groups as much as Buddhist temples and local communal temples. Local churches, unlike Buddhist and communal temples, did not possess much land to begin with and hence had little to be stripped of during the land reform. Among the Catholic church and the five Protestant denominations, the United Methodist Church had 26.63 *mu* of land dispersed in four locations of the districts of Taoshan and Xianjiang. But the income from these fields only comprised 0.033 percent of its total income in 1948 and that percentage went to zero in

---

98 “Pingyang Xian zongjiao gongzuo yijian” (Opinions on religious affairs in Pingyang), July 19, 1954, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-6-70: 28.

1950. The China Inland Mission owned three mu of vegetable gardens in front of the headquarters church in the county seat, but these were “borrowed” by the PLA to build a training ground in 1949. In December 1950, this church received 200 jin of rice as rent for the garden area. Catholic churches bought three mu of land in the Xianjiang District in 1944. The income from land comprised 0.056 percent of this church’s total income in 1948 and 0.089 percent in 1950. Other denominations did not possess land or other materials that could be used to finance church activities.

The headquarters of some denominations received major support from foreign missionary enterprises, which they had to surrender amidst the “Three-self” movement in 1951. In 1950, foreign subsidies of the Catholic church and the Seventh Day Adventist Church still comprised more than fifty percent of their total income. The United Methodist Church even had 86.7 percent of its income coming from the United Methodist Church in Britain. When these churches had to operate without financial aid from abroad, the lives of residential clergy and staff were seriously affected because most of the income of the church was used to pay them salaries.

---

100 One member bestowed a house in the county seat to the church in 1939. The church rented it out for a few years, but for some reason it did not receive any rent after 1944. See “Jidujiao xundao gonghui Wenzhou jiaojiao Ruian lianqu dengji zongbiao” (The register of the Ruian affiliated district of the Wenzhou ecclesiastical district of the Methodist Church), July 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-3-12: 53–61.


102 “Ruian Xian Tianzhujiao dengji zongbiao” (The register of the Catholic church in Ruian), May 19, 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-3-12: 123–131.

103 “Yesujiao Zilihui Ruian fenhui dengji zongbiao” (The register of the Ruian division of the China Jesus Independent Church), July 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-3-12: 45–52; “Jidu fulin Anxirihui Ruian jiaohui dengji zongbiao” (The register of the Seventh Day Adventist Church for the Return of Jesus in Ruian), July 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-3-12: 64–73.

104 Preacher Shu Chengqian of the Seventh Day Adventist Church was informed that he could leave or stay at his own will. He and his wife chose to stay, but their salary was meager and far from enough. They had
For the vast majority of local branches, the 1949 transition hardly had an economic impact on their operation, as they were predominantly financed by members’ voluntary donations. Under the influence of independent church movement, some rural branches of the Methodist Church and the China Inland Mission were only nominally affiliated with their denominations. Ximen church at the county seat and Xintian church at Tangxia, for instance, remained in the order of the China Inland Mission, but their operation and finance were entirely separated from the latter. Both erected their chapels in 1923 without financial aid from the China Inland Mission.\textsuperscript{105} In the case of the Local Assembly and the China Independent Church, which emerged from the independent church movement before 1949, they had long cut off foreign connections and therefore had no foreign subsidies to speak of. Nor did they have any land to lose. The financial statement of Shayang church, one branch of the Local Assembly in Ruian, shows that collections included regular Sunday collection, self-supporting fee, and Thanksgiving collection. Donations would be collected at any time if there were additional needs. In 1953 the association received Sunday collection of 180,000 RMB, self-supporting fee of 1,200,000 RMB and Thanksgiving collection of 200,000 RMB. That year the church even had 40,000RMB surplus with all its expenditures.\textsuperscript{106} The financing system used by most rural churches was very similar.

\textsuperscript{105}“Ruian Ximen jiaohui 1950 nian jingji shouzhi qingkuang” (Financial statement of West Gate church in Ruian in 1950) and “Ruian Ximen jiaohui shenghuo huiyi” (The register of West Gate church in Ruian), July 14, 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-3-12: 74–81, 134–135.

\textsuperscript{106}“Pingyang Xian Shayang jiaohui shehui tuanti chengli shenqing shu” (Social organization registration form of the Shayang church of Pingyang County), August 10, 1954, Pingyang County Archives 10-60-90:58. Shayang church was located in Ruian but it for a short while had been under the
Church buildings were frequently a target of appropriation after 1949 despite the principle of “religious freedom” prescribed in the Common Program and later the 1954 constitution. In Tangxia, the Catholic church of Baotian Township was distributed to individuals as permanent residence during the land reform. Meanwhile, the Catholic church of Zhangzhai village was confiscated to house a kindergarten and a cultural center (wenhua guan). The Protestant church of Tangkou village was borrowed by the village’s clinic. In neighboring Xianyan, the Catholic church of Xiacheng village was borrowed partly as local militias’ offices and partly as classrooms for the peasant night school. But church gatherings continued as normal.107 Two cadres at Taofeng town, Taoshan District personally occupied the building of a China Inland Mission church.108 After the land reform, the infringement on the church continued, even though official documents show that the Wenzhou municipal government and county governments reiterated the directive “no occupation of churches without permission” many times.109 Nine out of a total of seventeen churches were occupied by other institutions, according to a report from the Catholic church itself in 1957. However, only in one case was it clearly stated that the entire church building was taken. It is possible that in the other cases church activities co-

administration of Pingyang ecclesiastical district of the China Jesus Independent Church because of its proximity to Pingyang.

107 “Zhixing zongjiao zhengce diaocha baogao” (Investigational report of the implementation of religious policies), April 9, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-5-62: 13.

108 “Guanyu Taoshan qu Taofeng zhen Zhonghua Jidujiao jiaotang shifou moushou ji zhen chaichu jiaotang mentai de jiufen wenti de chuli qingkuang.” (On whether to confiscate the chapel of the Chinese Christian Church in the town of Taofeng, Taoshan District and the handling of the dispute over the removal of the door station of the church), June 5, 1957, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-9-121: 38, 40.

109 “Jinhou bude shanzi zhanyong jiaotang” (Do not occupy religious properties without authorization from now on), March 17, 1956, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-8-227: 30.
existed with other institutions, similar to what happened to some village temples and monasteries.\textsuperscript{110}

A considerable portion of local churches did not yet have a permanent site for gathering by 1949. The Catholic Church in Ruian had seventeen parishes, and each had a chapel (\textit{jiaotang}), most of which were built before 1930. The situation of the Protestant congregations was different. Five Protestant denominations had 102 branches (\textit{jiaohui}), according to the official registration in 1953. The registration shows that only two out of a total of nine branches of the Seventh Day Adventist Church owned a formal church building. The rest of the branches met either at member’s houses or rented places. Eleven branches out of a total of twenty-one branches of the Local Assembly owned a formal church building. Nine of them met at member’s houses. One was located in a cloths factory that was perhaps run by Christians.\textsuperscript{111} The registration does not show how many branches of the other denominations owned formal church buildings (vs. meeting in house gatherings). Local Protestant churches’ own historical records, however, indicate that there were fifty-nine \textit{tang} (literally chapels) and thirty-seven \textit{dian} (literally gathering place) in 1949. This gives us a better sense of the status of Church activities before the massive infringement of Church properties began. Many Protestant churches in Ruian, similar to those in other counties in southern Zhejiang, were only established in the 1930s and 1940s. In most cases, before they had the need and could afford to build a chapel,

\textsuperscript{110} About 45 percent of more than three hundred Catholic and Protestant churches in Wenzhou were totally appropriated. Both church buildings and gardens were used by other institutions, according to local Christian leader Zhou Jiefu’s proposal at the first meeting of the Second Congress of Zhejiang Province in 1953. See “Wenzhou zhuanshu guanyu jiaohui huifu juhui de zhishi” (Instruction of Wenzhou Commission on the recovery of church activities), May 28, 1953, Pingyang County Archives 10-5-20:6–9.

\textsuperscript{111} “Ruian quan xian Anxirihui mingce” (The register of the Seventh Day Adventist church in Ruian), 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-5-113: 29, 32.
Christians would meet at the house of a Christian family for as long as ten to twenty years. Even if they had a chapel, meetings at members’ houses were essential to local church communities. Besides attending Sunday worships at the chapel, Christians were also requested to have weekday meetings that usually took place at members’ houses for Bible studies and prayers. Such meetings were sometimes called on specific holy days, for instance, Holy Friday (sheng wu) or Holy Wednesday (sheng san). Additionally, ad hoc meetings were convened for prayer when a church member or one their relatives became ill. All in all, house gatherings (jiating juhui) were essential to local Protestant communities before 1949. 112 House gathering as a form, which existed before 1949, continues to be utilized by local Christian communities today because of its flexibility and convenience.

In a nutshell, Christianity was less impacted by the political campaigns of the early 1950s because it was much less dependent on land possession and highly mobile in organization. Between 1949 and 1957, different congregations of Christian churches manifested a range of developments that significantly differed from the trajectories of Buddhism, village temple activities, and redemptive societies. Within Christian churches, the Catholic church stagnated whereas Protestant churches expanded in terms of converters and number of communities, perhaps due to different levels of political coercion each faced. Within Protestant churches the more indigenized congregations tended to grow faster than others. Overall, Christianity was the only major religious tradition that kept the growth trend after 1949, which growth occurred against the

background of the temporary downfall of the majority religious traditions: Buddhism and village temple activities. The relative rise in availability of Christianity as a religious resource in local society, as chapter three shows, would bring substantive changes to the local religious landscape in Ruian and the Wenzhou region during the Cultural Revolution, when Christianity vastly expanded in territory and converters.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

I have demonstrated that, in contrast to the conventional wisdom, different religious traditions did not follow a uniform decline after 1949, but instead took variegated paths in Ruian in the early and mid-1950s. The systematic destruction, closedown and encroachment of village temples and Buddhist monasteries forced local temple and Buddhist activities into a period of contraction, but beliefs in gods and demons and related ritual practices remained important in village life after 1950s. Indigenous redemptive societies remained very active for a short period after the Communist takeover. Seven Star Teaching, taking advantage of people’s discontent with the land reform, even welcomed a surge in the number of followers before it was silenced by massive crackdown. The Catholic church stagnated in membership partly due to persistent political repression. Most surprisingly, the Protestant churches continued to gain new converts and even established new branches in some villages in the early and mid-1950s.

My discoveries are congruent with recent studies bridging the 1949 divide in the study of modern Chinese history. The 1949 revolution certainly caused serious discontinuity or disruption in many dimensions of religious life in rural China. Yet across
the 1949 bridge, as my study shows, there are also important continuities, some of which are unexpected. In particular, the rise of the Protestant church in Ruian and Wenzhou, which initiated at the turn of twentieth century, extended well beyond 1949. Evidence indicates that the Cultural Revolution did not halt, and might have even reinforced, the growth trend of the Protestant church in the Wenzhou region, which of course requires another study to prove.

The increase in Christian population, especially Protestant population, in the early and mid-1950s was very likely not limited to Ruian and the Wenzhou region. An empirical study shows that between 1951 and 1958, the Christian population in Yunnan Province increased from about 100,000 around 1949 to more than 120,000 in 1958.\(^{113}\) The growth in Christian population was also observed in at least four counties of Jiangsu Province in 1957, according to a state media report from that time.\(^{114}\) In Hunan and Fujian Provinces, from 1954 to 1955, the members of the Anyang Assembly in Hunan province increased by more than half from 1563 to 2467. In 1954, all the eleven assemblies in Fujian Province saw a threefold increase in their church membership.\(^{115}\)

Beyond discontinuity and continuity, the diversified trajectories of various religious traditions in the early and mid-1950s also lead us to reflect on some broader processes in China’s long twentieth century. Prasenjit Duara has argued that one of the

---


\(^{114}\) “Jiangsu xinjiao renshu juzeng” (Number of new converts to Christianity grew rapidly in Jiangsu), Neibu cankao, the Xinhua Agency, May 17, 1957.

most important processes in rural China in the twentieth century was the collapse of the so-called cultural nexus of power when the state disarticulated political leadership from the cultural nexus and old elites were forced to leave the political arena. There is no question that the role of more established organizations such as lineage or village temple organizations diminished in the twentieth century as “competing ways of organizing action are developing or contending for dominance” in this culturally “unsettled” period.

However, tradition “has continued even as the traditional elite has not, because newly risen groups from the poor have bound culture to politics.” As I have demonstrated above, in Ruian in the Republican era there were other traditional organizations such as indigenous redemptive societies that reinvented themselves and greatly expanded their influence in local society. New organizations such as Christian churches also quickly took roots and rapidly spread in the region. The Communist guerrilla, which was home grown, should also be construed as a newly rising group that competed for power and influence much like the other groups.

Although the Communist party in the competition established itself and its ideology as the ruler of the local order in 1949, the other organizations were never

---

116 Duara, *Culture, Power and the State*. In particular, see chapters four and five on the decline of lineage and religion. According to Duara, the cultural nexus of power refers to networks of territorial organizations (including lineage, the market system, temple organizations, water control, etc.) and interpersonal relationship (e.g., “between affines, patrons and clients, or religious teachers and disciples”) that are bonded by certain cultural symbols and norms. “In its organizational aspect, the cultural nexus serves as the framework that structures access to power and resources in local society. It also serves as the arena in which politics is contested and leadership developed in this society.”


subdued and some, such Protestant churches, even grow after the foundation of the People’s Republic. Village temple organizations in Ruian and Wenzhou survived the Maoist era and many were revived in the contemporary era.119 Lineage organization in the region followed a similar path.120 Christian churches have firmly established themselves as a crucial part of the organizational life in today’s Wenzhou region, which has even earned the name of “China’s Jerusalem.”121

Based on these findings in Ruian and the Wenzhou region—the decline and revival of village temple and lineage organizations, the rise and subsequent silence of redemptive societies, and the continuous rise of Christian churches—the evolution of organizational life in the Wenzhou region in the twentieth century looks more like a long process of renewal of the rural order (vis-à-vis the modern state), rather than a sudden breakdown thereof, in contrast to what Duara has argued with respect to villages in North China. This renewal process, including the endeavors made by religious organizations to survive in the 1950s that I have recounted in this chapter, demonstrates the capacity and agency of local communities to stabilize traditional power networks in the face of state penetration by utilizing various old and new cultural tools. These hypotheses of course will have to be proved by further studies.

119 According to a 2012 official survey, solely in Ruian, there were 595 registered religious sites and more than 1,200 unregistered temples.

120 Lineage continued to wield considerable power in local politics in many places. In southern Zhejiang, the compilation of genealogy never stopped. Even during the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution, some lineages in Ruian continued to compile new genealogies. In Pingyang, the county bordering Ruian on the north, the force of lineage organizations was even stronger to some extent. Unlike other places that experienced armed fighting during the Cultural Revolution, in this county, the fighting was of another form—fighting between lineages with long feuds that were mixed with cliques holding distinct political positions (Liu Xiaojing, “Xiandai zongzu xiedou wenti yanjiu” (The issue of lineage fight in modern period), Nongcun jingji yu shehui, 5(1993): 53–54).

121 Nanlai Cao, Constructing China’s Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
Chapter Two

Oscillating Between Campaigns: Practicing Religion under Maoism, 1949-1978

Many communities in Ruian after 1949, as chapter one shows, quickly learned to acclimate themselves to Communist rule and were able to carry on their religious traditions in one way or another; some religious communities (e.g. Protestant churches) even continued to grow amidst heightened political coercion. Chapter one has also showed some major strategies and mobilization mechanisms that communities employed to preserve local religious traditions, be it the worship of local deities, Christian congregations, or millennialism. This chapter continues the discussion of how some religious traditions managed to survive and even thrive under Maoism. I will focus on the role that the dynamics of governance, grass-roots cadres, and religion played in religious developments under Maoism. The goal is to delineate the contour of space created within the local political environment that enabled the working of the aforementioned strategies and mechanisms in the Maoist years.

The modern Chinese state has proved to be the most critical advocate and promoter of secularization through its various political engineering plans.¹ The Communist government in particular, among all regimes in the twentieth century, brought religious repression to its peak in Chinese history. Previous studies tend to discuss state and religion dynamics under Maoism solely within the framework of religious policies and have generally implied a pattern of state dominance and local

resistance. On the other hand, recent studies on contemporary China have characterized the approach of the government to religion as “blind-eye” governance, suggesting a clear departure from hostile attitudes by the government under Maoism. Karrie Koesel further argues that religious actors and local state agents tend to “develop mutually reinforcing and supportive relations.”

I argue in this chapter that even during the Mao years the religion issue was not always a zero-sum game with state repression on one side and local resistance on the other. Despite its repressive nature, regulation of religion at the local level under Maoism still created certain space, intentionally or unintentionally, for religious practices. This suggests that the CCP governance on religion manifested some level of continuity between the Mao years and the post-Mao era. In other words, the “blind-eye” governance on religion was not a contemporary phenomenon as previous studies suggest and can be traced back to the Mao years.

This chapter first introduces the Communist government’s approach to religion, highlighting two important facets of it. One is the juxtaposition of suppression and limited tolerance. The other is the instability and indeterminacy of the categories and

---


discourses used in the government’s religious policies. I then examine how political campaigns had strongly impacted oscillations in religious policies and their local implementation, and the resurgence of religious activities in between peaks of major campaigns. To further explain why religious policy and its implementation fluctuated with political campaigns, the last part shows the predicament of local governance on religion in terms of cadres’ lack of collaboration from institutional and cultural perspectives. Thus I demonstrate how space for religious activities, especially in between campaigns, was created.

The CCP’s Two-Pronged Approach to Religion

The Maoist rule without question battered religions the hardest in Chinese history. It is important, however, to distinguish the goals of religious policies from their results. The Communist government was hostile to religion but not explicitly antireligious at least before the mid-1960s. Even during the Cultural Revolution, the government did not formally declare an antireligious policy in spite of its de facto antireligious stance. The CCP’s religious policy differentiated among religious traditions by different approaches and goals. Overall, in its attitudes towards religions, the Communist government after 1949 managed to maintain a balance between suppression and limited tolerance, which was true for both the five sanctioned religions and communal religious traditions. Among major religious traditions, the outright suppression of redemptive societies was the only exception because of the societies’ alleged political motives and ties to the KMT.5

The regulation of state-sanctioned religions in the People’s Republic departed from its Nationalist predecessor in a crucial way (though the categorization of five legal religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Christianity and Islam was largely an inheritance of the KMT’s classification system), for its religious policy was formulated as part of its broader united front policies (tongzhan zhengce). The united front policies emphasized the importance of distinguishing “major contradictions” (zhuyao maodun) from “minor contradictions” (ciyao maodun) and “internal contradictions within people” (renmin neibu maodun) from “contradictions between us and enemies” (diwo maodun) (Gong 2011). The issue of five sanctioned religions was primarily regarded as “internal contradictions within the people,” but sometimes also considered as “contradictions between us and enemies” (diwo maodun), for religion had been exploited by feudal landlords (in case of Buddhism) and imperialists (in cases of Protestantism and Catholicism) to oppress the people and threaten the socialist regime. Hence the government required the suppression of counterrevolutionary activities under the cloak of religion (e.g., cutting off the connections of religious organizations with imperialists) but also simultaneously the protection of limited “religious freedom” as stipulated in the Common Programme (gongtong gangling) and later the 1954 Constitution of the People’s Republic.6 All relevant measures were formulated in accordance with such


6 “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu Hanminzhu zhong Fojiao wenti de zhishi” (The party central committee’s instruction on the issue of Buddhism among Han people) and “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu chuli Tianzhujiao wenti de zhishi” (The party central committee’s instruction on the issue of Catholic church). See Zhonggong zhongyang tongyi zhanxian gongzu zu, ed., Tongzhan zhengce wenjian huibian (disijuan) (Collections of the united front policies, volume 4) (Zhonggong zhongyang tongyi zhanxian gongzu zu, 1958), 140-149.
bifurcated discourses, which ran through the entire Maoist period from 1949 to 1978. Even though religious policy eventually moved towards the suppression end of the spectrum over the Maoist years, such bifurcation in discourses was never formally abolished.

On the front of religious traditions falling outside the category of legal religions, the Communist Party, unlike the Nationalist Party, did not specifically launch campaigns targeting communal religious activities after taking power in 1949. Land possession and dominance of traditional elites in communal religious activities were associated with feudalism and the old society. Lands held by village temples were therefore redistributed along with the purge of traditional elites during the land reform. However, practices and beliefs related to communal religion were believed to be primarily a thought issue (sixiang wenti). Communal religious activities were generally prohibited as “superstition”, especially when they collided with state agenda priorities, as when they were accused of interfering with agricultural production or being infiltrated with class enemies. But communal religious traditions as a whole were never elevated to the height of “counterrevolutionary activities” as redemptive societies were.\(^7\) Superstition was to be opposed in principle but an issue that could only be solved gradually, as exemplified in Mao’s famous judgment that “peasants themselves erected *pusa* (literally Bodhisattva, but here it actually broadly references all sorts of deities including Bodhisattva) and they would use their own hands to cast aside *pusa* at some point.”\(^8\) A curious fact is that the

\(^7\) The Communist government waged a national campaign to eradicate redemptive societies in the early 1950s because they were perceived politically “reactionary” and subversive with its connections to the KMT government. See Hung, “The Anti-Unity Sect Campaign.”

\(^8\) Mao Zedong, “Hunan nongmin yundong de kaocha baogao” (Report on the peasant movement in Hunan), in *Mao Zedong xuanji di yi juan* (Anthology of Mao Zedong, volume one) (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe,
Party had attempted to define “superstition” since the 1930s. However, a formal demarcation between “religion” and “superstition” was never formally established even during the Maoist years.⁹

One facet of the Party’s approach to communal religion was in fact to appropriate some local religious traditions. In its early stage, the Party realized the great practical importance of “local flavor” in carrying out propaganda. Before taking over the whole nation, the Communist Party appropriated and reconstructed local folk customs such as yangge (rice-sprout songs) and nianhua (new year painting) in its liberation zones to help implement Communist ideology, mobilize the masses, and transform and control cultural life.¹⁰ From 1938 to 1942, in a series of speeches, including the famous “Speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” Mao Zedong advocated the adoption of “national forms” for ideological propaganda, which would include the “use of old forms.”¹¹ In the spirit of “using old forms,” at least in Zhejiang, annual temple fairs were transformed into commodity exchange meetings. We do not know how much traditional practices were

---

⁹ In the “Decisions on Certain Issues in Land Struggle,” issued by the Chinese Soviet Republic in 1933, a passage suggests that priests, pastors, Daoist masters, Buddhist monks, temple workers, fengshui observers, fortune-tellers and diviners should all be considered as “religious professionals engaged in religious superstition” (zongjiao mixin). When the same document was revised and re-issued in 1948, this passage remained almost the same. When the document was issued for the third time in 1950 after the founding of the People’s Republic, the phrase “religious professionals” was changed into “religious professionals or superstition professionals.” The addition of “superstition professionals” paved the way for the possibility to differentiate “religion” from “superstition.”


¹¹ Holm, Art and Ideology, 49-74.
allowed, but temple fairs were carried on in this form until terminated by provincial authorities on the eve of the Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{12}

The juxtaposition of suppression and limited tolerance means that the religious policy of the Communist government left some leeway, albeit limited. This was true not only for legally acknowledged religious traditions, but also for some communal religious practices that were not acknowledged as religion but interpreted as something the authorities could to some extent tolerate. The juxtaposition of suppression and limited tolerance also suggests that local religious practitioners could potentially coopt the two-pronged religious policy toward their own ends. In other words, they could create more space for their communities by using the protection that the government claimed to give to go against the repressive measures. The discourse of “religious freedom” stipulated in the Constitution, for instance, was frequently cited by religious practitioners in the defense of their operations and properties in the 1950s. More to the point, as I will further show below, this seemingly sensible two-pronged policy met its own predicaments when coupled with periodical campaigns in local implementation.

\textbf{Campaigns and the Governing of Religion}

Different regimes in China over the twentieth century manifested similar interests in defining, designating space for, and curbing religion. One condition that distinguishes religious policies under Maoism from the pre-1949 and the post-1978 periods, however,

was the great extent to which religious policies were subservient to the government’s central agendas. In other words, the policy towards religion from formulation to execution had almost always been conditioned on the Communist government’s priority programs. As these priority programs were implemented through numerous campaigns that characterized governance under Maoism, religious policies and implementation thereof had frequently oscillated, following the ebbs and flows of campaigns.

The focus of the central government on religious work oscillated between struggle (douzheng) and unity (tuanjie) amidst campaigns of the period from 1949 to 1957. To take Protestant Christianity as an example, in the three campaigns—the ‘Resist America, Aid Korea’ campaign (Kang mei yuan chao), land reform, and the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries—which were in full swing in the early 1950s, Protestant Christianity was heavily affected by the high tide of anti-imperialism. Church leaders were under a lot of pressure to denounce imperialism and cut off ties with foreign churches. In 1953, however, in accordance with the general line for the transitional phase (guodu shiqi zongluxian) declared that year, the government changed the focus of religious reform to patriotism and introduced the slogan ‘love of country, love of church,’ which emphasized unity. In 1955-56, against the backdrop of the Campaigns to Wipe Out Hidden Counterrevolutionaries (Suqing ancang de fangeming fenzi), the tone on Christianity was set to focus on struggle again. The government consequently smashed the so-called “counterrevolutionary” cliques of Wang Mingdao, Kung Pin-Mei and Watchman Nee, who were allegedly active opponents of the Three-self movement. For a

---

brief period during the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1957, the Party adopted a moderate religious policy before the Anti-Rightist Movement of the same year, which gave prominence to class struggle and hence required the tightening of religious policy once again.

In a similar fashion, religious governance at the local level oscillated between suppression and limited tolerance before the mid-1960s. During the land reform, all Buddhist temples and churches in Ruian and the Wenzhou region were asked to cease activities. Buddhists and Christians hardly dared to congregate due to extreme political terror at the time. Acts of resistance were harshly punished. Jiaoxuan, the first head of the Buddhist association in Yueqing, printed the land reform law for the purpose of helping monks and nuns learn the law and therefore better protect Buddhist temples and properties. He was consequently sentenced to five years in prison for undermining the land reform. Baihe Temple, where the association was located, was sealed up on government orders. The annual dragon boat race and or “touring the deities” (taifo) rituals were prohibited with some dragon boats dismantled for the construction of schools and offices.14

After the land reform, this high-handed manner in dealing with religion (and indeed all issues) went away along with the high waves of campaigns, and was replaced by a more pragmatic and less coercive approach. In dealing with what the authorities called “superstition riots” during the summer drought in 1953, which involved massive rainmaking ceremony and some attacks on village and town cadres, the county

14 “Wei xi chaming Yueqing Xian suo fasheng zongjiao wenti chuli bao shu you” (On elucidating the handling of the religious incidents in Yueqing county and reporting to the [Wenzhou regional] Commission), September 12, 1951, Yueqing Municipal Archives, 26-3-2.
government ordered to first “educate” (jiaoyu) villagers and, if persuasion was futile, then let people do the ritual. \(^{15}\) County officials even stressed that the cadres should not impose uncompromising prohibitions but should instead try to illustrate that “there is no prohibition on the belief in deities and there is also freedom not to believe in religion.”\(^ {16}\)

Similar pragmatism was observed even more clearly in the case of dragon boat rowing. \(^ {17}\) The dragon boat rowing ritual reappeared in 1953, and the county government did not issue a prohibition order. There were reports that local cadres attempting to force villagers to stop the ritual were later criticized by the county officials for damaging Party and people relations (dangqun guanxi). \(^ {18}\) In 1954, the county government had a dramatic turn in its policy towards dragon boat rowing. This ritual, instead of being condemned as superstition, was interpreted as the people’s traditional cultural recreation (wenhua yule), created for commemorating the great patriotic poet Qu Yuan. \(^ {19}\) And “[dragon boat

---

\(^ {15}\) The county government in Yongkang, Zhejiang, even allowed all the county officials except for administrative heads (i.e., county head, district head, etc.) to participate in rainmaking ceremonies in order to better “educate” people. See Lü Shanxin, “Taiping xiang qiuyu mixin shijian huigui” (Memoir of the incident of rainmaking superstition at Taiping town), in Wushi niandai de Yongkang (Yongkang wenshi zilao di shisan ji) (Yongkang shi zhengxie wenshi weiyuanhui, 2001), 360.

\(^ {16}\) “Guanyu ben xian gedi fasheng quanzhong xing zhaofo qiuyu ji saodong shijian de baogao” (Report on [the incidents of] conjuring up deities to make rain and disturbances throughout the county), August 5, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-5-3: 81.

\(^ {17}\) The Dragon Boat Rowing ritual was performed annually if possible before 1949. The Dragon Boat Rowing is not merely a boat race. It contains a set of rituals including an opening ritual procession that tours the head of the dragon boat in the neighborhood to bring the blessing of the deities. It is organized by Head Households (toujia) who are chosen by senior village leaders from those who were willing to lead and who were generally from rich and reputable families before 1949.

\(^ {18}\) The vice head of Xincheng district Xie duyin was forced to write a self-criticism later on for firing his guns into the air to dispel the masses and attacking an ritual organizer in Lower village. See “Guanyu Xincheng qu Xinzhou xiang saodong shijian geren jiantao” (Self-criticism on the riot of Xinzhou town, Xincheng district), August 31, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-5-90: 23-29.

\(^ {19}\) “Zhonggong Ruian xianwei pi zhan Duanwu jie wenyu huodong weiyuanhui guanyu Duanwujie wenyu huodong hualongzhou gongzuoyi qijian” (The Ruian county party committee approved and issued the opinions by the committee on cultural recreation during the Dragon Boat Festival: the affair of dragon boat rowing), May 30, 1955, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-7-34: 55-60.
rowing is] an opportunity for our party to lead the masses to develop cultural 
recreation.” Consequently, educating the masses and inventing new forms to replace old 
forms became the theme of the county government’s policy on dragon boat rowing.

Many churches in Ruian resumed activities without authorization soon after the 
land reform, and did not encounter interference. Some were more cautious and petitioned 
to the government for resuming activities. The civil affairs offices of the provincial 
government and Wenzhou Prefectural Commission gave orders to permit those churches 
that had petitioned to reopen and those that had proved not to have political issues to 
resume regular gatherings. Buddhist leaders also petitioned, for a different cause, 
forming a county Buddhist association. When the county government procrastinated in 
dealing with their petition, Buddhist leaders organized a Buddhist Study Group (Fojiao 
_xuexihui_) without government permission. The group did not seem to meet any 
governmental interference until 1958 when the county government shut down all temples.

In the meanwhile, the government started to respond to many complaints from 
Christian and Buddhist communities on the encroachment on religious properties that

---

20 “Guanyu zhengque chuli Duanwu jie hualongzhou wenti de jidian yijian” (Some opinions on correctly 
handling the issue of dragon boat rowing during Dragon Boat Festival), May 27, 1957, Ruian Municipal 
Archives, 1-9-232: 12.

21 “Wenzhou zhuanshu wei zhi jiaohui qingqiu huifu juhui wenti you” (Wenzhou Special Commission 
on the question of replying to the Christian church’s petitions for restoring gathering), May 11, 1952, Ruian 
Municipal Archives, 4-4-74: 27-28. It is worth noting that The Ruian county government responded 
passively to the orders from the Wenzhou Prefectural Commission by procrastinating petitions. But they 
did not take any actions to stop the majority Christian churches and Buddhist temples resuming activities 
without authorization neither. See “Guanyu jiaohui zai tugai hou de huifu juhui wenti” (On the issue 
regarding the restoration of church gatherings after the land reform), July 29, 1952, Ruian Municipal 
Archives, 4-4-74: 26.

22 “Wei qingshi ben xian Fojiao choubeihui ke fou zhuxu qi chengli you” (On asking whether allowing the 
preparatory county Buddhist association to be established or not), October 10, 1952, Ruian Municipal 
Archives, 4-4-74: 11.
was becoming routinized.\textsuperscript{23} There were growing concerns of “violation of religious policy” (\textit{weifan zongjiao zhengce}) within the provincial and prefectural governments at the time. At the request of churches, the district head of Xincheng District even went to Xiacun church, the headquarter of China Inland Mission in Ruian, in person to urge the Xintian Township government etc., which occupied the church, to move out. Some churches were (temporarily) returned to Christian communities.\textsuperscript{24} The Wenzhou prefectural government, responding to mounting cases of unauthorized occupation of churches, also issued a command in March 1956, stipulating “no occupation of churches without permission from now on.”\textsuperscript{25}

In late 1957 and 1958 religious control in southern Zhejiang tightened once again amidst the national Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward.\textsuperscript{26} In October 1957, the Ministry of United Front Work formulated a plan to urge (via debate) the religious leaders to follow the socialist path and to accept the leadership of the Communist Party. Yet when this plan was brought to execution in Wenzhou in 1958, local officials went much further than united front officials in Beijing had expected. Driven by the frenzied atmosphere of the Great Leap Forward, county governments promoted a local campaign of “great leap in religious work” (\textit{zongjiao gongzuo dayuejin}).

\textsuperscript{23} Churches continued to be occupied as schools, offices or private residences after the land reform. See “Zhixing zongjiao zhengce diaocha baogao” (Investigation report on the implementation of religious policies), April 9, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-5-62: 13-15.

\textsuperscript{24} Ruian jiaohui shi 1998: 13.

\textsuperscript{25} “Jinhou bude shanzi zhanyong jiaotang” (Do not occupy churches without authorization from now on), March 17, 1956, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-8-227: 30.

\textsuperscript{26} In the Campaigns to Wipe Out Hidden Counterrevolutionaries of 1955, the prefectural and county governments had launched a round of arrest among Catholics, but which did not have major impact on other religious communities.
The term “great leap in religious work” (zongjiao gongzuo dayuejin) was not expressly used in official documents, but the concept was clearly present. To Wenzhou prefectural officials, if agricultural and industrial production could leap forward, so could “religious work” (zongjiao gongzuo). The government convened religious leaders and activists to attend “study sessions” where many ended up denouncing their own faiths and giving up church/temple properties. Those who resisted were labeled as counterrevolutionaries, paraded through streets, attacked in struggle meetings or even jailed. In response to needs of industrial production, not only were dragon boat races prohibited but also many village temples and Buddhist monasteries were torn down, and statues of divinities were taken as raw materials for iron-smelting. The Ministry of Public Security and the National Bureau of Religious Affairs apparently favored the extremism displayed by the county government. Officials from the two departments, without the presence of officials from the United Front Work Ministry, held a special on-the-spot meeting in September in Pingyang, a neighboring county where the county government launched the same kind of great leap of religious affairs, to praise and popularize the Wenzhou experience.

United front officials, however, considered the campaigns to stamp out religion in Wenzhou during the Great Leap Forward to have deviated from normal religious policy.

27 “Wenzhou diwei guanyu quanqu zongjiao gongzuo xianchanghui qingkuang baogao he Pingyang Huqian xiang dui zongjiao douzheng shidian zongjie baogao” (Wenzhou party committee’s report of the regional on-the-spot religious affairs meeting and summary of the experiment on the struggle against religion at Huqian township, Pingyang county), November 1, 1958, Longquan Municipal Archives 1-5-172: 76-79.


29 “Wenzhou diwei guanyu quanqu zongjiao gongzuo xianchanghui qingkuang baogao he Pingyang Huqian xiang dui zongjiao douzheng shidian zongjie baogao” (Wenzhou party committee’s report of the regional on-the-spot religious affairs meeting and summary of the experiment on the struggle against religion at Huqian township, Pingyang county), November 1, 1958, Longquan Municipal Archives 1-5-172: 76-89.
In 1959, the Zhejiang Provincial United Front Work Department issued an investigation on the implementation of religious policy in Wenzhou and asked for excessive measures to be rectified.\(^{30}\)

Between 1959 and 1966, political environments continued to deteriorate for religious communities in Wenzhou. But the coercion of religious activities on the ground never reached the same height as in 1958. Concerned by the increased Christian activities, Zhejiang provincial government sent officials to investigate the religious situation in Wenzhou in 1960 and 1962, but did not launch major operations. During the Socialist Education Movement, the Zhejiang provincial government, perhaps for the first time, issued a special anti-feudal-superstition notice, worrying that “superstitious activities” would affect social stability and could be taken advantage of by counterrevolutionaries.\(^{31}\)

In Ruian, the county government reiterated the ban on dragon boat rowing in May 1963 after an unsuccessful attempt to stop the reemergence of the ritual in 1961.\(^{32}\) The county government prohibited dragon boat rowing again in spring 1966, citing it as “rampant feudal superstitious activities in the disguise of dragon boat races, which have caused multiple disputes and even fights between villages.”\(^{33}\)

---


31 “Zhejiang Sheng renmin weiyuanhui guanyu fandui fengjian mixin huodong de tongzhi” (The Zhejiang people’s committee’s notice on opposing feudal superstitious activities), December 26, 1964, Ruian Municipal Archives, 49-16-41: 19-20.


Cadres and the Predicament of Governance on Religion

The fact that religious policy and its implementation fluctuated along with high tides of political campaigns does not seem surprising given that religious policy was rarely the priority of the government. Yet the fluctuation in religious policy and its implementation generated a thorny issue at the local level—passivism and resistance from grass-roots cadres who were in charge of implementing religious policies—an issue that existed from the very beginning but that eventually turned into a systemic one by the campaign-intense governance and ultimately led to the failure of religious control under Maoism.

As the central government’s two-pronged strategy on religion basically left the burden of demarcating between what was allowed and what was not to those grass-roots cadres who directly faced religious activities, the implementation of religious policies was doomed to be difficult. All of the discourses central to this two-pronged strategy, such as normal religious life, counterrevolutionary activities under the cloak of religion or superstition, was elusive. They were never (and indeed could not be) clearly defined. Therefore, it was impossible for grass-roots officials, especially town and village cadres, whose mastery of religious policies was, as official documents characterized, “very limited,”34 to differentiate between what was allowed and what was not. In addition, when the land reform left an ostensible vacuum in religious leadership, local authorities soon realized that they were put in a position of confronting with religious activities led

34 “Ruian xianwei guanyu zongjiao gongzuo de pishi baogao” (Ruian county party committee’s instruction and report on religious affairs), July 15, 1955, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-7-35: 4.
mainly by the revolutionary masses (*geming qunzhong*) (i.e., landless peasants, poor peasants, or middle peasants), on whom the Chinese revolution and socialist construction relied. For many cadres, dealing with the revolutionary masses was harder than the traditional elites.

Thus from early on, grass-roots officials expressed their unwillingness to cope with religious work. In a December 1952 report of the first provincial meeting on religious affairs, provincial officials noted that there were pervasive “sentiments of disdain and fear of the difficulty of” (*qingshi he weinan qingxu*) religious affairs. “Most of the party committee propaganda departments did not pay attention to and examine this work. They also did not designate officials to specifically take charge of this work…this work is widely considered unimportant…but tough to do. They prefer not to do it.”

The fluctuation in the focus of religious work along with campaign waves, instead of improving local cadres’ capacity to discern “the boundary between political issues and issues of thoughts and faiths, or the boundary between illegal activities and normal religious activities,” as they were so often requested to do, only further confused local cadres and deepened their reluctance in dealing with religious affairs.

Compliance by town and village cadres was less of an issue during campaign time when the government usually pursued the suppression side of religious policies, which required much more imposition of coercive measures and much less protective efforts.

During campaign time, all issues were politicized to prioritize some state agendas. “The

---

35 “Zhejiang shengwei xuanchuanbu guanyu diyici zongjiao gongzuo huiyi de zongjie baogao” (Zhejiang provincial party propaganda department's concluding report of the first meeting on religious affairs), December 15, 1952, Wenling Municipal Archives, J1-1-56: 30.

36 Wenling Municipal Archives, J1-1-56: 30.
uncertainty and fears generated by campaigns, and the political demands then for total ideological obeisance, cut through and obviated any self-protective resistance by lower levels.”37 In each campaign, town and village cadres, especially the latter, had to work together with, and were even under the surveillance of, work teams (gongzuodui) sent by higher-level governments. Some campaigns in fact directly targeted village cadres. Such situations demanded cadres to perform state tasks more dutifully as ordered from above.

It was more difficult for local (especially town and village) cadres when the focus of religious work switched back to less aggressive tactics in intermittent periods between peaks of campaigns. “For most of the time, they either do not know what to do or feel impatient,” a report of Ruian government in 1955 summarized,38 “so they often swayed between ‘‘leftism’ and ‘rightism.’ The latter was more often the case.”39 “Leftism” meant hardly using harsh measures, for instance, closing temples and churches and direct interference in religious life to repress religious activities. “Rightism” referred to the inclination not to interfere. Village cadres, well aware of the existence of religious activities, often did not report on them until a command came from their superiors.

In addition to leftism and rightism, there was another type of typical cadre behavior in dealing with religious issues: passivism. This was exemplified in the attempts to transform dragon boat rowing to serve the government’s own agenda. 40 Following the

---


38 Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-7-35: 5.

39 Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-7-35: 5.

40 “Guanyu zai Duanwujie jinzhi hualongzhou kaizhan aiguo huodong de tongzhi” (On prohibiting dragon boat rowing and carrying out patriotic activities during Dragon Boat Festival), June 16, 1958, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-10-305: 6-7.
government’s advocacy to reinvent dragon boat rowing in 1954, town and villages cadres organized cultural and artistic activities (wenyi huodong) and sporting events but also turned a blind eye to dragon boat rowing. Traditional religious consciousness still informed dragon boat rowing to such an extent that the local government in 1961 had to prohibit practices such as eulogizing the god (changsheng) and holding incense basket (duan xiangdou). 41

Entering the 1960s, the general political environment continued to worsen for religious communities. However, this tendency was paralleled by another seemingly paradoxical development: cadres’ persistent reluctance to collaborate in the execution of religious policies. “Letting things drift” (fangrenziliu) and crude actions (cubaozuofa) were typical attitudes of town and village cadres in the early 1960s. Similar kinds of reluctance and formalism as in the 1950s were seen in some religious strongholds in Ruian. Cadres in Mayu district, for instance, either did not interfere or “simply called together Christians to force them to write confessions or to educate them together with those thieves, landlords or counterrevolutionaries and asked them to write guarantees (baozheng) [to promise not participating religious activities any more].” 42 County officials criticized town and village cadres for “being short of methods [in dealing with religion].” 43 Town and village cadres, however, complained that religious affairs were not easy to handle. The head of Xincheng commune said in a meeting that “if we did not handle [religious affairs] well, it would affect religious freedom. However, if we do not

41 Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-13-108: 28-30. The basket represents a group of divine spirits who possess the body of rowers during dragon boat race.


43 Ruian Municipal Archives, 4-13-42: 4.
interfere, religious activities will gradually expand, which would affect production and the development of socialism. We are caught in the middle. It is better for the superiors to provide [us] with some solutions (chuzhuyi).”

Lack of collaboration from cadres in their role as state agents shows the institutional dimension of the predicament of local governance on religion. Another dimension of this predicament primarily related to grass-roots cadres’ perception of and engagement in religion in their role as members of local communities. Interactions between these two dimensions continued to provide space for religion in the intervals of mass campaigns in the Cultural Revolution even though all religious activities were virtually criminalized.

Local governance by the Communist government, including the regulation of religion, had to rely on grass-roots cadres. One knotty problem that the government faced from the start and could not resolve all along was the religious beliefs of cadres themselves. Despite prescreening mechanisms on family background and faith, the government could not prevent two situations from happening. The first was continued engagement by cadres in religious practices. In order to be appointed to their posts, some cadres with Christian or Buddhist faiths would withdraw from group religious meetings and even publicly denounce their faiths. In private settings, however, some cadres might remain involved with religious activities. Background checks on someone’s devotion to local deities were simply a non-starter because almost everyone had participated in village temple activities.

44 “Guanyu muqian zongjiao huodong qingkuang” (On current religious activities), November 16, 1961, Ruian Municipal Archives, 4-13-42: 7.
A second issue was probably even more pervasive, that is, cadre’s secretive and indirect support of relatives and acquaintances’ engagement in religious activities. There were almost no formal institutional mechanisms to prevent this type of behavior. Evidence shows many instances of cadres directly leading religious activities in the 1950s. During the drought of 1953, for instance, village heads or youth league secretaries in some villages directly organized rainmaking ceremonies.\(^{45}\) In the 1960s, direct participation by cadres in religious activities might have decreased, but indirect participation did not disappear and might have even increased. Shu Chenqian, a Seventh Day Adventist Church leader, wrote in his memoir that in 1963 when he was still doing labor under supervision (*jiandu laodong*), a man living in Mayu town center was very sick, allegedly possessed by demons. His wife came to ask for the permission of village cadres, and the latter then came to Shu and asked him to help heal the possessed man.\(^{46}\) A 1963 investigation shows that in Shangma Brigade, Tangxia District, cadres did not take any actions against frequent Protestant activities. Vice Brigade secretary Chen Liangkui even claimed that without directives from above they lacked means to control. The investigation also discovered that Chen’s father mobilized village elders to rebuild a *Sanbaodian* (literally a Buddhist temple but also possibly a village temple). This initiative was said to have tacit permission from Chen.\(^{47}\)

\(^{45}\) “Guanyu benxian gedi fasheng quzhong xing zhaofo qiyu ji saodong shijian de baogao” (Report on [the incidents of] conjuring up deities to make rain and disturbances throughout the county), August 5, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-53-3: 72-81.


\(^{47}\) “Guanyu Meitou, Changqiao, Baotian, sange gongshe zongjiao huodong qingkuang de diaocha” (Investigation of religious activities in three communes: Meitou, Changqiao, and Baotian), October 12, 1961, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-13-42: 19.
It was perhaps true that people with religious backgrounds were less likely to be appointed as cadres in principle. However, it was not unusual for religious followers to be appointed as village cadres in the tense political atmosphere of the 1960s. In the restoration of Mountain God temple in Meishukeng Brigade, Yaozhuang Commune, Huling District in 1961, county officials found that Chen Zhaorao, the brigade party secretary, not only initiated the act of reconstruction but also surprisingly was himself a spirit medium. In the opening ceremony of the rebuilt Mountain God temple, Chen himself allegedly entered into trance to give a speech, in which he accused that “the Communist Party (previously) forced me to have no place to live…(referring to the destruction of the temple).” Tangkou Village in Tangxia District historically had a high portion of Protestant population. Xia Mingxin was from a family that had been Protestant for three generations. He was baptized in early 1958. But he was still selected as village party secretary and stayed in that position throughout the Cultural Revolution. He told me was that he stopped going to Protestant meetings until his retirement in the mid-1990s.48

In the early 1960s, the government became concerned about cadres’ engagement in “superstition” and lineage activities. 49 Local cadres themselves were also one of the

48 Interview by author, Tangkou village, May 12, 2013.

49 In the same period, the distinction between religion and superstition became a central issue in theoretical debates between party intellectuals with Ya Hanzhang on one side and You Xiang and Liu Junwang on the other. The exchange between the two parties lasted for three years (September 1963 - November 1965). Ya argued that religion should be separated from superstition that must be suppressed. We could only gradually make religion disappear by atheist education. You and Liu contended that religion and superstition were the same false illusions of supernatural power and the separation of these two was to beautify religion. It was not enough to solely conduct atheist education. We must fight against religion because it was not simply an thought issue (sixiang wenti) but also a socio-political issue. The hardliners seemed to win the day given the history in the following decade. However, Ya’s contribution on the separation of superstition from religion would have significant influence on the religious policy after 1978. For the Ya versus You and Liu debate, see Hiroike Shinichi, “Chuugoku no kyousan shugi niokeru ‘shuukyou’ gainen: 1960 nendai kiba ya kanshu niyou riron o chuushin ni” (The concept of “religion” in Chinese Communism: Ya Hanzhang’s discussions in the 1960s), Shuu kyou Kenkyuu, 336(2003): 27-50.
targets of the Socialist Education Movement (also known as the Four Clears Movement). Work teams found that in Ruian and the Wenzhou region many grass-roots cadres either directly organized or tacitly agreed to religious activities like temple reconstruction and genealogy compilation. Zhang Buwang, the party secretary of the embroidery [handicraft] brigade in Tangxia commune, arranged a large-scale funeral for his mother who passed away in December 28, 1965. He invited a group of vocal liturgists and Daoists to host a complete set of elaborate rituals, some of which allegedly had only been seen before 1949. Hundreds of relatives and neighbors, including “landlords, rich peasants, counterrevolutionaries and bad elements” (difufanhuai), attended the funeral and a huge banquet afterwards.\(^{50}\) In another case, Shao Yongsheng, who was the vice head of Zi’ao brigade in Tangxia, was invited to organize the compilation of a new genealogy of the Shao lineage in the entire Tangxia district by other Shaos in Shaozhai brigade of Tangxia commune.\(^ {51}\) In the new genealogy, which I was able to see in 2012, Shao’s name was listed alongside the chief editor Shao Yanliu, a former landlord, who was also the chief editor of the previous genealogy. In the case of cadres in Donglian Brigade, Hongqiao District, Yueqing, they even used money of the brigade to fund temple reconstruction and genealogy compilation.

Both Zhang and Shao cases were targets of criticism in cadre meetings supposedly held to educate other cadres and to teach “correct” attitudes and

\(^{50}\)“Pizhuan xianwei jianwei guanyu Tangxia Zhang Buwang tongzhi jinxing fengjian mixin huodong dasi huihu huangfei de diaocha baogao” (Issuing the investigation report by the county party supervision committee on comrade Zhang Buwang of Tangxia’s engagement in feudal superstitious activities and extravagant expenditures), January 14, 1966, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-18-8: 35.

\(^{51}\)“Guanyu Tangxia Shao Yongsheng tongzhi canyu lingdao ‘xiu jiapu’ wenti de taolun” (Discussion on comrade Shao Yongsheng of Tangxia district’s involvement in organizing “genealogy compilation” activities), June 15, 1963, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-15-143: [1-6].
understandings of issues like feudal superstition and lineage. Many cadres, however, explicitly expressed sympathy towards Shao and Zhang in meetings. In Shao’s case, for instance, some believed it was necessary to compile a genealogy because without it “the five relations (wulun) would get messy. We would not be able to recognize our ancestors or grand-aunt would not realize that she married her grand-nephew… whatever things have a system. A nation is constituted of the center, province, county and commune level by level. So human relations should also be sequenced generation by generation.” In Zhang’s case, someone said “Funeral rituals are our customs for thousands of years. Zhang’s mother, she was long-lived and senior in genealogical ranking (beifen). [She also had] a good fortune of having four generations [in her family] living together in a house (sishitongtang). His son is party secretary and his grandson is the head of a cooperative. They have money and there is nothing wrong with making the funeral ‘renao’ (boisterous).” The observer continued, “If funeral is class struggle, then everything in villages is class struggle. It is an old custom handed down from the old generation. If somebody’s funeral is cold and cheerless (lenglengqingqing), what taste does it have?”

Increased engagement by village cadres in religious and other traditional practices and their continued ambiguous attitudes indicated that the dilemma in suppressing superstition persisted in Ruian in the 1960s. Cadres, the new leaders of the villages, in fact turned into real obstacles in clamping down on superstition when village affairs after collectivization became more dependent on them, because they were both the target and

---

52 Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-15-143: [1].

53 “Guanyu dui Tangxia Zhang Buwang tongzhi jinxing fengjian fubi huodong de diaocha qingkuang he bianlun qingkuang” (Investigation and discussion on comrade Zhang Buwang’s engagement in restoration of feudal order) January 17, 1966, Ruian Municipal Archives, 49-18-1: 82.
the enforcers of anti-superstition policies. On the one hand, there was a considerable gap between the perception village cadres had of religious and lineage activities and the politically correct notion of religious and lineage activities superior officials were at pains to inculcate into them. On the other hand, however, there was not such a wide gap in perception between village cadres and ordinary villagers with respect to religion and lineage. Village cadres could certainly behave differently (even if they actually considered communal religious and lineage activities as harmless customs) when a political campaign came or a major decision was sent down from above. However, it is equally important that they could secretly permit, support or even directly participate in religious and lineage activities, just as the county government discovered in investigations.

**Fluctuating Expressions of Religiosity under Maoism**

As the fluctuation in religious policy intensified passivism of local cadres in dealing with religious work over time, empirical evidence shows that the level of religious activities in Ruian and the Wenzhou region displayed clear oscillation during the Mao years. It was hardly a coincidence that those waves of religious activities happened to be those intermittent periods between peaks of campaigns. After each of three major campaign periods that hit religious communities the hardest followed a surge of religious activities (though on different scales). The last surge that took place in the later stage of the Cultural Revolution, as I will show below, curiously happened to be when the task of regulating local society fell more on the shoulder of grass-roots cadres.
The years 1950-52 were the first slump period for almost all religious activities except for some local redemptive societies that even briefly expanded themselves before their organizations were crushed by the massive crackdown in 1953. Between mid-1952 and early 1957, no political campaigns had demanded a major strike again religion except that local Catholics were briefly affected by the Campaigns to Wipe Out Hidden Counterrevolutionaries. The annual ritual of dragon boat race interrupted by the civil war and land reform returned though the scale of its recovery was unclear. The severe drought in summer of 1953 led to the resurfacing all over Zhejiang of the taifo ritual to make rain. Official documents from the same year shows that petitions for the return of village temples and the compensation of dragon boats dismantled during the land reform had turned into scores of riots in Ruian. In three cases (Huaguang Palace (Tangxia District), East Hall Temple (Xincheng District), Brook-side Palace (Mayu District)), temples were (temporarily) returned to the community.

Buddhist monasteries continued to lose ground in Ruian. In 1956, Buddhists reported to the government that twenty eight temples were seized as corrals and storage to serve the needs of cooperativization. Monks and nuns were forced to participate in the cooperative agriculture. Buddhist activities, however, was not without signs of rejuvenation in some areas in Ruian. The government noticed an increase in Buddhist activities.

54 Similar accidents were reported in Longquan County as well.

55 “Xianyan Qu Xianyan cun Huaguang miao shijian diaocha” (Investigation of the Huaguang Temple incident in Xianyan village, Xianyan District), July 1953, Ruiian Municipal Archives 1-5-113: 17-23; “Xincheng Qu guanyu Dongtang miao bei pohuai de baogao” (Report on the damage to East Hall Temple), July 30, 1953, Ruiian Municipal Archives 32-4-7: 4-6 and “Wei baogao benxian Xincheng Qu liangku feng zhun chexiao bao qing bei cha you.” (On the request for permission to revoke the Xincheng granary), August 25, 1953, Ruiian Municipal Archives 32-4-3: 2; “Mayu Qu Caocun xiang mixin saodong shijian de baogao”(Report on the superstition riot in Caocun township, Mayu district), August 27, 1953, Ruiian Municipal Archives, 4-5-63: 78-81.
rites (fahui), unsanctioned Buddhist organizations and requests to repair damaged
Buddhist temples in some regions of Eastern China. 56 Ruian was no exception. Though
the county government intentionally procrastinated in responding to their petition to form
a Buddhist association, Buddhists did not wait and organized a Ruian Buddhism Study
Group (Ruian Fojiao xuexihui) in 1953, which convened two meetings each month to
lecture on and discuss Buddhist scriptures. 57 In 1957, the Lotus Society for Nuns
(nvlianshe) restored traditional Mercy Goddess Rite (Guanyin hui), a ritual meeting to
commemorate the birth of the goddess. Jianshang Hall at Daluo Mountains, a traditional
center of Buddhism in the Wenzhou region, also resumed public ordination ceremony
(without authorization) in the same year. Thirty monks were ordained. In the county seat,
the Buddhism Study Group finished repairing the Buddhist Hall in West Gate Street and
raised money for the repair of the prominent Temple of Awakening to the Truth
(Wuzhensi). 58 Official statistics indicated that the number of monks and nuns only
dropped from 480 in the early 1950s to 410 on the eve of the Great Leap Forward. 59

Christianity was in much better shape. By January 1953, almost all Protestant
congregations had restored routine activities. New gathering spots were even established
in some villages in the few years that followed. The recovery of the Catholic church after
the land reform proceeded at a much slower pace. By July 1955, about two thirds of

56 “Huadongju guanyu chuli zuijin Fojiao huodong hunluan qingkuang de zhishi” (Directives of East China
Party committee on the handling of recent chaos in Buddhist activities) May 9, 1953, Longquan Municipal

57 “Guanyu xian Fojiaotu huodong de han” (Report on Buddhist activities in our county), April 15, 1957,
Ruian Municipal Archives, 4-9-121: 34-37.

58 Ruian Municipal Archives, 4-9-121: 36.

59 “Zongjiaotu bianhua qingkuang” (Changes in the number of religious believers), June 5, 1961, Ruian
Catholic communities had resumed activities. As chapter one shows, though the membership of Catholic church and Methodist church had dwindled, the overall Christian population kept a growth trend before 1958.

The Great Leap Forward of 1958 and the two years that followed were probably the most silent period for religious activities in the Maoist years. The years 1959-1960 were the high tide of the Great Famine when everyone had to first deal with the issue of survival as death could approach at any time due to shortage of food. This to a great extent explains the silence of religious communities. Since late 1961, however, traditional practices appeared to revitalize in the local society of Wenzhou (and many other regions in the country as far as official records indicate). The resurgence of traditions in the early 1960s, according to Zhang Letian’s study in Northern Zhejiang, had bearing on how much autonomy brigades got from the commune. After the Great Famine, the central government decided to free brigades from the direct and totalistic control of the commune. With the brigade level having more autonomy, it was reported in Ruian that what officials called “illegal trading and profiteering” had apparent increase. “Private farming with individual plots” (fentian dangan) appeared in 525 production teams (lower level unit of the brigade) in the county—a tendency of decollectivization that worried local authorities.

---


61 “Guanyu dangqian jiejie douzheng yu liangtiao daolu douzheng de cailiao” (Materials on class struggle and the struggle between two paths), December 3, 1963, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-14-16: 84.
Religious and lineage activities presented similar signs of reinvigoration about which local authorities did some investigations. We should not take a literal reading of official statistics but they can help us get a sense of the scale of religious revival at that time. The investigations in Tangxia District in 1963 indicated major superstition activities in the district including renovating temples, rebuilding statues of divinities, and gatherings for purification rites (jingdu) on the first and the fifteenth day of the lunar month. Twenty-two village temples and Buddhist monasteries were renovated. The investigators also identified fourteen mediums, eighteen head households (toujia) who organized superstitious activities, four fortunetellers. They even included nine Christian preachers (Yesu jiaoshi) as superstitious activists. More than a thousand villagers were reportedly involved in superstition activities.62 On lineage activities, 32 lineages of 27 brigades, covering more than 20,000 people, compiled genealogies.63 Among a certain Dai family in the district, each family member donated one RMB for the genealogy compilation. In Hongqiao District of Yueqing County, among all 161 brigades of the district, ten renovated ancestral halls, twenty-nine restored village temples, and fourteen compiled new genealogies.64

After the closure of all churches in 1958, a small number of Christian communities in Ruian turned into underground activities. Within a few years in some

62 “Tangxia Qu dangqian jiejie douzheng qingkuang” (Current situation of class struggle in Tangxia District), December 15, 1962, Ruian Municipal Archives, 49-14-16: 64.


64 “Hongqiao Qu guanyu dang de gugan zhengfeng xuexihui qingkuang de jianbao” (Brief report on rectification study cession of backbone party members in Hongqiao District), February 18, 1963, Yueqing Municipal Archives: 1-15-27: 42.
traditional strongholds people had reestablished family gatherings. Number of participants started to grow including some new converts. In some cases Protestant villagers publicly moved into churches for group meetings. Similar phenomenon was observed in Yueqing. Some Protestant leaders in Ruian even once went to the county government to ask for the return of their churches. Official statistics indicate that more than half deacons of Protestant churches had resumed activities.

It was not just Wenzhou. The entire Zhejiang witnessed similar scenarios of religious resurgence between the years 1961 and 1964. In the middle of the Great Famine, “rumors went around in some places. ‘Backward people’ (luohou qunzhong) have started superstitious activities such as reciting scriptures, worshiping deities, building temples and divine statues…” After 1961, most “superstition professionals” (mixin zhiye fenzi) in Zhejiang had taken up the old profession again, including witches, sorcerers, and diviners, official statistics show. In Pingyang, a neighboring county of Ruian, and some other counties in southeastern Zhejiang, almost 100 percent of superstition professionals resumed their former roles.

65 “Guanyu dangqian zongjiao huodong qingkuang he chuli yijian de baogao” (Report and handling opinions on current religious activities), 1962, Yueqing Municipal Archives, 5-6-2: 39-46.

66 Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-14-16: 83.

67 “Guanyu liji caiqu cuoshi jiaqiang fanghuo he zhizhi mixin huodong de yijian” (Opinions on immediately taking measures to reinforce the work of fire prevention and to stop superstitious activities), July 6, 1960, Ruian Municipal Archives, 4-13-12: 12.

68 According to published data, the regional distribution of percentage of superstition professionals who resumed the old profession is Yuhang 60 percent and Xinchang 69 percent (northern Zhejiang); Cixi 84 percent, Ninghai 98 percent and Tiantai 92 percent (eastern Zhejiang); Yunhe 74 percent and Pingyang 98 percent (southern Zhejiang). See Chen Xubin, ed., Yunhe Xian gong’anzhi (Yunhe county public security gazetteer) (Yunhe Xian gonganju, 1994), 118; Cheng Shicen, ed., Pingyang Xian gong’anzhi (Pingyang county public security gazetteer) (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 1997), 98; Gao Shuibiao, ed., Xinchang Xian gong’anzhi (Xinchang county public security gazetteer) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1994), 139; Hu Yuntang, ed., Cixi shi gong’anzhi (Cixi municipal county public security
Not just Zhejiang, in other provinces, the authorities also spotted similar developments in the early 1960s. In Gaoyao County of Guangdong Province, people collectively donated money and devoted labor to help rebuild temples. In Changshu of Jiangsu Province, “many production teams set up altars to sing ritual scrolls (xianjuan) in the name of bringing great peace and harvest, some others sang scriptures and performed rituals in the name of sacrificing to ancestors.”

Throughout the Cultural Revolution the religious policy of the Communist government did not display fluctuation as it had in the 1950s and early 1960s. The regulation of religious activities completely leaned on the suppression side as the discourse of class struggle virtually replaced any other discourse in actual implementation. Even Buddhist and Christian activities were criminalized.

The Cultural Revolution, however, did not always have a consistent level of religious prosecution. The experience of people in Wenzhou shows two campaigns in the first few years of the Cultural Revolution that most severely devastated religious communities. The first was Clear the Four Olds in 1966, which was followed by Armed Fights, the peak of which lasted for about two years. The attacks on religious communities in the period between 1966 and 1969 were ferocious. Homes of religious

---

69 “Nongcun mixin huodong de fazhan yingxiang shengchan he shehui zhian” (The development of superstition activities in rural areas affected production and public security), Neibu cankao, December 25, 1962, 6-7.

70 “Youxie gongshe chuxian mixin huodong” (Superstition activities appeared in some communes), Neibu cankao, January 24, 1962, 13-14.
practitioners were ransacked; people were paraded through the streets, humiliated and tortured in mass meetings. In the remaining period of the Cultural Revolution, the center of political campaigns was in urban areas. This period was relatively quiet especially for religious communities in rural areas in spite of periodical “Red Typhoons”—local campaigns targeting class enemies and social issues.

The most crucial consequence of political campaigns in the early stage of the Cultural Revolution was that the attitudes of cadres at the grassroots level became extraordinarily important to the control of religion when regular government functions were incapacitated. The whole county fell into collective “armed fights” (wudou) between two major factions after January 1967. All government institutions—the county government, the county party committee, the public security bureau, and others—were completely paralyzed. The public security bureau was not reestablished until April 1973.

When control of religious activities relied more on the grass-roots cadres, the cadres behaved much like how they did in the 1950s and early 1960s in spite of the tightening political environment for religion. There were not surprisingly numerous accounts of town and village cadres dispersing gatherings of religious practitioners, reporting them to the county government, and making arrests. But there were also many instances where cadres cast a closed eye on or directly participated in religious activities.

---

71 In October of 1966 when Red Guards in Ruian went to the streets to “clean up Four Olds” (posijiu), solely in Mayu, in a month Red Guards confiscated 7,484.5 taels of tin and 57,698 incense holders. (Tin was commonly used to make religious artifacts in traditional Chinese society) They destroyed 180 statues of divinities and burned 1,060 volumes of genealogy. Almost five hundred landlords, rich peasants, capitalists, and rightists were paraded through the streets; 438 were persecuted in struggle meetings.

72 Zhang, Ruian shi longzhou huodong jianshi, 78-91.
The difference between the two attitudes was exemplified in the handling of the rainmaking ceremony in Xincheng during the summer drought of 1967, which happened to be in the climax of armed fights in Ruian. The drought was the most severe one since 1953. Senior villagers from surrounding villages poured into the East Palace Hall, Lower village, Xincheng to pray for rain. Two factions in conflict, each with backing from different cadre groups, could not agree on how to deal with the ceremony. One faction agreed that the ceremony could be continued whereas the other faction opposed, which then caused violent conflicts. Two people were killed.

There were more cases of cadre’s involvement in religion in the early 1970s, especially after the Lin Biao incident in September 1971 and the visit of Nixon to China in February 1972. A report of the Zhejiang party committee in 1973 shows that nineteen

---

73 There was almost no rain for eighty-three days starting from mid-July. Even Tang River, the longest river in the Wenrui plains, dried up.

74 Interview with Zhang Shisong at Lower village on July 26, 2012. Tang Yijun, ed., Xincheng zhenzhi (Xincheng town gazetteer) (Huangshan shushe, 1998), 280. In another case, representatives of Protestant churches in Wenzhou and Fuding of northern Fujian gathered in Nanchen village, Xicheng, in spring 1971 to discuss the merge of all orders into one in order to act jointly, which turned out a critical historical moment for the development of the Christian church in Wenzhou. It is said that more than six hundred people joined to the meeting. There was another meeting of even bigger size that took place in the same place in winter of the same year. Although further information is needed to confirm, village cadres very likely played a role in sheltering these gatherings given the scale of these meetings. See Miao Zhitong, Wenzhou qu jiaohui shi (Church history in Wenzhou), unpublished internal document, 2005-2006(?), 138-139.

75 According to a provincial report, a few months after Nixon’s visit, in August 1972, Cao Xiangde of Huangyan County, Taizhou, who was a former student in a Catholic seminary, wrote letters to some overseas institutions to accuse the government of religious persecution. Zhuo Peiliang, another former student of a Catholic seminary, assembled a group of people to draft a letter to Christians in the nation and plotted to send a delegation to Rome to seek help from the Pope. In September, Rev. Liao Zhongjie, a native of Wenzhou who served in the Methodist church in Hong Kong at that time, allegedly got in contact with his sister in Wenzhou, asking her to collect information and reconnect with old acquaintances. These reports are likely ideologically laden given political conditions at that time. However we should not rule out the possibility that there were indeed attempts to contact the outside world after the Nixon’s visit. “Guanyu daji liyong zongjiao jinxing pohuai huodong de fangeming fenzi de qingshi baogao” (Request for striking against counterrevolutionaries exploiting religion to conduct destructive activities), February 2, 1973, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-21-60: 14-20.
village party secretaries and heads of the youth league in the brigades of nine counties where Christianity historically had a strong presence converted to Christianity. The authorities accused Christian churches of attempting to usurp the leadership of the government’s grassroots organizations by infiltrating church organizations in grassroots party organizations. For instance, the party secretary of Huli Brigade, Pingyang, a famous Christian village, which had been set up as a model for the elimination of Protestantism in 1958, turned his home into a gathering point for church activities. In other cases religious activities got some kind of permission through indirect connections. Zhushan village in Hulin district had only twenty some Christians in the early 1970s, and Christians once could not find a stable place for gatherings due to constant harassment of local cadres. But the village eventually became a new center of church activities in the district. Part of the reason, it is said, was that the wife of a town cadre who had been possessed for years converted to Christianity in 1974, so she became an activist and once even turned her home into a family gathering point.

It was in such an institutional environment with heightened political pressures on one hand and tolerance and protection of some cadres on the other that religious activities found space to grow and even thrive in Ruian and the Wenzhou region in the later stage of the Cultural Revolution. When high tides of campaigns passed, local traditions soon

---

76 Chen Cunfu, “Zhejiang diqu Tianzhujiiao he Xinjiao diaocha yanjiu,” Ding/Tripod, 131(2004): 13-20; “Wenzhou diwei guanyu quanqu zongjiao gongzuo xianchanghui qingkuang baogao he Pingyang Huqian xiang dui zongjiao douzheng shidian zongjie baogao” (Wenzhou party committee’s report of the regional on-the-spot religious affairs meeting and summary of the experiment on the struggle against religion at Huqian township, Pingyang county), November 1, 1958, Longquan Municipal Archives, 1-5-172: 76-89.

77 Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-21-60: 15.

78 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 16.
remerged along with reactivated private economy in Wenzhou. As early as spring of 1968, a witness observed massive performance of the Dragon Lantern ritual, the tour of paper dragon, as well as traditional dramas in some mountainous areas of Yongjia, which is separated from the Wenzhou municipality only by the Ou river. In Ruian, since the early 1970s, there were also signs of restoration of temple and lineage activities in some villages. A historical account of one hundred and seventy village temples in Ruian indicates that eleven village temples had renovation or reconstruction in the period 1970 and 1978. My interviews of Buddhist leaders also show developments in certain areas. Buddhist and communal religious activities found niches in Daluo Mountains in the coastal Wen-Rui plains, traditionally a center of Buddhism in Wenzhou, and in inland Shengjing Mountain and Baiyan Mountain, which is allegedly the birthplace of Lord Yang, the most famous local deity in Wenzhou. Among all major religious traditions, Protestant churches made the most surprising progress during the Cultural Revolution. The details will be discussed in the next chapter. In short, not only church membership multiplied but also church gatherings were brought to new territories across Ruian and the entire Wenzhou region.

---

79 There were two reports on the attempts to restore “feudal superstition” and “feudal lineage” in Huling district of the mountainous area in early 1970s. See “Guanyu dui Huling qu Chen Shicong Chen Wenzhu fengjian fubi an de chulian yijian baoqiao” (Opinions on the handling of the case of feudal restoration of Chen Shicong and Chen Wenzhu in Huling district), March 30, 1973, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-21-9: 30-33 and “Guanyu Huling qu Zheng Qingzan jinxing fengjian fubi de chulian jueding” (Decision on the handling of the case of feudal restoration of Zheng Qingzan in Huling district), July 8, 1977, Ruian Municipal Archives, 82-27-1: 260-261. A small portion of temples has been rebuilt in the early 1970s. See Zhou Konghua and Ruan Zhensheng, eds., Wenzhou Daojiao tonglan (A General Survey of Daoism in Wenzhou) (Hong Kong: Tianma Books, 1999).

80 Ying Weixian, ed., Ruian Shi Daojiao zhi (History of Daoism in Ruian) (Ruian Daojiao xiehui, 2011).

81 Interview with Pan Yiheng, Ruian, May 15, 2013 and interview with Liaozheng, the head of Buddhist association in Ruian at Longshan Temple on August 17, 2012. Pan, a former president of Ruian Buddhist Association, witnessed the entire post-1949 history of Buddhism in Ruian and was among those who first started to organize congregations during the Cultural Revolution.
Conclusion

The Communist government after 1949, far from maintaining a consistent antireligious policy, pursued a two-pronged strategy that combined suppression and limited tolerance. On the other hand the formulation and implementation of religious policy were at the outset strongly subjected to needs of political campaigns. The oscillation in the focus of religious work in the wake of political campaigns seemed to be sensible moves but created further predicaments of local religious governance that made it impossible to keep the balance between suppression and limited tolerance. In the long run, it nullified the Communist government’s effort to subdue religion.

The predicament of local governance on religion lay on two interrelated aspects. First, the public expression of religiosities as I have demonstrated for Wenzhou often exceeded what the authorities would allow in interval periods between campaigns. Religious activities resurged in the mid-1950s, early 1960s and early 1970s when local residents sensed the relaxation of political control. Second, passivism of grass-roots cadres in executing directives on religion from superior governments also created potential space for the frequent resurgence of religious activities. Local cadres had always been a weak link in the government’s plan to regulate religion from both institutional and cultural perspectives. Bewildered by the sway in religious policies, many village and town cadres chose to interfere less or simply not interfere, while others imposed harsh measures to crack down on religious practices. Both types of behaviors were to avoid the painful task of differentiating between what was sanctioned and what was not. As the Communist government was never able to get rid of cadres’ entrenched perception of local traditions, local cadres that the government had to rely on as state
agents increasingly became the obstacle of state regulation on religion. In particular during the later stage of the Cultural Revolution when the government’s control of local society was seriously weakened by chaos that political campaigns generated, religious activities in many areas of Ruian and the Wenzhou region were able to find shelter under the protection or due to inactivity of village and town cadres.

The case of Wenzhou indicates that space for religious activities always existed on the margins of political campaigns in spite of hostility to and repression of religion that political environments under Maoism posed. Underpinning such a space was a type of governance that is similar to “blind-eye” governance that we see today in the regulation of religious (and other nongovernment) organizations—a conundrum that local governance since 1949 itself created but could not overcome. Unlike blind-eye governance today, blind-eye governance under Maoism lacked economic incentives. Yet they share similar institutional and cultural elements. From this perspective, blind-eye governance today is the continuation of blind-eye governance under Maoism.
Chapter Three

Diversification and Unification—The Protestant Church at the Zenith of Maoism, 1958-1978

The years 1958-1978 in China usually conjure up images of high Maoism, as state penetration of village life, collectivism, and ideology-induced violence reached their climax. In particular, suffering, misery, and struggles have always monopolized popular narratives of religious life under high Maoism. There are various reasons for the predominance of such narratives, an important one being the paucity of historical records. The Cultural Revolution is virtually a black hole to scholars of Chinese religion. Yet studies in recent years have showed growing scholarly interest in exploring the transformation, rather than mere repression and disruption, of religions during this period. This trend is partly driven by efforts to understand the contemporary revival of religion and to reevaluate religious history in twentieth century China.

In spite of the scarcity of materials and the difficulty of access to state archives, a few scholars have taken the challenging task of unveiling local religious life during the period of high Maoism. Their studies amply demonstrate the immense complexity of

---

1 Recent studies of Christianity in China by Daniel Bays and, for instance, only mentioned the period of Cultural Revolution in passing. See Daniel H. Bays, A New History of Christianity in China (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) and Xi Lian, Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). Similarly, the comprehensive survey of the entire religious field in modern China by Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer basically leaves out the period of Cultural Revolution. Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, The Religious Question in Modern China (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).


religious life under high Maoism. The extent to which people were able to preserve and carry on their religious practices differed depending on various political, historical, and geographical circumstances. In some villages of North China, the Maoist state did successfully eliminate public religious practices (e.g. practices of Catholics and local liturgists).\(^4\) In Guangdong and Fujian of South China, Protestantism fared better, employing a wide range of strategies for survival and empowerment.\(^5\) Most interestingly, some scholars argue that the Cultural Revolution even witnessed the rise of Pentecostal Christianity, featuring miracle, healing and exorcism, which suggests that the revival of Christianity might have started in the early 1970s, rather than the reform period.\(^6\)

This chapter picks up the story where chapter one left off and follows the evolution of religious life in Ruian and the Wenzhou region in the years 1958-1978. It demonstrates that Protestant communities not only survived the political storms of high Maoism but even vastly expanded their territories and followers during the Cultural Revolution, unlike any other religious traditions.

How do we make sense of the growth of Protestant communities in Ruian and the Wenzhou region under high Maoism? Current studies of religion in the 1960s and 1970s have been focusing on beliefs and practices. Kao Chen-yang specifically suggests the connection between the popularity and transformation of Pentecostal practices and the


\(^{6}\) Kao, “The Emergence of Pentecostal-style Protestantism.”
rise of Protestantism.\textsuperscript{7} My investigation in Wenzhou, however, indicates there were neither a rise in nor a significant transformation of evangelization techniques in the region during the Cultural Revolution. Ritual healing and exorcism have had a strong presence in Ruian from as early as the 1930s. Pastors Chen Shangsheng, stationed in the Methodist Church of Tangxia town in the mid-1930s, observed that “the Church in Ruian has long been known for opening the door of evangelization through curing illness and expelling demons (\textit{yi bing gan gui})…Nine out of ten adherents in this county entered the Church (\textit{shi you ba jiu}) because of either illness or demons.”\textsuperscript{8} Ritual healing and exorcism without undergoing remarkable changes continued to feature in Protestant evangelization in Ruian and other regions of Wenzhou throughout the Maoist era.\textsuperscript{9}

What then explains better the rise of Protestantism under high Maoism? I argue in this chapter that the key to understanding the critical transformation of Protestantism in rural China is organizations and institutions. Most studies of religion under high Maoism present religious organizations as having been largely, if not entirely, destroyed during

\textsuperscript{7} Kao, “The Emergence of Pentecostal-style Protestantism.”

\textsuperscript{8} Chen Shangsheng, “Xiantan Xiang xiangzhang quanjia guizhu” (The Whole Family of Xiantan Township Head Converted). \textit{Xiaduo yuekan} 1, no.6 (1937): 36. See also Lin Hongbin, “Wenzhou Aojiang Ruian budao zhi jieguo” (The Fruits of Sermons in Aojiang and Ruian of Wenzhou), \textit{Tongwenbao: Yesujiao Jiating Xinwen}, 1550(1933): 7.

\textsuperscript{9} Ruian Municipal Archives 4-13-42: 9-19; Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 173; Ruian Municipal Archives 49-17-12:116; Ruian Municipal Archives 4-21-27: 96-97, 117. A typical Protestant exorcism was hosted by a preacher who convened a group of Protestants. They would pray in front of the ill person, many of whom were believed to be possessed by Satan or polluted after having contact with idols, i.e., any objects related to the worship local deities. Sometimes, they would grab the shoulders or hands of the ill person in order for the power of God to work directly on their bodies. Such prayers would last at least hours. Sometimes people would pray day and night nonstop until they believed that demons had been driven away. Shu Chengqian, the Adventist leader in Mayu, often hosted collective prayers in patients’ houses to expel demons. See Shu, \textit{Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi}, chapter 5 (section 2) and chapter 6 (section 2 and 7).
the political storms. Based on this premise of the severe damage and disintegration of Protestant organizations, some go on to say that as a result the religious arena became privatized and Protestantism took a Pentecostal turn (i.e. the belief in miracles and the emphasis on healing and exorcism), which in turn increased the popularity and even sustained the growth of the Protestant church during the Cultural Revolution.

My study, however, tells a different story. In Ruian and the Wenzhou region during the Cultural Revolution, I argue, religious repression dramatically empowered the territorial expansion, institutionalization, and unification of Protestant organizations, which added to the importance and availability of Protestantism both as part of the “cultural toolkit” and as organizational resources for local society, paving the way for the subsequent boom and nationwide expansion of Wenzhou Christianity.

The year 1958 was a turning point when the county government forced the systematic shut down of all the churches and temples in Ruian. Clergy and believers were forced to forsake their faiths. Some were jailed and died in prison. But soon after the Great Leap Forward, in Ruian and the entire Wenzhou region, Protestants dispersed into house gatherings in their own villages or neighboring villages. Protestant communities established more house gathering places amidst the surge of religiosity after the Great Famine. In the first two years of the Cultural Revolution all religious activities were again severely disrupted. Yet when the county government became completely paralyzed during the Armed Fights of 1967-1969 and remained impaired by factional politics


11 Kao, “The Emergence of Pentecostal-style Protestantism.”

thereafter, the government involuntarily loosened its control of religion. Protestant house
gathering spots mushroomed and became more spread out as people attempted to reduce
the risk of being attacked. By the end of the 1970s, almost every town[ship] in the county
established Protestant gatherings. In the early 1970s, regional networks and coalitions
also came into being at both the county and prefectural levels, which fostered a unique
rotational system of pastoral care and facilitated evangelical work and the rise of
traveling preachers in the entire region and beyond. The Ruian/Wenzhou story, I suggest,
represents a pattern of church development in rural China during the Cultural Revolution
that is crucial to the understanding of contemporary boom of Protestantism.

The Pre-1949 Indigenization Efforts and the Post-1949 Tenacity of the Protestant
Church

The Protestant church in Wenzhou was among the most thoroughly indigenized
churches in China before 1949. A significant number of financially and administratively
self-reliant Protestant communities, with a considerable group of voluntary native
preachers and church leaders, came into being.

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed a nationwide independent church movement in
China. Before the national wave, the United Methodist Church and the China Inland
Mission—two major missions in Wenzhou—had already emphasized self-administration
and self-support of local Christian communities. “All missionaries live in the city of
Wenzhou…by far the heavier burden of evangelizing this district relies upon the shoulder
of the local preachers. These form the backbone of the mission, and number 315,”13

wrote A.H. Sharman of the Methodist Church, the largest mission in the region, in 1917. “These local preachers chiefly represent the farmer class… not well educated…” In addition, “another class of men that helps greatly in evangelizing the district is the ‘church leader.’ This is generally one to each church, appointed by the circuit meeting. He is consulted on all local matters, settle troubles between Christians and non-Christians, collects the offerings of the members for church expenses, and frequently preaches when the man appointed does not arrive. His work is always voluntary. He is in fact, as in name, the pillar of the church.”

With this method, “it will be observed that while the churches of the district have more than doubled, the number of missionaries has not increased since 1900.” The China Inland Mission used very similar administrative structures, with the only difference being that they probably relied on voluntary preachers even more heavily. In 1920, the Inland Mission in Wenzhou had 211 voluntary preachers but only 44 salaried preachers.

China Jesus Independent Church, the first independent church in Wenzhou, was instituted in the 1910s. The membership and number of churches (gathering places) of China Jesus Independent Church in Wenzhou constituted nearly half of the national organization in the 1920s. Their churches were financially and administratively independent. All church leaders and preachers were volunteers. The latecomer, the Local Assembly, whose followers in Wenzhou in the early 1950s accounted for about a quarter


15 Sharman, “Rural Evangelism in the Wenchow District,” 364.


of the national organization, adopted a similar system of voluntary preachers.

“Preachers et al. are all voluntary. They are dispatched and take turns to preach in each place.”

The historical legacy bequeathed by the pre-1949 indigenization efforts in Wenzhou, including financial self-reliance, allowed local Christian communities to weather the political storms in the early 1950s. The post-1958 establishment of house gathering networks, as I will show below, could also be credited to the legacy of the pre-1949 developments, which produced a large pool of village church leaders—church elders (zhanglao) and deacons (zhishi) in charge of administration of Protestant communities, and preachers taking care of evangelical work. This layered structure ensured continuation of leadership in local Protestant communities when the Church confronted unprecedented persecution.


20 The Catholic church in Wenzhou also relied very much on local catechists. This approach was developed during the tenure of priest Cyprien Aroud of the Congregation of the Mission at the Wenzhou parish (1899-1929). It was also a success. However, this approach was not designed to encourage self-administration of local Catholic communities. Catechists were not selected from active members of church. Most catechists started to be educated and trained as young children before being dispatched to out-stations. The Wenzhou parish set up a hierarchical system within the catechists, the purpose of which, as it is stated, was to “guarantee complete control over the catechists” (Cyprien Aroud, “Catechist Work in Wenchow,” Catholic Missions, 1917, 153). Catechists were all paid workers. The position of church elders, who played a pivotal role in taking care of administrative work and facilitating communication with non-Christians in local Protestant communities, was absent from the official design among Catholic communities. In finance, administration and ritual services, all local Catholic churches and stations had a much higher level of reliance on the headquarter in comparison to Protestant churches. In early 1950s, perhaps out of financial and political reasons, the catechists were dismissed (“Wenzhou jiaoqu de chuanjiao sishi” (Catechists of Wenzhou Diocese). http://www.tzjwzjq.com/Look_History.aspx?MID=22 (Accessed on May 25, 2015)).
Church Devastated, Divided and Regrouped: 1958 - 1966

Observers usually date the beginning of the terrifying ordeal for most Christians in China to the Cultural Revolution erupting in the summer of 1966. Yet to Christians in the Wenzhou region, their trial began in the year 1958 when the prefectural and county governments, in concert with the national campaign of the Great Leap Forward, launched a local campaign of “great leap in religious work.” Drastic measures were implemented in the entire region to minimize religious activities and their influence. Almost all churches and gathering places were shut down and seized during the campaign. Local churches became deeply divided as many members were coerced to abandon their Christian faith and even attack other members. In spite of all the external attacks and internal splits, however, Protestant house gatherings were able to regroup in some areas in the wake of the Great Famine (1959-1961).

“Great Leap in Religious Work” in 1958

Between 1953 and 1958, evangelical work carried on fairly well for most Protestant churches in Ruian, but church activities faced more obstacles due to the rapid progress of collectivization. In particular, local cadres increasingly accused weekly church worship and other church meetings of delaying collective agricultural production and interfered in church activities more frequently. Adventists, for instance, insisted on observing Saturdays, whereas village cadres thought it problematic and pushed them to work, causing conflicts. 21 Nevertheless, most churches and gathering places continued

21 Shu Chengqian, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi (Memoirs of Fifty Years Life in Church), unpublished manuscript, 2002, chapter 3 (section 4) and chapter 4.
activities. Many even increased in membership. The Adventist community in Zhuyuan village of Huling was even getting ready to build a permanent church as Protestants became the majority population of the village. The Local Assembly in Xincheng town also began building their church, which was about half finished by the spring of 1958.

The “great leap in religious work”, however, temporarily ended all church developments. Ruian county government convened a ten-day socialist education movement study class in April 1958, which could be considered as a prelude to the “great leap in religious work.” Two hundred and sixteen people attended the class, including Protestant and Catholic clergy, “core lay Christians” and Buddhist monks and nuns from all over the county. Preacher Shu Chenqian of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church at Mayu, a town ten miles away from the county seat, was among those summoned. County officials considered “restraining and weakening religious activities” as a complementary measure to “support [the great leap of] industrial and agricultural production.” But the study class in the eyes of Shu was basically “a measure to exterminate religion”.

---

22 The increase in the membership is based the data from the registers of the Adventist Church in 1953 and 1957.

23 “Ruian Xian zongjiao qingkuang gongzuo qingkuang baogao” (The situation of religious affairs in Ruian County), July 15, 1955, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-7-35: 2–3.


26 Whether the government planned to immediately stamp out religion is debatable (Zhu 2011, 94-95). The central government did not issue a formal policy of eliminating religion even though the radical steps by the local government in Wenzhou were endorsed by some officials in Beijing and Hangzhou (e.g. officials of the Department of Public Security and the National Religious Affairs Bureau) who had once intended to popularize the Wenzhou experience in the country. Documents of county governments did not place “exterminating religion” as a concrete goal to be accomplished.
mobilized to accuse the “crimes” of imperialism and mission enterprises in meetings and on big-character posters. They were also asked to sign the “patriotic convention” (*aiguo gongyue*), agreeing to reduce the length of weekly worships and cancel all other meetings. Many religious leaders complied, apparently under great pressure. Some even “voluntarily’ cancelled” weekly worships entirely and “donated houses and church facilities to the commune,” officials reported.

The most difficult time for Shu was the small group meetings. Materials containing evidence of the “crimes” committed by religious leaders and activists were distributed to attendees, who were asked to confess their crimes and accuse others, especially those attendees whose “crimes” were listed in the materials. Some seemed to admit their “problems” in self-criticism. Pastor You Daoshu of the Methodist church, for instance, said: “When I pray to God all day and entrust my hope to empty delusion, people are actively participating in the great leap of production and construction...I am useless to the construction of our country. I want to break away from the church and participate in production.” People like Shu tended to remain silent. Shu was condemned for instigating villagers to withdraw from the co-operative in 1957 and even accused of rape. He responded to none of these charges, according to his memoir. Preacher Ye Zhiqin, a major leader of the Local Assembly in Ruian, denied all accusations against

---


28 For Shu’s accounts of the study class, see Shu, *Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi*, chapter 4. As elsewhere in the country, the wave of withdrawal from the cooperative, which swept mountainous areas of the county in 1957, included villages with the presence of Adventists. Adventists constituted the majority population in Zhuyuan village, Huling, where church leaders Du Zhulai and Du Zhuxiong allegedly led the withdrawal campaign. See Ruian Municipal Archives 1-11-183: 108.
him and refused to denounce his faith. He was publicly attacked by some representatives for “throwing himself into the lap of imperialism” (toukao diguo zhuyi, referring to his close relations with foreign missionaries before 1949). Liao Zhensheng, another preacher and a close friend of Ye for more than two decades, even requested the government to send Ye to labor camp. Ye and some other church leaders and activists were convicted as rightists and counterrevolutionaries. Four of them were formally expelled from the church at the county’s Christian meetings shortly thereafter. We do not know whether those who kicked Ye and the other three out of the church had other motives besides political pressure from the government. The attacks on and expulsion of Ye and other leaders, however, undoubtedly created new distrust and more splits in the church. Shu luckily was not convicted, perhaps thanks to his nonresistant stance, but only labeled as a “destructive lawbreaker” (pohuai weifa fenzi), which saved him from imprisonment and other compulsory measures.

The conditions worsened in the second half of 1958 when the entire Wenzhou region was immersed in the furious Great Leap Forward campaigns. Nine hundred and eighty two churches and gathering places in Wenzhou (and Lishui, which was under the jurisdiction of the Wenzhou Prefectural Commission at the time) were all closed. Only five churches in Wenzhou municipality, Lishui municipality, and Qingtian county seat were preserved for weekly half-day joint worships by all denominations. The closed-

29 “Rightist” or “counterrevolutionary” is not coherent concepts during the Maoist era. In this case of church leaders, they were convicted as “rightist” or “counterrevolutionary” most likely because they refused to cooperate with the government. As “rightist” and “counterrevolutionary,” they received penalties varying from self-criticism, “reeducation through labor” (laodong gaizao), and even death.

30 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-11-183: 110; Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-10-161: 58.

31 “Guanyu Wenzhou diqu zongjiao zhengce zhixing qingkuang de baogao” (Report on the implementation of religious policies in the Wenzhou region), June 26, 1959, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-11-248: 18.
down churches were mostly taken by the communes and production teams. Some were remodeled and even demolished.

In Mayu of Ruian, Shu was once taken around to a mass struggle meeting and was brutally tortured because he did not give up on his Christian faith.32 In the same meeting, church leaders like him were also asked to “donate” the Bible, hymn books, church houses and other possessions to the collective. Similar meetings were held throughout Ruian County. Churches and temples were shut down. Most clergy and church leaders were labeled as rightists and counterrevolutionaries and some were forced to publically renounce their faith. Even the Three-self organization was destroyed. An official report wrote: “Ninety percent of temples and churches were voluntarily donated to brigades,”33 which, of course, were not voluntary but forced. Pastor Chen Zhehai of the Methodist Church, who was also the president of the county Protestant patriotic association, was convicted as a rightist and counterrevolutionary in April. He was then arrested along with a few Christian leaders. Chen died in prison about a year later. Cao Yongqi, an elder (zhanglao) of the China Jesus Independent Church also died in prison.34 Many church leaders were sent down to the countryside to “support agricultural production.” Cadres urged Shu Chengqian to go back to Wenzhou municipality, his registered hometown. He insisted on staying at Mayu and was then driven out from the church to a neighboring village where he was assigned to labor under supervision (jiandu laodong) until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution.

32 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 4 and chapter 5 (section 1).
33 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-11-183: 108.
Regrouping of Protestant Gatherings After 1958

Christian congregations, both Protestant and Catholic, almost entirely discontinued between late 1958 and late 1960. Only in a few locations did people, albeit with a fear of the government, continue to meet on and off. However, Protestant congregations clearly increased from the fall of 1960 when conditions gradually began to improve. House gathering was not new to Protestant communities as a majority of them congregated at private houses before 1958. Only large and established Protestant communities had built churches as permanent gathering places, especially those in the plain areas.

The top priority for Protestants was to sustain group meetings in secrecy, or at least keep a low profile. People began to develop a set of patterns for group meetings in order to accommodate the dire political environment. Meeting dates and times were not fixed. Daytime was generally avoided and sometimes people had to take turns in participating in the meetings. Meetings were sometimes held at nights in order to both avoid the attention of local cadres and suit the needs of participants from afar.

---

35 In addition to the “great leap in religious work” in 1958, other factors, especially the Great Famine of 1959-1961, also had a direct bearing on the temporary silence of religion. The famine hit the southeast coast less severely than other regions of China, but there were still about 141,000 cases of abnormal death in Zhejiang. See Cao Shuji, Dajiuan—yijiuwujiu nian—yijiuwujiu nian de Zhongguo renkou (Chinese Population between 1959 and 1961) (Hong Kong: Shidai guoji chuban gongsi, 2005), 282. In August of 1959 alone, the Ruian government reported 10,895 cases of “swollen sickness” (fuzhong bing)—a term referring to dystrophia caused by hunger. See Yang Jisheng, Mubei—Zhongguo liushi niandai daijihuan jishi (Tombstone—A Historical Record of the Great Chinese Famine in the 1960s) (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu chuban gongsi, 2008), 246. When mere survival became a daily challenge and priority, it is no wonder that collective meetings ceased, although individual domestic practices might never have stopped.

36 “Guanyu muqian zongjiao huodong qingkuang” (On current religious activities), November 16, 1961, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-13-42: 5.

37 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 177.
The most crucial strategies devised to cope with difficult political conditions lay in choosing the locations and controlling the size of the congregations. Village and town cadres were more or less aware of these religious assemblies. Without tolerance or tacit permission of village and town cadres, the existence and continuation of group religious activities could be very difficult. In areas where local cadres tended to take uncompromising stances against religious groups, people had to constantly change meeting places. Though not a common phenomenon, there were instances of non-Christian villagers informing on Christian meetings, in which event people had to relocate. Even in areas where local cadres tended to turn a blind eye on Protestant house gatherings, people would lay low and congregate in places away from town[ship] centers or villages, avoiding unnecessary attention and cadre unease.

In Mayu, as early as 1959, with the encouragement of Shu Chengqian, some Adventists who used to congregate in the Adventist church in the town center relocated to nearby Wujia village where people met occasionally. Only a dozen people took turns to

38 An investigation of Protestant gatherings in Shangma Brigade, Tangxia in 1961, for instance, found that “brigade cadres neither took any measures on those [Protestant] gatherings nor reported it to the superior,” suggesting cadres knowing the existence of Protestant gatherings (“Guanyu Meitou, Changqiao, Baotian, sange gongshe zongjiao huodong qingkuang de diaocha” [Investigation of religious activities in three communes: Meitou, Changqiao, and Baotian], October 12, 1961, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-13-42: 19). In the same year in Mayu, it was seen that “letting things drift” (fangrenziliu) was a typical attitude of town and village cadres toward religious activities, which similarly suggest that cadres were aware of the existence of Protestant gatherings. (“Mayu Qu Jidujiao zuzhi chengyuan dengjibiao” (Register of members of Protestant organizations in Mayu District), October 12, 1961, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-13-42: 5).

39 That cadres turned a blind eye on religious activities have many reasons. One reason is that some of them were directly or indirectly involved in religious activities. A more common reason probably was that they found that religious affairs were not easy to handle. The head of Xincheng Commune said in a meeting in 1961 that “if we did not handle [religious affairs] well, it would affect religious freedom. However, if we do not interfere, religious activities will gradually expand, which would affect production and the development of socialism. We are caught in the middle. It is better for the superiors to provide [us] with some solutions [chuzhuyi]” (“Guanyu muqian zongjiao huodong qingkuang” (On current religious activities), November 16, 1961, Ruian Municipal Archives, 4-13-42:7)
attend the meetings and participants for each meeting would not exceed ten.\textsuperscript{40} Shu himself, who was subject to labor under supervision and restrained from traveling and communicating with villagers outside the context of agricultural production, probably did not attend meetings in the new location until such restraints were lifted in 1961.\textsuperscript{41}

In the district of Tangxia, Pan Jinyou, the former resident manager (\textit{zhutang}) of Shangma China Inland Mission church at Baotian commune, along with his wife, visited old adherents of the church in the name of seeing friends and patients in Baotian and neighboring townships. They eventually got together a group of more than forty people, which was unusually large for that time. Some participants came from as far as Yongqiang commune of Wenzhou municipality.\textsuperscript{42} Separately, some churchgoers who used to meet at the Methodist Church of Tangxia town dispersed to four nearby villages for secret meetings under the coordination of preacher Zhao Hongtian and deacon Zhao Hongzhu. By 1965, according to official documents at the time, they had assembled a group of eighty two Protestants.\textsuperscript{43}

In eight districts of the county, all five Protestant denominations showed signs of restoration.\textsuperscript{44} All gatherings took place in the houses of Christians and most were just prayer meetings without the presence of formal clergy (e.g. pastors), as many of them had either been imprisoned or were too intimidated to lead them. By fall 1962, according to

\textsuperscript{40} Ruian Municipal Archives 4-13-42: 4.

\textsuperscript{41} Shu, \textit{Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi}, chapter 5 (section 2).

\textsuperscript{42} Ruian Municipal Archives 4-13-42: 16-19.

\textsuperscript{43} “Ruhe zhizhi Tangxia Yesu jiaoting juhui” (How to prevent Protestant house gatherings in Tangxia), November 6, 1965, Ruian Municipal Archives 49-17-12: 116-117.

\textsuperscript{44} “Guanyu zongjiao huodong qingkuang de diaocha” (Investigation of religious activities), August 1, 1962, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 170.
an estimate by the county government, about twenty Protestant gathering places appeared in the county with the participation of approximately eight hundred people.\textsuperscript{45} As a more unusual occurrence, in early 1962, adherents of China Jesus Independent Church in Linxi commune of mountainous Huling district even started to publicly congregate in the old church. That same year, Zhao Hongxu, a deacon of the Methodist Church at Tangxia, Yang Chisheng, a preacher of China Inland Mission in Hai’an, and Zhu Xunli, the elder of the Local Assembly at Taoshan town, even spontaneously convened about thirty Christians to go to the county government to demand the reopening of churches.\textsuperscript{46}

The return of Christian activities caught the attention of the government. Pastor Chen Dengyong of Adventist Church in Ruian ignored warnings and insisted on organizing house meetings in multiple locations of the county seat. He was arrested and put into a labor camp in a remote inland province in 1960. Chen’s wife carried on the congregations after his arrest. Then she was also arrested.\textsuperscript{47} Neither was released until 1980. Even the Zhejiang provincial government was concerned. To the dissatisfaction of the Ruian county government, the provincial government sent officials twice to Ruian in

\textsuperscript{45} Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 170. Not only Christianity but also local worship appeared to have the tendency of revitalization between 1961 and the eve of the Cultural Revolution. Genealogy compilation and temple and lineage hall reconstruction occurred to various extents in all districts of the county. Solely in Tangxia by mid-1963, twenty-seven brigades of seven communes had thirty-two cases of genealogy compilation. In thirteen temples in Tangxia commune, people grouped together to burn incense and worship deities (\textit{shaoxiang baifo}). Organizers and participants were reportedly mainly old people. Ritual specialists such as mediums and fortunetellers also picked up their old professions. It was the period of the Socialist Education Movement. The Wenzhou Prefectural Commission had dispatched a work team to Tangxia; some ritual specialists were arrested and cadres who were involved in superstitious activities were also impacted. See “Zhonggong Ruian xianwei pizhuan zhengfadangzu guanyu zhizhi fengjian canyu de gezhong fubi huodong” (Ruian County Committee of the Chinese Communist Party issuing County Political Legal Commission’s opinions on curbing various restoration activities of feudal residue), May 5, 1963, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-15-69: 17-19.

\textsuperscript{46} Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 170-171. Some church leaders even openly called on to return church properties after the central government issued a “sixty articles on agriculture” (\textit{nongye liushi tiao}) in 1961.

\textsuperscript{47} Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 175-176.
1960 and 1962 for investigations. The news of the coming of provincial officials to villages was ironically advertised by leaders of Christian communities as a sign of the loosening of restrictions on Christian gatherings (though county officials seemed to suggest that the Christians were in fact misled by provincial officials into believing that the provincial government had more religious tolerance). Nevertheless, the Wenzhou Regional Committee had drawn up a list of “counterrevolutionary bad elements” within religious organizations in the spring of 1964. This plan, however, did not seem to be carried out. In any event, drastic measures such as those in 1958, which had been criticized by the Zhejiang Party Committee, were not seen again in the early 1960s.

**Diversification and Expansion of Protestant Gatherings: 1966-1978**

After the recovery in the early 1960s, Christians were again dragged into political storms in the early Cultural Revolution. The extreme violence of the early Cultural Revolution again brought disruption to Protestant house gatherings, but not for long. The development of factional politics in the region soon unexpectedly opened up new opportunities for the resumption of house gatherings in rural areas. Protestant gatherings

---

48 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 175. County officials accused “sent-down” provincial officials as being “out of touch with reality” and only relying on “policy directives from above.”

49 “Guanyu daji zongjiao neibu fanhuaifenzi de yijian baogao” (Opinions on strikes against counterrevolutionaries and bad elements inside religious sector), June 1, 1964, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-16-80: 76-77.

50 There are two elements that may explain why radicalism against religion did not appear again in Wenzhou in the period 1961-1965. First of all, the scale and level of activeness of collective religious practices at the time, though recovering, were incomparable to what they were before the 1958 crackdown. Therefore it was less urgent for local officials to impose drastic measures against resurfaced religious activities. Secondly, the radical steps against religion in Wenzhou in 1958 were apparently not favored by some officials in the government. They considered these steps have deteriorated the tension between the government and religious communities (Ruian Municipal Archives 1-11-248: 17-19). Provincial and prefectural officials had taken some measures to reduce the impact of the 1958 crackdown in the early 1960s (Zhu, “Guojia tongzhi,” 96-97). The basic policy inclination was not to further provoke more tension.
in particular mushroomed and extended into new territories, many of which were towns and villages that never had a Protestant church or congregation.

Church Amidst the Red Guard Movement

In summer 1966 when the Red Guards marched onto the streets, shouting the slogan of “Clear[ing] the Four Olds,” Shu Chengqian and other religious leaders were once again taken to the parades and struggle meetings. Their bodies were bundled together. Plaques labeled “counterrevolutionary,” “superstition head,” or “special agent of imperialism” hung around their necks. Once Shu was even forced, as a form of humiliation against his Christian faith, to wear the gown of a local deity that the militias looted from village temples, and had his face scribbled in ink. Another time, in a late night, Shu was abruptly marched off to the Mayu theatre by a few youngsters. Kicks and blows rained on him and he was nearly beaten to death.51

The misery of Christians, and indeed adherents of all religions, escalated to a whole new level at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. Anything related to religion was under attack. Christianity, though never officially prohibited, was ubiquitously denounced as “superstition” or “religious superstition” (zongjiao mixin) during the Cultural Revolution. Compared to the “great leap in religious work” in 1958, which targeted religious leaders, persecution in 1966 extended to active lay Christians.52 Active Christian Ni Guangdao of the Lower village of Xincheng, who was in his mid-20s, was hung from the beam of a farm tools shed in a nearby village and tortured for thirteen days

51 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 4.
52 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 16.
in July 1967. One night, some militias beat him by an iron ruler until they left him for dead. During the “clear the four olds” campaign in 1966 many lay Christians’ homes were ransacked. More Bibles, hymn books and church magazines were burned. To use local Christians’ own words, local churches entered into a period of “three-nos”: “no church, no clergy and no Bible.”

The stormy Red Guard movement in 1966 forced the vast majority, if not all, of the house gatherings to cease operations in the entire county, and brought about the second period (with the first silence being the years 1958-1960) of total silence for local churches. Yet the attacks starting in the summer of 1966, as one Christian interviewee commented, were just “a gust of wind” (yizhenfeng). It was extremely violent but also very short. It was unlike the 1958 attack on religion, which was “policy-driven” (zhengcexingde) and directly carried out by the government. In fact the frantic attacks on religious followers soon ended as the Red Guard movement lost momentum. Local Christians in retrospect even celebrated the years 1966-1967 as a moment of solidarity. “During the ‘exterminating religion’ period of 1958, shepherds were assaulted and sheep were, without question, dispersed. Yet [home] searches and struggles during the Cultural Revolution pushed every adherent to the same corner. We all shared the feeling of being on the same boat.” This account is probably not mere rhetoric. Given


54 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 16.


57 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 16.
its disorder and furiousness, the attack by the Red Guards could target anyone with a Christian background regardless of his/her the status in the church. Even those who had abandoned their faith in 1958 could not avoid being attacked. Such was the experience of Lin Youdi of Changqiao, Tangxia. According to some accounts, she was ashamed for giving up on her Christian faith in 1958. However, after being paraded through the streets in 1966, she felt that God had not abandoned her and believed again.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{Factional Politics and the Loosening Social Control}

A more important reason for why the 1966 attack was just “a gust of wind” was that the Red Guard movement quickly turned into countywide factional battles beginning in the summer of 1967, which unexpectedly opened up space for people in the rural areas to maneuver and carry on religious activities through severe political conditions. Protestants seized the opportunity and greatly expanded their territory.

Armed fights broke out between two major mass organizations—the so-called royalist group (General Headquarter (\textit{lianzong})) and the rebel group (United Headquarter (\textit{lianzhan}))—and lasted two years. The battles over the control of the county seat between July and September of 1967 left at least dozens, if not hundreds, of dead bodies floating on the nearby Feiyun River.\textsuperscript{59} Governmental apparatuses, including the county government, the party committee, the public security bureau, and the court, all ground to

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{58} Ruian jiaohui, \textit{Ruian jiaohui shi}, 16.

\end{footnotesize}
a complete halt during this period. Large-scale conflicts ended in September of 1969 with the rebel group officially proclaiming to disband.\(^{60}\)

Factional politics continued to dominate social and political life in Ruian and Zhejiang for the rest of the Cultural Revolution.\(^ {61}\) Clashes among military-appointed officials who had no former ties to Wenzhou, rebels incorporated into the local leadership, and rehabilitated old cadres kept recurring. The reshuffling of local leadership in Zhejiang and Wenzhou after the Lin Biao incident in 1971 and the anti-Confucius anti-Lin campaign further destabilized the political and social order. Conflicts between opposing organizations were constant.\(^ {62}\)

Factional conflicts and factional politics precipitated the loosening of social control in many aspects. First, it disempowered the governmental apparatus. The Ruian party committee was not restored until July 1971 (and lower level party committees were restored around the same time). But the county public security bureau and the county court were not restored until April and March of 1973 respectively.\(^ {63}\) Second, the government’s attention was diverted from the control of local communities, including the activities of religious communities. As the county government was preoccupied with power struggles, the repression and surveillance of religious activities, though still very severe, could never return to the levels of 1958 or 1966. Third, rural areas were much less

---


\(^{61}\) Miao Zhitong, Wenzhou qu jiaohui shi (Church history in Wenzhou), unpublished internal document, 2005-2006(?), 137-139.


\(^{63}\) Zhonggong Ruian shiwei dangwei yanjiushi, Zhongguo Gongchandang Ruian lishi dashiji, 91.
affected by factional conflicts and factional politics. When the county authorities were overthrown by the rebels in 1968, they turned to village residents for help. Many young villagers joined the royalist General Headquarter and were mobilized to participate in the battles in the county seat and its vicinity. However, the vast rural areas were never the center of the storm. Moreover, when many young people were drafted into political campaigns, collective agricultural production became difficult to organize. When the commune came to the verge of disintegration, restraints by the commune on the lives and travels of rural residents also loosened. Many, including some Protestants, left to make a living elsewhere. The early 1970s also witnessed the budding of private economy in Wenzhou. It was under these circumstances that Protestant gatherings resumed and further spread in the countryside.

Multiplication of Protestant Gatherings

The distribution of house gatherings manifested two tendencies after 1958: from concentrated gatherings to dispersed gatherings; and from densely populated areas into less populated surrounding areas. Both tendencies greatly intensified when house gatherings remerged again in the chaos of the Armed Fights period (1967-1969).

---

64 For North China, Henrietta Harrison (Harrison, The Missionary’s Curse, 167) similarly observed that the Cultural Revolution was not focused on the Catholic villages whereas the Socialist Education Movement in the early 1960s hit these villages the most.

65 Many of my interviewees were witnesses and participants of the private economy. Mr. Zhou Zexian, Tangkou village, Tangxia, left the cooperative around 1969. He spent a few years doing beekeeping in several remote provinces, including Yunnan (Interview by author, Tangkou village, May 12, 2013). Mr. Ding Bingkuan of Lower village, Xincheng, was a peddler, travelling in mountains of Ruian and neighboring counties and exchanging malted candy for junk in the 1970s (Interview by author. Lower village, May 12, 2013). In Yantou and nearby villages of Mayu, people secretly began timber business in the early 1970s. They bought timber in mountains of neighboring Taishun and Wencheng and sold it in the underground market of Yantou village (Wu Zhenwei, Interview by author, Mayan village, July 23, 2012).
The district of Xincheng in the plain areas, for instance, had more than thirteen percent of the Protestant population in the county in 1957. But the Protestant community there only had four churches and gathering places, the majority of which congregated in three places of Xincheng town, the district center. Since autumn 1961, Protestants established underground gatherings in several locations of Dongtian and Shangwan Township, with some meetings in the county seat. The development of gatherings continued after a short interruption by the Red Guard movement and the Armed Fights. By 1978, forty four Protestant meeting spots had been established in all eleven towns and townships of the entire district. Shu Chengqian observed similar developments in Fengtagang village, which was located in the Pingyang County part of the Rui-Ping plains. Fengtagang village was the first so-called Adventist “gospel village” (fuyin cun) where villagers were predominantly Adventists. However, in order to guarantee the continuation of gatherings, church leaders decided to disperse gatherings to eight locations in surrounding villages during the Cultural Revolution. “Preachers took turns to preach in those eight places. [But the affairs of all eight gatherings places] were centrally arranged and regulated.” Even so, “[people] had to constantly change bases in order to accommodate the environment.”

In the mountainous districts, the increase of Protestant meeting spots was equally impressive. Nearly seventy percent of the Ruian landscape consisted of hills, which provided ideal shelters for the assemblage of religious adherents during the Cultural

---

66 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 180.

67 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 14.

68 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 14.
Revolution. Zhuyuan village of Huling district had been a Protestant stronghold since the early 1950s. Only three people attended when Adventist house gatherings were reestablished by deacons Du Zhulai and Du Chongchang after the “great leap in religious work” in 1958. But the group expanded to more than one hundred in the winter of 1961. After the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, in order to avoid the interference of local cadres, gatherings were relocated to an Adventist family’s house in the hills on the border between Jinchuan Township and Fangzhuang Township. Adventists from surrounding villages who used to attend meetings in Zhuyuan then started to organize congregations in their own villages. Adventists in nearby Dongkeng Village formed their own house gathering, which eventually developed into an Independent Church. In the entire Huling district, the number of Protestant house gatherings rose from twenty eight in 1957 to ninety four in 1978.

The increase in house gatherings during the Cultural Revolution did not necessarily result from solidarity, as historical accounts of the local Protestant church claim, but sometimes from denominational competitions and even change of denominational affiliation. Such was the case with the formation of Adventist gatherings in Taoshan town of Taoshan district. The China Inland Mission church in Taoshan town was established in the early Republican era. It was one of a few bases of China Inland Mission in the mountains of Ruian. Adventists historically had no presence in the town. Hong Longcong and his family were in firm charge of the church at least since the early

---

69 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-4-207: 172.
70 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 15.
71 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 18-19.
1950s. However, when Hong Longbiao, a younger brother of Longcong, and some other Taoshan adherents had contacts with Shu Chengqian, the Adventist preacher at Mayu, they adopted the theological stance of Adventism in the end of 1960s. They wanted to turn their own gathering into an Adventist one, carrying out practices of Adventism and only receiving preachers from the Adventist church. But they met with vehement opposition from Longcong, who tried every means to stop the continuation of his brother’s gatherings in any house of their family. Consequentially, the church was divided and Longbiao organized his own Adventist gatherings in Pichaitan outside Taoshan town. After three to four years, attendees of the Pichaitan gathering from Jinggu township of Mayu set up a new meeting spot in Shamenshan village of Jinggu in 1975. One year later, the converts from Chen’ao and Heshibu villages of Jinggu, which grew very fast, formed another meeting spot in nearby Chen’ao village.

Outside Ruian, there were similar denominational competitions. In Wenzhou municipality, for instance, when Adventists, amidst complete social chaos between 1967 and 1968, established several gathering places, some adherents of the China Jesus Independent Church chose to join the Adventist meetings when their own churches remained disorganized.

The dissemination and increase of Protestant house gatherings, whether stemming from active adaptation or from competitions, had the same effects as “seeder” and

---

72 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 18-19.

73 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 9.

74 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 6 (section 3).

75 The division of a house gathering or change in denominational affiliation could also be construed as an adaptation strategy.
“propaganda team”—two terms that Mao Zedong used to evaluate the historical significance of the Long March. No evidence shows the dissemination of Protestant house gatherings being deliberately modeled on operational patterns of the Communists before 1949, though the dissemination of gatherings was perhaps deliberately planned in some cases. In other cases, the decisions to spread out gatherings were almost spontaneous, at least in the very beginning when Protestant communities seeking to carry on activities were left no other choices. Soon, however, as I will show in the next section, those unrelated and isolated efforts in different Protestant communities and denominations became coordinated to further promote the developments of house gatherings.

Protestantism expanded to new territories as the Church diversified nonstop in this context. Often these new territories historically had either no Protestantism presence or only very few Protestant adherents who could only congregate elsewhere. Dadianxia Township, according to an interviewee, had only several families with Christian members.76 By the end of the Cultural Revolution, however, Protestants had set up two gathering places in the township, which later grew into a Dadianxia church with five hundred and fifty members in 1991.77 Throughout the county, the Protestant church operated ninety eight churches and gathering places before 1958 (Map 3.1). By 1978, two hundred and seventy six gathering places had been created, tripling the number in 1957 (Map 3.2). At the prefecture level, according to estimates by people in the church, one

77 “Xincheng Qu zongjiao qingkuang diaocha tongjibiao” (Investigation chart of religious situation in Xincheng district), 1991, Ruian Municipal Archives 72-24-10: 56-57.
thousand nine hundred and fifty four gathering places were established in the entire Wenzhou region between 1971 and 1980.78

The vast majority of the increase in Ruian was in rural areas. Protestant congregations in the county seat only increased from five to seven in the two decades after 1957 (Figure 3.1), reflecting the unevenness of growth between rural and urban areas. Protestant congregations, excluding the county seat, covered forty of a total of sixty one town[ships] in 1957. By 1978, however, Protestant congregations expanded into seventy one of a total of seventy three town[ships]. In 1957 eighty four villages had either Protestant churches or gathering places. By 1978, two hundred and twenty seven villages had Protestant gathering places (Figure 3.2). The low growth rate in the county seat could be related to the level of political control, as the county seat tended to be more tightly regulated. But we should not rule out other possibilities such as lack of leadership.

Another layer of complexities is the unevenness of growth between plain areas (Xincheng, Tangxia, Xianjiang, and most parts of Mayu) and mountainous areas (Taoshan, Huling, and Gaolou) and among various districts. Generally speaking, the number of Protestant house gatherings tended to increase faster in mountainous areas than plain areas. However, within mountainous areas and even in the entire county, the growth rate in Huling was exceptionally high and the growth rate in Mayu was relatively low. The causes of these variations will have to be further studied.

Given the increase in house gatherings in Ruian and the rest of the Wenzhou region in the years 1958-1978, it is likely that the Protestant population experienced a

---

corresponding growth. There are unfortunately no formal statistics for the changes to the Protestant population in this period. An investigation report of Zhejiang provincial government in 1981 estimated that “Protestants in Ruian and Pingyang grew by a factor of four during the Cultural Revolution, and in Wenzhou municipality, by a factor of twenty.” Statistics by the Ruian county government showed that there were a total of 60,185 Protestants around 1982, which was more than four times the number in 1956. The pre-1978 total population growth in the county was about 2.2 times. Based on these data, it should be safe to say that the growth rate of the Protestant church membership in the years 1958-1978 was higher, if not much higher, than the growth rate of the total population. Further parameters such as the regional, age, and gender distribution of the growth will need to be measured in a further study.

79 Conversion along family and lineage lines and conversion after illness continued to be the most important paths of conversion in the period 1958-1978. It remained common at the time that Christian faith was passed to family members. Shu Chengqian’s father-in-law was a first generation Adventist. Shu’s daughter Xiaorong was baptized at a young age. She married another Adventist preacher Zhao Dianren in the mid-1960s. Shu Chengqian’s brother-in-law Hu Yuming also became an Adventist under family influence in the late 1960s. So did Hu’s wife. Hu’s children all grew up Protestant. Other Adventist church leaders all had very similar inheritance of Christian faith among their family members (Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi). Among those new converts whose family had no Christian background, their conversion is almost entirely related to their own or relatives’ illness, physical or mental.


81 “Guanyu Ruian Shi zongjiao wenti diaocha qingkuang de huibao” (Comprehensive report on the investigation of religious situation in Ruian City), December 22, 1990, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-38-6: 32.

Map 3.1, Protestant churches and gathering places in 1957
Map 3.2. Protestant gathering places in 1978.
Figure 3.1, The distribution of Protestant congregations in Ruian: 1957 and 1978.

Chengguan is the county seat.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1957</th>
<th>1978</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town[ship]</td>
<td>40/61</td>
<td>71/73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Village</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chengguan</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.2, Regional distribution of churches and gathering places in 1957 and 1978.\(^83\)

\(^83\) Roughly speaking, Chengguan (the county seat), Xincheng, Tangxia, Xianjiang, and main part of Mayu belong to plain areas. Taoshan, Huling, Gaolou, and part of Mayu belong to mountainous areas.
The Transformation of the Protestant church: 1969-1978

Another crucial process that took place almost simultaneously with the creation of new gathering places was the emergence of regional and denominational coordination. Integration and collaboration connected Protestant gatherings of various regions and denominations into a networked community. Amidst this process, a unique Wenzhou model of evangelical work was established, which further contributed to and facilitated the territorial expansion of evangelical work by Wenzhou preachers.

Weakening Denominational Differences and the Convergence of Denominations

With the establishment of congregations in the end of the 1960s, loosely organized trans-village church collaboration soon appeared, necessitated by both the increased demand of evangelical work and the uneven distribution of evangelical workers. Though many local preachers remained active at the time, their geographical distribution was uneven due in part to variance in the impact of political campaigns and more importantly to different histories of various Protestant communities. Rural churches differed greatly in the number of evangelical workers, namely, pastors, teachers, and preachers. Before 1958, the Methodist Church’s county headquarter in Tangxia town had seven preachers but most of its other twenty churches had only one to three preachers. Several churches even had deacons serving as preachers.84 The multiplication of gathering places, however, demanded more evangelical workers as many church meetings or house gatherings not only moved to new places but also divided into two or

84 Zhonghua Jidujiao Xundao gonghui Wenzhou jiaqu Ruian lianqu ge zhihui fuzeren ji xintu mingce (List of division leaders and followers in the Ruian affiliated district of the Wenzhou ecclesiastical district of the Chinese Christian Methodist Church), 1958, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-10-75:29–40.
more groups. Most meeting organizers were church leaders (church elders or deacons), but some were just ardent adherents. These church leaders were not necessarily preachers as they did not know how to preach or discuss the Bible. Most new house gatherings therefore were just prayer meetings (daogao hui) at the outset.\textsuperscript{85} Ritual performance might also have been difficult, as church elders or deacons were in principle not allowed to perform rituals such as baptism or ordination.

Under these circumstances, “ardent adherents communicated with adjacent gathering places, [and participated in their] Sunday prayer meetings, and hymn singing. They also exchanged preachers with adjacent gathering places.”\textsuperscript{86} Ultimately a regional collaboration network formed. Huang Xinrong, of Hekoutang village of Xianyan town, returned home from Dongtou in 1958, where he previously served as pastor. In the winter of 1966, at the request of four Methodist gathering places in Tangxia town, he agreed to serve as pastor. He then managed to connect with two other Methodist gathering places and two China Inland Mission gathering places in Tangxia district. The network was then extended into some gathering places in Xincheng and the county seat in 1967. By 1970, similar collaboration systems had likely been established in the other five districts of the county as well.\textsuperscript{87}

In the winter of 1971 representatives from all eight districts, representing all denominations other than the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Local Assembly,


\textsuperscript{86} “Yongjia Xian Jidujiao shiliao” (Historical Materials of Christianity in Yongjia), unpublished. Cited by Chen Fengsheng, “Wenzhou jiaohui yigong fazhan lichen” (The Development Course of Workers in Wenzhou Church), Jinling shengxuezhi, 3(2010): 34.

\textsuperscript{87} Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 20-21.
held a meeting in Nanchen village, Xincheng. The meeting decided to form a county general council. Huang Longcong, Miao Zhitong, et al. were elected as council members and Du Zhixin was elected as general manager (zong fuze). “The county general council insisted on not distinguishing between denominations but stressing the unification (heyi) of the church. In particular, the Methodist church, the China Inland Mission, and the China Jesus Independent Church no longer differentiated by denomination but only established churches by locality. Other than each denomination still following their own baptism tradition, other matters were all unified.”

It ought to be noted here that the denominations referenced by this council resolution were denominations as created by the missionaries from the pre-1949 period. “After the creation of the county general council, there were seasonal co-worker (tonggong) communication meetings and annual meetings [held to] properly arrange administration, co-worker training, evangelization, spirituality cultivation as well as the Sunday worship of churches all over the county.”

Since 1972, the county general council established connections with the Protestant church in other counties of Wenzhou as well as some counties of Taizhou and Lishui (e.g. Yuhuan, Huangyan, and Qingtian). In 1974, the Ruian county council decided to join the general council of the Wenzhou region (Wenzhou diqu zonghui).

The Paidan System, Traveling Preachers, and the Expansion of Evangelical Work

88 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 21. Similar processes took place in other counties of the Wenzhou region as well. The integration of churches in Wenzhou municipality, it was said, occurred even earlier. Local preachers had built up a relatively developed network by the end of the 1960s. In 1970, a unified church had been grounded in Wenzhou municipality. For the unification of churches in Cangnan and Yongjia, see Chen, “Wenzhou jiaohui yigong fazhan lichen,” 33-34.

89 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 21.
Regional coordination and denominational unification all over the Wenzhou region had a far-reaching influence on the organization and development of Protestant gatherings. The integration process of rural churches first contributed to the creation of a network of scattered rural Protestant communities that were otherwise relatively isolated, and then initiated and further institutionalized the sharing of resources and preachers among gathering places of different denominations and in different areas.

As one Protestant gathering was dispersed into multiple gatherings in multiple locations to avoid attention and harassment, Protestant communities instantly faced a new issue, which was how to pastor those new gatherings scattered in different places. The increase in gatherings was apparently beyond the capacity of existing preachers who needed to simultaneously take care of at least more than two gatherings. Many young preachers emerged at that time who were not formally ordained, but were either self-proclaimed or appointed by church elders. The distribution of preachers, however, was apparently uneven. How to ensure each gathering received enough pastoral care thus became a pressing need. In response a unique “preacher assignment” (paidan, literally tract distribution) system eventually took shape and later became the most important pastoring method of the Protestant church in contemporary Wenzhou.

---

90 The extent of regional coordination and denominational unification needs further studies, e.g., how well the collaborations among local churches were coordinated during the Cultural Revolution, and how much influence and control the newly created county general council and its leaders had on local churches.

91 The aforementioned Miao Zhitong was for instance a self-styled preacher. Yang Duojia (Dorcas) of Oubei, Yongjia never went through any formal training but claimed to be suddenly enlightened in one day. At age of 20, she was asked by her uncle who was in charge of a Protestant gathering spot in her village to preach in Protestant meetings.

92 Materials are lacking on the origins of the paidan system. It is possible that it originated from the preacher system in the local Protestant church in the pre-1949 period, where preachers were sent by their denominations to different places to preach.
The *paidan* system, according to the account of a church leader,\(^3\) appeared as early as the mid-1960s. In the Oubei area of Yongjia, Protestant communities already started a coordinated “preacher assignment” system in 1965, but it was interrupted by the outburst of the Cultural Revolution for three years. The *paidan* system did not seem to be a complete new invention. Protestant churches in Wenzhou before 1949 used similar systems, but with major differences from the *paidan* system. The first major difference was that the pre-1949 system was centralized with the headquarter of each congregation in the region (not the county) planning and controlling the dispatch of preachers. The second major difference was that each congregation of Protestant churches before 1949 had its own system and did not send preachers to each other’s churches. Under the *paidan* system, loosely organized upper-level church organizations were in charge of dispatching preachers. These upper-level church organizations were a coalition of Protestant gatherings in a certain area, roughly the equivalent of an administrative district or several districts, regardless their former congregation affiliations (the Seventh Day Adventist church was the only one that did not participate in such a coalition). Among upper-level church organizations that had established contacts with each other, they would coordinate co-workers (*tonggong*) being dispatched to each other’s gatherings for Sunday worships or other meetings.\(^4\) The system greatly facilitated and opened up new territories for the


work of local preachers, as it provided a liaison system for Protestant communities all over the Wenzhou region (even parts of Taizhou, Lishui and Northern Fujian). Exchange of pastoral visits was very frequent. Yu Dubing of Yueqing, who later became the president of Yueqing Three-self Patriotic Association, was invited to preach in the Ruian county seat, Xincheng and Tangxia. He also visited suburbs of Wenzhou municipality. On the other hand, Miao Zhitong and Ni Guangdao of Ruian were invited to host preaching meetings and co-worker training camps in Yueqing and Pingyang. For many, their work even expanded to the entire region. Yang Duojia (Dorcas), of Oubei, Yongjia, initially only preached in the neighboring areas. However, when the paidan system appeared in the early 1970s, she started to travel outside Yongjia. According to her testimony, for many years since, she rarely stayed more than one night at home. She visited all eight counties of the Wenzhou region plus Yuhuang county of Taizhou. Once she was even stationed in Ruian for more than two full years.

A group of young preachers raised after 1958 further built up their personal reputation and influence using the regional network as a platform. Many later became leading figures in the explosive growth of the Protestant church in Wenzhou and China. This group of self-styled young preachers emerged, especially in communities where the old leadership had fallen for various reasons, and often claimed to be directly inspired by God or to have seen miracles. “God often personally summoned preachers through either intense emotions [triggered] during prayers or marvelous dreams and visions. People whom God called upon would directly devote [themselves] into service upon having

95 Miao, Wenzhou qu jiaohui shi, 153-163.
God’s confirmation. He did not need the approval of any organization or take a vow to anybody. The only subject that he needed to keep loyalty to was God…That was a period when God directly ruled.”

Most preachers who were active or emerged during the Cultural Revolution and who have also left accounts or testimonies, such as Miao Zhitong and Yang Duojia, claimed to have the gift of healing and exorcism, which they believed was given to them in order to advocate the gospel and glorify God. Many first developed their reputation by performing exorcism and miracles. Local residents, especially the families of sick people, got to know these preachers and Christianity first as exorcists and a healing method and then as evangelists and a form of spirituality, as these preachers first approached them as willing to provide free services to cure illnesses that the families had no other means to deal with.

Miao Zhitong was one of these self-styled travelling preachers, who later became one of the most prominent leaders of house churches in China. Miao was born in Tongxi of Taoshan, Ruian. His mother’s family had a Protestant background for generations. His parents both passed away when he was still young. After graduating from middle school, he worked briefly in a state-owned dairy factory and as a middle school teacher before returning to his home village. In 1966, the first year of the Cultural Revolution, the wife of his friend Jiang Shirong was allegedly possessed by demons. They resorted to all sorts of local deities, but all efforts were in vain. Jiang sought help from Miao. Miao, his uncle and another Christian sung hymns in front of her, which, according to Miao,

---

97 Shehe, “Wenzhou jiaohui guanli moshi qiantan.”

98 According to Shu Chengqian, many Adventist preachers also had the gift of healing, see Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 6 (section 7).
unexpectedly drove the demons away. A few days later, he witnessed another miracle. When his daughter had acute pneumonia, he prayed to God again. Then his daughter marvelously recovered. These events Miao considered to be the signs of God’s calling. He then established a gathering in his village, along with Jiang and several others.  

Miao was elected a member of Ruian county council in the aforementioned 1971 meeting, which he helped to convene. According to his own accounts, he travelled extensively in the Wenzhou region in the 1970s, especially Ruian, Yueqing and Pingyang. He probably travelled to other regions of eastern Zhejiang as well. Though still based in Ruian, his charismatic preaching and theological stances earned him lots of followers over the years. By the time the county council broke up in 1982 on the issue of whether they should participate in the Three-self organizations, Miao had already established his own faction. It was reported that his faction had eleven churches and fifty two gathering places in 1990. In mid-1980, Miao permanently moved from his remote home village in the mountainous Huling district to Li’ao of Tangxia, where his followers concentrated. 

The Local Assembly and the Adventist church did not participate in the county general council. Part of the reason was probably that the former insisted on not giving up their signature practice of “head-covering” (mengtou), that is, requiring female attendees

---


100 “Guanyu Ruian Shi zongjiao wenti diaocha qingkuang de huibao” (Comprehensive report on the investigation of religious situation in Ruian City), December 22, 1990, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-38-6: 34-35.
to cover their heads with a black hat or handkerchief.\textsuperscript{101} The latter, on the other hand, insisted on observing Saturday. However, evidence suggests that adherents of these denominations also made efforts in the end of the 1960s and 1970s to reestablish connections and integrate communities of their respective denominations across the region. Shu Chengqian, the preacher of the Adventist church in Mayu, moved back to Wenzhou from Ruian in 1968 in order to have his sick wife better cared for, probably also to dodge heated factional conflicts within the church. By that time, the Adventists had organized several gatherings in Wenzhou municipality. When Shu’s wife passed away the following year, he was able to fully devote himself to the visits to Adventist communities throughout southern Zhejiang.

As a latecomer and the smallest sect of the Protestant church in Wenzhou, the Adventist church, compared to other sects, probably faced the most serious scarcity of preachers. The southern Zhejiang mission of the Adventist Church was divided into seven independent sections in the early 1950s. This system became simply un-viable when the Cultural Revolution came, as many gatherings needed the presence of preachers and other gatherings were waiting for a preacher in order to be established. Shu therefore, along with other preachers and adherents, visited and tried to connect with almost all Adventist communities belonging to the former southern Zhejiang mission, including Adventist churches of Taizhou and Lishui. Sometimes they were also invited by villages that only had adherents or gathering places of other denominations. The border area of Zhejiang and Fujian was the frontier with Taiwan, hence the political atmosphere was very tense, but Shu and others went to Adventist communities there at least two to three

\textsuperscript{101}“Head-covering” was ruled as a heresy by the underground “Wenzhou regional church” in 1974 (Wenzhou diqu jiaohui). See Qingquan, “Wenzhou jiaohui dashi niandaibiao xia.”
times a year in the early 1970s. Hu Yuming, Shu’s brother-in-law, visited Jinhua of central Zhejiang, Ningbo of eastern Zhejiang, and even Fuzhou and Quanzhou of Fujian during the later part of the Cultural Revolution. They were not welcomed in every place. Besides the risk of being arrested, they were sometimes resisted by local Adventists. For instance, attendees of Adventist gatherings in the Ruian county seat were at most a little more than twenty people during the entire Cultural Revolution. Shu and his fellows also were never able to reach Adventists in most places of Lishui and Taishun of Wenzhou, despite their attempts to do so. However, in other areas, they encouraged and successfully persuaded some people to resume gatherings. In some villages where people already reestablished gatherings, they acted as guest preachers, helped with Bible studies, or led prayer meetings.  

102

The Rise of Wenzhou Protestantism in Local Context

A comparison with other religious traditions sheds further light on the causes and implications of the territorial expansion and development of Protestant organizations in the years 1958-1978.

All Protestant churches, Catholic churches, and Buddhist temples were closed in the county by 1958. The vast majority of village temples for the worship of local deities were subject to the same fate. The level of devastation of leadership significantly varied. The Catholic church and redemptive societies suffered the most, due to alleged ties with

102 Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 7-9, 13-21, 22-24.
the Vatican (in the case of the Catholic church) or the KMT residual forces (in the case of redemptive societies). The hierarchy of the Catholic church in Wenzhou consisted of priests, acolytes (fuji), and catechists (sishi).\textsuperscript{103} Priest Lin Mingzhu of Ruian parish was arrested for his alleged relations with the Legion of Mary in 1952. Priest Huang Haoran of Ruian parish was arrested in 1955.\textsuperscript{104} The number of Catholic catechists, who were instrumental to the growth of converts, “had been decreasing year by year, due to financial problems since the second Sino-Japanese war in Wenzhou.”\textsuperscript{105} The Catholic church in Ruian nevertheless still had seventeen catechists in 1951. Most of the twelve remaining catechists and even some lay leaders of Catholic communities were arrested in the 1955 nationwide strike against Catholics, causing a sweeping panic of “exterminating religion” (miejiao) among local Catholics.\textsuperscript{106} This massive arrest and its aftermath partly explain why Catholics, unlike Protestants, did not seem to have recovered any collective activities in the early 1960s. Two jailed priests never returned. Catholics probably established some house gatherings toward the end of the Cultural Revolution. These were largely concentrated in Mayu under the leadership of Chen Nailiang,\textsuperscript{107} a former student of Ningbo Saint Vincent Seminary who was released from prison in 1965, and catechist

\textsuperscript{103} “Ruian Xian Tianzhujiao dengji zongbiao” (The general register of the Catholic church), May 19, 1951, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-3-12: 129.

\textsuperscript{104} “Guanyu dangqian zongjiao huodong qingkuang de baogao” (Report on current religious activities), April 2, 1957, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-9-85: 65. All Bishops and priests of the entire Wenzhou Diocese have probably been arrested by 1958.


\textsuperscript{106} “Dui Tianzhujiaotu jinxing xuanchuan jiaoyu de qingkuang jianbao” (Brief report on propaganda and education among Catholics), December 7, 1955, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-7-103: 72–74.

Jiang Lianghui. Catholic house gatherings were never as diversified as the Protestant ones, however. By 1981, they only had twenty three gathering places.\textsuperscript{108} Catholics in Jinbao Mountain of Wenzhou municipality, Yishan, Linjiayuan of Pingyang similarly set up bases beginning around the end of the 1960s when some jailed clergy were released.\textsuperscript{109} Chen Nailiang organized adherents to observe holy dates in Pingyang and Wenzhou, but a networked Catholic community never developed during the Cultural Revolution, at least partly due to the lack of leadership and local preachers. Most clergy were in prison for almost the entire duration of the Cultural Revolution.

Redemptive societies were also comparatively silent during the Cultural Revolution, largely due to the ruthless persecution in the 1950s and its aftermath. In the 1950s, redemptive societies were classified as engaging in counterrevolutionary activities, for which the government had zero tolerance, hence all their bases were shut down even earlier than those of other religions. During the Cultural Revolution, their continued ties to counterrevolutionary activities left a vacuum of leadership and limited space for maneuvering.

Village temple and Buddhist activities equally faced the lack of leadership. The purge of traditional elites and confiscation of their properties during the land reform and other campaigns of the 1950s stripped village temples and Buddhist monasteries of both leaders and major patrons. In addition, the expropriation during the land reform of religious land, which village temples and Buddhist monasteries traditionally relied on for

\textsuperscript{108}“Yijiubaer nian zongjiao gongzu qingkuang he jinhou yijian” (Religious work in 1982 and opinions for the future), January 27, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-31-45: 147.

their operations, devastated the relatively closed temple and ritual organizations. Most of them were dissolved by the time of the Cultural Revolution, lacking both leadership and income. The vast majority of monks and nuns returned to secular life after 1958 and ordination had been prohibited since then. There was also an age issue: most ordained monks and nuns who were still alive in the early 1970s were already in their seventies. Though Buddhist gatherings also resurfaced around that time, these monks and nuns were simply too old to lead, resulting in many of these gatherings being organized and led by lay Buddhists. Buddhist gatherings were mainly in hills near villages such as Daluo Mountain, Tangxia, a traditional center of Buddhism in southern Zhejiang, and Jin’ao Moutain, Xincheng, and primarily involved scripture chanting. Collective ritual services were rare due to the lack of clergy.

Besides the lack of leadership, village temple and Buddhist activities faced a thornier problem: the lack of religious space. Both relied heavily on the temple as an operational space, especially for purposes of engaging in collective religious practice. Village temples dedicated to the worship of local deities in particular are tied to the localities. By nature requiring statues of divinities, particular layouts of ritual space and good fengshui for temple locations, collective worship of local deities and the Buddha could never be as mobile as Christian gatherings. Substitutive space might have been set

---

110 The average age of monks and nuns in the entire county was fifty two, based on a 1955 survey of residential Buddhist monks and nuns (“Guanyu Fojiao qingkuang diaocha baogao” (Investigational report on Buddhism), July 14, 1955, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-7-137: 38).

up in some places, but could hardly be a viable and sustainable solution for collective worship.\textsuperscript{112}

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, the majority of village temples either remained closed or had been demolished during the Cultural Revolution. Most of them were occupied by state institutions such as schools, factories and granaries. The political environments did not become amenable to the reclamation of most temples until the 1980s, though a small number of local temples were restored and rebuilt in the early 1970s.\textsuperscript{113} Neither did Buddhist activities return to their traditional sites, the monasteries, the restoration of which only began sporadically around the end of the Cultural Revolution. Thus village temple and Buddhist activities at the collective level only began to return in very limited areas during the Cultural Revolution, though individual worship of local deities and Buddha as well as domestic ritual practices likely never stopped throughout the Maoist era in Ruian.

Looking beyond religious organizations, the early 1970s witnessed the gradual disintegration of the commune—the social unit imposed by the Communist government. Many villagers in Ruian and other counties in the Wenzhou region began to make a living outside the commune system. Some left for other regions and provinces while others ran small businesses or opened workshops.\textsuperscript{114} Viewed in this context, the expansion of Protestant churches during the Cultural Revolution increased not only the

\textsuperscript{112} The staging of communal rituals required money and more importantly cooperation of the entire village and even many villages, which also made collective worship much less flexible than Christian activities.

\textsuperscript{113} “Guanyu dui Huling Qu Chen Wencong, Chen Wenzhu fubian de chuli yijian baogao” (Opinions on handling the feudal restoration case of Chen Shicong and Chen Wenzhu of Huling District), March 30, 1973, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-21-9: 30-33.

\textsuperscript{114} See footnote 63.
relative importance of Protestantism in the local religious ecology but also more broadly the availability of Protestantism as a source of social belonging and communal identity.

**The Rise of Wenzhou Protestantism in National Context**

Wenzhou was not the only region where the Protestant church experienced growth during the Cultural Revolution. Based on church historical records and local gazetteers, the Protestant church’s followers and territory of influence expanded during the same period in at least the following areas: from south to north, Quanzhou, Fuzhou (especially Fuqing County), and Ningde regions of Fujian; Wenling, Xiaoshan and Shangyu counties of Zhejiang; Fuyang Region (especially Fuyang County) of Anhui; Xinyang (especially Gushi County) and Nanyang regions of Henan.\footnote{Quanzhou Shi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Quanzhou shizhi* (Quanzhou City Gazetteer) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 2000), 3558; Cao Yuen et al., eds., *Fuqing shizhi* (Fuqing City Gazetteer) (Xiamen: Xiamendaxue chubanshe, 1994), 969-972; Tang Jinhua et al., eds., *Ningde Diqu zhi* (Ningde region gazetteer) (Beijing: Fangzhi chubanshe, 1998), 1667; Wenling xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Wenling xianzhi* (Wenling County Gazetteer) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1992), 831-832; Xiaoshan Xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Xiaoshan Xianzhi* (Xiaoshan County Gazetteer) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1987), 984; Shangyu Xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Shangyu Xianzhi* (Shangyu County Gazetteer) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1990), 749-750; Fuyang Xian difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Fuyang Xianzhi* (Fuyang County Gazetteer) (Hefei Shi: Huangshan shu she, 1994), 412-413; Fuyang Shi difangzhi bangongshi, ed., *Fuyang Diqu zhi* (Fuyang Region Gazetteer) (Beijing: Fangzhi chubanshe, 1996), 1055-1045; Xinyang Diqu difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Xinyang Diqu zhi* (Xinyang Region Gazetteer) (Beijing: sanlianshudian, 1992), 915-917; Zhang Benle, ed., *Hui huang shi wu nian—Xinyang Diqu juan* (Glorious Fifteen Years—Xinyang Region Volume) (Beijing: Guangming ribao chubanshe, 1995), 322; Nanyang Diqu difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, ed., *Nanyang Diqu zhi* (Nanyang Region Gazetteer) (Zhengzhou Shi: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1994), 457-458.) We certainly should not take for granted accounts and statistics in church historical records and local gazetteers,\footnote{My sources for Xiapu and Wenling counties are from both historical records of local Protestant churches and local gazetteers. Yet my data for other counties and regions all come from published official gazetteers of various kinds from more comprehensive “county gazetteer” (*xianzhi*) to specialized “records of religions” (*zongjiaozhi*) and “records of united front work” (*tongzhanzhi*).} and the latter can be especially problematic in accuracy, completeness, and
consistence. Nevertheless, such records show a basic development trajectory of Protestant churches in the aforementioned areas, which in turn allows us to situate the Wenzhou experience during the Cultural Revolution in national context.

In the Ningde region of Fujian and in Wenling County, Taizhou of Zhejiang, both of which bordered Wenzhou, the Protestant population experienced a sizable increase during the Maoist era. The Protestant church in the Ningde region had 14,602 baptized members and 672 inquirers on the eve of 1949. Those numbers shrunk to 9,958 baptized members and 839 inquirers in 1965. In 1982, however, according to official statistics, those numbers grew to 36,532 baptized members and 9,263 inquirers, bringing the total number of Protestants to almost three times that in 1949. More importantly, the increase in church membership in the region was accompanied by the dissemination of Protestantism to new areas. In Xiapu County, though many Protestant activities remained clandestine after 1966, by 1971 house gatherings spread to more than twenty villages new to Protestantism while the Church gained more than 1,800 new converts. In 1949, the Protestant church in the county had only 34 churches and gathering places with 3,282 members, belonging to the Anglican Church and the Local Assembly. The number of

---

117 For instance, data in local gazetteers, which were official publications, could be filtered for certain ends of the government. The number of religious followers listed could be lower or sometimes higher than actual numbers. The statistics in local gazetteers are often incomplete. Many gazetteers do not have the number of churches and gathering places. Also, we are not entirely clear on how the numbers of religious followers were calculated. The biggest issue for this study, however, is that the vast majority of counties and regions did not investigate the religious situation during the Cultural Revolution. Most of what we have in local gazetteers are statistical data from or after 1980.

118 Tang, Ningde Diqu zhi, 1667.

119 Chen Guiqiu, ed., Xiapu Xian Jidujiao zhi (History of the Protestant Church in Xiapu County) (Xiapu Xian: Xiapu Xian zongjiaozhi bianxiezu, 1992), 49-50.
church and gathering places rose to 52 with 11,862 members in 1980, spreading over all fourteen town[ship]s of the county.\textsuperscript{120}

In Wenling County of the Taizhou region, churches and gathering places were all closed in the 1950s. In some Protestant communities, collective gatherings were forced to discontinue and were not restored until the Cultural Revolution ended in the late 1970s, though adherents might keep practicing at home or go elsewhere for house gatherings. Yet, as church records indicate, other Protestant communities secretly carried on group meetings throughout the entire Maoist period.\textsuperscript{121} Those Protestant communities that remained active at that time each had to disperse to more than two gathering places for activity. The activities of Dapanao church after 1958 even dispersed into seven gathering places, each in a different village. In this fashion, gatherings were established in many villages that had no Protestant tradition or previous presence of Protestants.\textsuperscript{122} My analysis of statistics in church records shows that, of the 116 churches in the county in 2006, 82 churches trace back to the pre-1949 period, respectively belonging to the Anglican Church, the China Inland Mission, the Methodist Church, and the Local Assembly. Of the remaining 32 churches, four originated in the period 1960-1963; eighteen were formed in the years 1966-1976, that is, during the Cultural Revolution. The Adventist Church, which kept separate statistics, also set up new gatherings places in the county in 1949 and 1953. Corresponding to the multiplication of gathering places, the

\textsuperscript{120} Chen, Xiapu Xian Jidujiao zhi, 44, 52.

\textsuperscript{121} See local church historical records: http://www.wlfyzj.com/content.asp?parent=root3%40%D0%D6%B5%DC%BD%CC%BB%E1%40 (Accessed on April 29, 2015)

\textsuperscript{122} See http://www.wlfyzj.com/content.asp?parent=root3%40%B4%F2%E3%DD%E1%AE%BB%F9%B6%BD%BD%CC%CC%C3%40 (Accessed on April 29, 2015)
Protestant population in Wenling also witnessed a great increase during the Maoist era. In 1949, the Protestant church had 16,079 members in Wenling. However, by the end of the Cultural Revolution, according to the estimate of the government, the Protestant population might have reached 50,000.\(^{123}\)

In the Nanyang region of Henan Province, the Protestant church had 18,243 members on the eve of 1949. The statistics in 1985 indicate that there were already 80,825 Protestants in the region.\(^{124}\) In the same province, the number of Protestants in the Xinyang region grew to 21,863 in 1982 from 12,528 in 1949.\(^{125}\) The Protestant church in these regions also expanded its territory during the Cultural Revolution. In Fangcheng County of Nanyang, all 69 churches and gathering places established before 1949 were closed during the Cultural Revolution. However, new gatherings places mushroomed in the period. By 1974, according to an official investigation, Protestants had set up 169 gathering places across the county and the Protestant population increased to 6,338 from the 4,195 of 1949.\(^{126}\) In the gazetteer of Zhenping County of the Nanyang region, we find a similar account: “[during the Cultural Revolution], Protestant activities not only did not stop but even had new developments.”\(^{127}\) An investigation in 1976 shows that the county

\(^{123}\) Wenling xianzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Wenling xianzhi*, 831-832.

\(^{124}\) Nanyang Diqu difangshizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Nanyang Diqu zhi*, 458.

\(^{125}\) Xinyang Diqu difangshizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, *Xinyang Diquzhi*, 916.

\(^{126}\) Wang Dingsen and Zeng Dahai, eds., *Fangcheng xianzhi* (Fangcheng County Gazetteer) (Zhengzhou Shi: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1992), 615.

had 118 gathering places at the time whereas it only had 27 churches and gathering places in 1947.\textsuperscript{128}  
The progress of Protestantism in Nanyang during the Cultural Revolution can be situated in the trajectories of other religions in the same region during the same period. In 1985, the number of mosques reached 95, but had not returned to the 1949 level of 124.\textsuperscript{129}  Also in the same year, 82 Buddhist monasteries had resumed activities but with only eight ordained monks and nuns. That number paled in comparison to the 373 Buddhist temples the region had in 1949.\textsuperscript{130} In 1985, only five Catholic churches with 9,129 attendees had reopened, compared to the 44 churches and 33,897 converts in 1949.\textsuperscript{131} Also in 1985, 48 Daoist pavilions had resumed activities, but this was less than one fifth the number of Daoist pavilions in 1949.\textsuperscript{132} Redemptive societies had the largest group of followers among all religious traditions before 1949, with about 150,000 adherents constituting 120 sects. By 1985, their followers dropped to 11509, less than one tenth the number in 1949 and about 60 sects had disappeared.\textsuperscript{133}  
The foregoing strongly suggests that significant membership growth and territorial expansion of the Protestant church during the Cultural Revolution, counter-intuitive as it is, was not unique to the Wenzhou region. Political repression might have

\textsuperscript{128} For stories of the Protestant church in Fancheng and Tanghe counties of the Nanyang region during the Cultural Revolution, see also Aikman, \textit{Jesus in Beijing}, 74-89.

\textsuperscript{129} Nanyang Diqu difangshizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, \textit{Nanyang Diqu zhi}, 448.

\textsuperscript{130} Nanyang Diqu difangshizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, \textit{Nanyang Diqu zhi}, 443-444.

\textsuperscript{131} Nanyang Diqu difangshizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, \textit{Nanyang Diqu zhi}, 453.

\textsuperscript{132} Nanyang Diqu difangshizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, \textit{Nanyang Diqu zhi}, 440-441.

\textsuperscript{133} Nanyang Diqu difangshizhi bianzuan weiyuanhui, \textit{Nanyang Diqu zhi}, 461.
stimulated similar patterns of development elsewhere in the country. However, what allowed or facilitated such developments of the Protestant church in other areas has yet to be found out. In areas with such developments, it is also crucial to look into institutional transformation, if any, before a comprehensive comparison with Wenzhou can be done.

**Conclusion**

It has long been held that political campaigns during the Cultural Revolution had completely silenced collective activities of all religious traditions in China. But in this study, I have presented a very different picture of the religious situation at that time. This study demonstrates that political repression in the years 1958-1978, while ravaging all religious traditions, more importantly provoked a far-reaching transformation of the Protestant church in Ruian and the entire Wenzhou region. The crucial years of 1958 and 1966 each marked an apex of religious persecution. The local campaign of “the great leap in religious work,” occurring concurrently with the nationwide Great Leap Forward, brought the conversion and destruction of religious sites to a whole new level. Christian communities became deeply divided as many members renounced their Christian faith and some were even mobilized to attack fellow Christians. The Red Guard campaign in 1966 again incited an extreme, but ephemeral, violence against religious adherents.

Political campaigns and the hostile environment forced collective religious activities to go underground and branch out. Yet the survival paths of different religions critically diverged. The activities of redemptive societies and the Catholic church were severely suppressed in the 1950s and the “counterrevolutionary” stigma accompanied them ever since, making their mass development hardly possible during the Cultural
Revolution. Similarly, the return of village temple and Buddhist activities at the collective level was limited to very small areas until the end of the Cultural Revolution due to the lack of leadership and the absence of religious space.

Among all religious traditions, however, the Protestant church was the most successful in diversifying its congregations, largely due to the pre-1949 indigenization efforts of Protestant denominations, which left a large pool of native preachers, church elders and deacons, ensuring the continuation of church leadership amidst political storms. Some Protestant communities might have further split in the diversification process, but overall the survival strategies unexpectedly gave new vitality to Protestant communities. Gatherings not only mushroomed but also, more importantly, expanded to new territories. By the time the Cultural Revolution ended in the late 1970s, gathering places had been created in almost every town[ship] in the county, while the commune system that the Communist government utilized to reorganize rural societies was quickly disintegrating.

Two other concurrent processes, unification and coordination, further empowered the growth and expansion of Protestant churches. A loosely organized countywide and regional network was created in the early 1970s among gatherings of the United Methodist Church, the China Inland Mission, and the China Jesus Independent Church, which decided to put aside most of their pre-1949 denominational differences. Similar processes of coordination also took place within the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Local Assembly. The importance of countywide and regional networks lay in their facilitation of evangelical work by a rising group of young travelling preachers. With the development of the paidan system, a worker co-assigning system unique to Wenzhou, these travelling preachers, who eventually rose to leadership, were able to reach out to
and evangelize not only people in their home towns or counties but also in the entire region and even beyond.

All in all, the Cultural Revolution inadvertently prompted the territorial expansion, institutional transformation, and membership growth of the Protestant church in Ruian and the Wenzhou region. Compared to other religions, Protestantism became more available as a source of social belonging and communal identity. The development during the Cultural Revolution also paved the way for the boom of Protestantism in the region in the reform period.

Yet the Wenzhou case was hardly unique. My preliminary research shows that the hostile sociopolitical environments similarly provoked the Protestant church’s territorial expansion and membership growth during the Cultural Revolution in some areas of Fujian and Zhejiang (areas other than Wenzhou) of southeast China, Anhui of central China, and Henan of north China. Future studies might not reveal the same growth pattern for the majority of rural areas in China. However, findings of growth in some regions are significant enough to warrant considering a new paradigm for understanding the phenomenal rise of Protestantism in contemporary China. It is worth exploring the significance that the Church’s progress in some key regions during the Cultural Revolution has on its contemporary boom. Those areas where the Protestant church experienced the expansion of territory and converts during the Cultural Revolution have proven to be the motors of the Protestant church’s evangelical work in China. Since the late 1970s or even earlier, preachers in Wenzhou of Zhejiang and Nanyang of Henan have travelled not just around their own regions but also to other regions of their
provinces and even beyond. In a parallel process, Christian entrepreneurs from Wenzhou have been actively disseminating gospel through their nationwide network of businesses and factories among locals and migrant workers. In these processes, the Wenzhou model and other models of church development originating in the Cultural Revolution have very likely taken roots in new areas. Future research has to find out what such models of development entail and how they have influenced Protestant churches in contemporary China.

134 Adventists in Wenzhou have been travelling extensively in Zhejiang, their home province, during the Cultural Revolution (Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi). As early as 1981, they have established house gatherings in Yixing County of neighboring Jiangsu, according to local gazetteers (Xie Aoping et al., eds., Yixing xianzhi (Yixing Gazetteer)(Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1990), 792). Around the same period, Adventist preacher Huang Longbiao of Ruian and his son went to the remote Jilin Province in Northeastern China where they also established house gatherings (Tian Zhihe et al., eds., Changchun shizhi: Shaoshuminzuzhi, Zongjiaozhi (Changchun Gazetteer: Ethnic Minority and Religion) (Jilin Wenshi chubanshe, 1998), 14). For the situation in Henan, see Aikman, Jesus in Beijing, 74-89.

Chapter Four

Mixed Blessings: Flourishing and Schisms of Protestant Churches, 1978-2014

By 1978, the year when Chinese government officially declared the ending of Cultural Revolution, Protestants in Ruian had established a countywide network of family gathering spots that expanded into many new villages across the county, though all churches both Protestant and Catholic, most Buddhist monasteries and village temples remained closed at that time.\(^1\) The network consisted of two hundred and seventy family gathering spots, more than twice the number of Protestant communities in 1949.\(^2\) Church membership also had substantial growth during the Cultural Revolution. A history of local Protestant church estimated that “every year there were several thousand people baptized, more than eighty percent of them being youth and the middle-aged.”\(^3\) Local authorities estimated that there were a total of 60,185 Protestants in 1981, more than four times the statistical number in 1956,\(^4\) indicating a trend that echoes the account of local churches, though there is probably no way to know the precise volume of increase of Protestants under Maoism.

In the few fears following 1978, the government set off to “reinstate religious policy” (luoshi zongjiao zhengce) and adopt the milder approach to religion that had been

---


2 A comparison of locations of gatherings spots and churches shows that many gathering spots had no church in proximity before the 1960s—a clear sign that Protestant churches had extended to new territory during the Cultural Revolution.

3 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 18.

under strong criticism within the party since 1957 and was virtually repudiated during the Cultural Revolution. The new guideline of the religious policy, which reinstated the religious freedom prescribed in the 1954 Constitution and asked for the reopening of churches, seemed to be a great opportunity for the return of church buildings and legalization of local Protestant organizations. Yet once again, as under Maoism, the guideline demanded loyalty of the church to the party state. The government required religious communities to register and organize themselves, from the central to the local level, within the framework of religious associations that the government attempted to implement in the 1950s, which essentially was a proxy to facilitate the state control of religion.

Protestant communities in Ruian faced both opportunities and challenges in this crucial historical moment. They could take the opportunity to return to the church, end the unstable and somewhat underground status of their activities and further the development of the church. On the other hand, it was also challenging for Ruian Protestants to operate within the rules and institutions that the government set up solely to keep the church under its firm grip, which, many church leaders found, was unacceptable. Some simply did not trust and were not willing to cooperate with the government after thirty years of ordeals under Maoism.

The main goal of this chapter is to illustrate the ways that Protestant communities reacted to the changes to the political and institutional environments in the early reform period as well as its consequences on the Protestant churches in the Wenzhou region and beyond. It highlights the Maoist legacy on the formation of today’s flourishing yet deeply

---

divided Protestant church in China. This study focuses on Protestant communities. But it examines Protestant communities in comparison with other religious communities, in particular the Catholic communities, hoping to help understand why Protestantism has stood out among all religious traditions in the contemporary religious revival.

In this chapter, I show that the 1980s was a period of great prosperity, but also disunion and chaos, for Protestant communities in Ruian and Wenzhou. The spread of Christianity and the fast decay of Buddhism during the Maoist era, especially the Cultural Revolution, reinforced the government’s tendency to prioritize the regulation of Christianity in the reform era. Many Protestant communities, unlike their Catholic counterparts, did not insist on uncompromising stances in their attitude toward the Three-self church and were able to fully exploit the benefits of being the “regulatory priority,” which in turn greatly precipitated the return of old churches and the legalization of new churches. The polarized reactions to the Three-self church within Protestant communities, however, soon led to the disintegration of the brief and fragile unity among local Protestant communities. Allies established among local Protestant communities during the Cultural Revolution fell apart. Schisms permeated and came to define internal dynamics of Protestant churches in Wenzhou since then.

Reinstatement of Religious Policy and “Regulatory Priority”

The Chinese government initiated a series of critical policy changes on the regulation of religious affairs in the early 1980s. In July 1980, the State Council approved the proposal to return occupied properties that historically belonged to religious
organizations, and settle related issues.\textsuperscript{6} This was the central government’s first regulation on properties of religious organizations in the reform era. The regulation would become the most cited official policy in the reclamation of churches, but it did not seem to be immediately implemented in many places, and for a while local communities like those in Ruian were probably not aware of its content or even existence.\textsuperscript{7} In March 1982, the central government issued “Basic Viewpoints and Policies on the Religious Question during Our Country’s Socialist Period” (\textit{Guanyu woguo shehuizhuyi shiqi zongjiao wenti de jiben guandian he jiben zhengce}), the Communist Party’s guideline for religious affairs after the Maoist era (commonly known as Document No.19). It renounced the use of coercive measures to stamp out “religion” and reiterated the Party’s “religious freedom” policy. It also stipulated the “selective” and “gradual” re-opening of some sites of legal religion.

Both overall institutional reinstatement and the central government’s specific concerns in the realm of religion motivated the readjustment of religious policy in the early reform period. When the central goal switched to economic development, there was a period of “\textit{bo luan fan zheng}” (to correct wrongs and return things to the normal) in the end of 1970s and early 1980s. The policy aimed at settling historical issues, reaffirming policies “distorted” during the Cultural Revolution, and resurrecting the government

\textsuperscript{6} “Guowuyuan pi zhuan zongjiao shiwuju guojia jianwei deng danwei guanyu luoshi zongjiao tuanti fangchan zhengce deng wenti de baogao” (The State Council’s approval and transmission of the report by Religious Affairs Bureau, National Development Committee, and others concerning implementation of policies on properties of religious organizations ), July 16, 1980, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-31-34: 16-19.

\textsuperscript{7} Buddhist leader Pan Yiheng told me that he did not know the policy until he wrote a letter to ask the national Buddhist association regarding the restoration of Sagely Longevity Chan Temple of Xianyan in 1981. “At that time Shanghai government did implement the policy. But [government] in other places put aside the policy.” He explained: “[speaking from] the local government side, you asked schools and factories to move out, where did you want them to move? Therefore the policy was put aside.” Interview with Pan Yiheng, May 15, 2013.
apparatus. Echoing the spirit of policy restitution, the united front work to which religious affairs are attached also had its own policy restitution intending to clean up the leftist influence and emphasizing solidarity. Changes to religious policy, that is, a “return” to the more mild policy on religion before 1957, therefore corresponded to this move in united front work.

The most immediate impetus for the formulation of new religious policy, however, was worries about losing control of religious communities in the critical moment of opening-up. Thirty years of Maoist rule had not eliminated religion, only frightened religious communities and pushed them into underground activities. The underground status of religious activities made it difficult for the government to grasp the actual development of religious activities. What was even more worrisome was the antagonism against the government that accumulated in the Maoist years, which, as some united front work officials pointed out, could “push religious followers to the side of enemy,” especially “overseas hostile forces.” This peril was real and imminent in their eyes.

Overseas Chinese and other churches, in particular those based in Hong Kong and Taiwan, were attempting to bring their influence back to the Chinese mainland. With the assistance of Christians in the Chinese mainland, they smuggled tens of thousands of Bibles,

---


9 Zhang, Zhang Ziyi wenji, 351, 397-398, 413-414. It was actually not a return. Even before 1957, there was never a stable policy line on religion. The religious policy in the period 1949-1957 fluctuated between marginalizing and eliminating by coercive measures, and fostering unity with religious communities (Fuk-Tsang Ying, “The CPC’s Policy on Protestant Christianity, 1949–1957: an Overview and Assessment,” Journal of Contemporary China 23, no.89 (2014): 884-901). The guideline of new religious policies in the early 1980s was close to the later of the spectrum.

religious pamphlets, and other materials into Guangzhou and other cities along China’s coast. Overseas churches were reconnecting with churches in China, oftentimes in the name of visiting families or making investments.\textsuperscript{11} All of these urgently demanded changes in the regulation of religion in order to allow the government to contain religious communities and the political threats that they could potentially pose. Since coercion and blunt repression under Maoism proved to be a failure, a relatively soft stance on religion stood out to be the government’s choice.

While the new religious policy applied to all legal religions, the government notably attached different levels of priority to different legal religions in actual, especially local, administration, depending on a number of factors such as the ways that the central government perceived different religions, the goals that the government pursued in the control of different religions, and the history of different religions in various regions. Back in the Maoist era, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism all represented different issues to the government. Catholicism and Protestantism were tied to imperialism. The goals of the government were to force Christians to sever their connections to overseas churches and to nurture Three-self organizations that would comply with the needs of the government.\textsuperscript{12}

The government’s concern for Buddhism in traditional Han regions as an organizational force was certainly not as grave as for Christianity, since Buddhism in

\textsuperscript{11} “Zhongyang guanyu dizhi waiguo jiaohui dui wo jinxing zongjiao shentou wenti de qingshi baogao” (Report and request by the Central Committee on the issue of resisting infiltration of foreign churches), March 4, 1982, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-28-47: 1-12. See also Zheng Datong (Mengfu zhi lu – Jidu li shiyi de rensheng (The Path of Blessing—Poetic Life in Christ)(Hong Kong: Xundao weili zhongxin, 2010), chapter 22) for the account of a church leader on their contacts with outside world at that time.

\textsuperscript{12} Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, The Religious Question in Modern China (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 158-159.
those regions was much more loosely organized and had much fewer foreign connections. Buddhism was more linked to feudalism in the perception of central officials. In the 1950s and 1960s, the land reform and other political campaigns had stripped Buddhist communities of massive tracts of land and eliminated the class of landlords that were traditionally patrons of Buddhist monasteries. Curiously, lay Buddhists (other than household Buddhists [jushi]), unlike lay Christians, very rarely appeared on official statistics in the Maoist era, hence it’s possible that, depending on the definition, the number of Buddhists in Han regions could be much bigger than Christians. The absence of statistical data on lay Buddhists was perhaps out of strategic concerns to downplay what officials called the mass foundation (qunzhong jichu) of religion. The number of lay Buddhists remained missing in governmental statistics of religion in the 1980s.

In Zhejiang as elsewhere in Han regions, after thirty years of Maoist rule, political linkage of Buddhism to feudalism was no longer an issue for the government. The provincial authorities estimated more than seventy percent of the population in the province were believers in Buddhism in 1940. However, after 1949, with the annihilation of the landlord class and feudalism, Buddhism rapidly fell into a period of decay. Buddhism monasteries lost most of its land. In Wenzhou by the end of the

---


14 In contrast, the Republican government seemed to have kept tracking the changes to the number of both Christians and Buddhists as well as followers of other legal religions. According to the Zhejiang Department of Civil Affairs, by 1940, Buddhists occupied 70.47 percent whereas Christians (Protestants and Catholics) only occupied 10.65 percent of total 663231 religious believers in the province. See Zhejiang minzhengting (Zhejiang Department of Civil Affair), *Zhejiang minzheng yuekan*, 4(1940): 149.

15 This probably has also to do with variations in organizational level of different religions. Buddhists in comparison are much more loosely organized, which made it difficult to investigate the number of Buddhists.

16 See footnote 14.
Cultural Revolution ordination of new monks and nuns had discontinued for almost two decades. There were very few Buddhist gatherings operating on a routine basis in the region at the time.\textsuperscript{17}

Yet, the survival and expansion of Christian churches in Zhejiang under Maoism made the two agendas, isolating Chinese Christians from foreign influence and keeping them under the control of the government, all the more pressing when China reopened itself to the world in the 1980s. In 1949, the province had seventeen percent of the total Protestant population in the country, which represented the largest share of Protestants among all provinces.\textsuperscript{18} Zhejiang also had numerous Catholics at that time. A history of Catholicism in Zhejiang estimated the province to have nearly 95,000 Catholics in 1949.\textsuperscript{19} In contrast to Buddhism, Christian churches in Zhejiang successfully endured Maoism. The Christian population continued to grow. The government estimated that the total number of Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) in 1983 was more than 600,000, twice the number in 1949.\textsuperscript{20} Protestant churches even expanded their territory during the Cultural Revolution (e.g. in Wenzhou as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter). In the same period, however, the pro-government Three-self organizations

\textsuperscript{17} Interview with a prominent local Buddhist leader Pan Yiheng, also a former head of Ruian Buddhist Association, who endured the entire difficult time for Buddhism in Ruian under Maoism. Interview Pan Yiheng, May 15, 2013.

\textsuperscript{18} 41.5 percent of near 200,000 Zhejiang Protestants were distributed in Wenzhou, according to a calculation of Ying Fuk-tsang. Ying’s data come from new local gazetteers that local government published. See Fuk-Tsang Ying, “Zhongguo Jidujiao de quyu fazhan: 1918, 1949, 2004 (The Regional Development of Protestant Christianity in China: 1918, 1949 and 2004),” \textit{Hanyu Jidujiao Xueshu Lumping} (Sino-Christian Studies), 3: 171.

\textsuperscript{19} Zhejiang Sheng zongjiaozhi bianjibu, ed., \textit{Zhejiang Sheng zongjiaozhi ziliao huibian yi: Tianzhujiao} (Documents on History of Religion in Zhejiang, volume one: Catholicism), unpublished manuscript, 1993, 47.

established at various levels in the early 1950s virtually disbanded after the “great leap forward of religious work” in 1957. Since the early 1970s when China normalized its relations with the US, local authorities in Zhejiang began to notice and raised concerns of attempts by local Christians to reconnect with foreign churches and penetration by the latter. Their worries only became more evident after 1978 with rapidly increased communications with the outside world.

For local authorities in Zhejiang, regulatory priority in religious affairs therefore inevitably leaned toward Christianity in the early reform period. Zhejiang Party secretary Wang Fang made it clear the status of Christianity as regulatory priority in a 1983 provincial religious affairs meeting: “Our province is one of the key provinces in terms of religious work. We have 700,000 religious followers. Protestants and Catholics are the majority. Other religious groups are the minority.” Zhejiang governor Liu Feng said in another provincial religious affair meeting in 1991: “religions of faith [in our province] are concentrated. Number one is Protestantism, having 960,000 followers, and number two is Catholicism, having 130,000 followers. Therefore we have to prioritize focal regions and focal religions.” Liu’s message cannot be clearer: Buddhism and other legal

---

21 “Guanyu daji liyong zongjiao jinxing pohuai huodong de fangeming fenzi de qingshi baogao” (Report and request about a crackdown on counterrevolutionaries exploiting religion to conduct destructive activities), February 2, 1973, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-21-60: 14-17.

22 “Wang Fang shujii zai quansheng zongjiao gongzhuo huiyishang de jianghua” (The speech of Secretary Wang Fang at the provincial religious work meeting), June 22, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-31-63: 36. It is curious that how Zhejiang government came up with this figure. Zhejiang had about 600,000 Christians in 1983. So it is very likely that either the government did not add the data of lay Buddhists or the number of people self-identified as lay Buddhist was extremely low at the time.

23 “Liu Feng tongzhi zai quansheng zongjiao gongzhuo huiyishang de jianghua” (Comrade Liu Feng’s speech at the provincial religious work meeting), November 24, 1991, Ruian Municipal Archives 49-43-5: 63.
religions in Zhejiang were minority religions administratively, and Christianity was a focal religion (*zhongdian zongjiao*).

It is against the background of Christianity as a “regulatory priority” in religious work in Zhejiang that the remainder of the chapter will illustrate groups of Christian communities’ different interactions with the new religious policy as well as dramatic yet far-reaching effects such interactions had on the development of Christianity in Wenzhou today.

**The Legalization and Proliferation of Protestant Churches**

The most urgent issue for religious communities in Ruian as elsewhere in China after the Cultural Revolution was to restore religious sites, the vast majority of which were occupied, demolished, or closed. The Chinese government shared a similar concern though out of different purposes. The Document No.19 made “appropriately arranging religious activity sites” one of two priorities raised for religious work officials and considered it a “crucial material condition of religious normalization.” Yet the number of religious sites planned to be restored (*ying luoshi*, literally meaning “ought to be implemented”) in Ruian differed significantly between Buddhism and Christianity. Christianity as regulatory priority in religious work was given disproportionately more quota and governmental assistance in the return of religious sites. All seventeen Catholic churches were included in religious sites to be restored. Fifty nine Protestant

---

24 The other task was to “let patriotic organizations fully play their roles.”

25 The difference in political arrangement, which was a critical instrument of united front work, was also pronounced. In the 1980s, six Protestant leaders and two Catholic leaders were selected as people’s political consultative committee member whereas only one Buddhist leader was arranged as the committee member.
churches were qualified, including all churches Protestant communities created before 1949. For Buddhism, the quota was fifty six temples, less than fifteen percent of the number of Buddhist temples in the early 1950s.

Among the quotas assigned to each religion, two Catholic churches and thirty-two Protestant churches were returned and reopened “with the approval of the [county] government” (zhengfu pizhun) by 1990, a euphemism for “after direct interference by the county government.” Christian communities retrieved five Catholic churches and eighteen Protestant churches after negotiations with occupying entities, in some cases with the mediation of lower level governments (e.g., town or district governments). In contrast, governmental interference in the case of Buddhist temples in the 1980s was stunningly low. Though Buddhists managed to get fifty two of fifty four monasteries in the quota returned, none of them was returned “with the approval of the [county] government.” In other words, Buddhists were pretty much left to fend for themselves in seeking the return of temples.

---

26 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-38-6: 2-3. Those thirty seven temporary meeting spots established before 1949 were not included.

27 It is unclear how the county government selected and decided the number of Buddhist temples to be restored in Ruian.

28 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-38-6: 3.

29 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-38-6: 3. The overall progress of the return of Buddhist temples was not necessarily smoother and quicker than Christian churches. A Concise History of Buddhism in Ruian written by Pan Yiheng listed 489 monasteries that were still active in the late 1940s (Pan Yiheng, Zhenan Ruian Fojiaozhi (History of Buddhism in Ruian of Southern Zhejiang), internal document, ca.1992). Only one hundred and nineteen of them were returned or rebuilt between 1978 and 1991. For the county seat and the suburb, the ratio is 23.81 percent. Ten of forty two Buddhist temples were restored by 1991. Seventy six among one hundred seventy eight temples, that is, 42.7 percent, were returned or rebuilt in Xincheng and Tangxia of Tang River basin. Yet in sharp contrast, only ten of one hundred nineteen Buddhist temples, that is, 0.08 percent, were returned or rebuilt in western mountains, including Huling, Taoshan, and Gaolou. For Ma and Xianjiang in the plain areas to the south of Feiyun River, the ratio is respectively six out of ninety two (0.06 percent) and thirteen out of sixty one (21.31 percent).
What is equally striking is, within Christianity, the difference between Catholics and Protestants in their attitudes toward the government, which has significantly impacted the extent to which each benefited from the status of Christianity as “regulatory priority.” The conditions of Catholic communities in Ruian were certainly not as good as Protestant churches though they all had to operate without a formal church. In 1982, none of the seventeen Catholic churches had been restored. Only four Catholic communities reportedly had activities. According to a joint investigation by provincial, city and county officials in July 1981, only a portion of Catholics regularly attended meetings in Li’ao of Tangxia District, which had one of those four Catholic communities. The number of Catholics in 1982 had increased by about two and half times in comparison to 1949, which was just a little higher than the total population growth rate during the same period.

Catholics in Wenzhou were much less capable of benefitting from “regulatory priority” status because they kept their resistance and adamantly refused to cooperate with the authorities. The clergymen released from prison reestablished the Roman Catholic diocese of Wenzhou soon after the Cultural Revolution. The diocese also reconnected with the Vatican and insisted on two “no touches”: “no touch with the government and no touch with patriotic associations.” The Wenzhou Patriotic Catholic Association established in 1980 virtually had no operations for at least ten years. The Ruian Patriotic Catholic Association was only established in 1999, though the county government had planned it since 1982. The Roman Catholic church had developed

30 “Guanyu Tangxia gongshe zongjiao qingkuang ji Li’ao gongshe xinyang zongjiao qingkuang” (A preliminary investigation of religious situation in Tangxia Commune and Li’ao Commune), July 2, 1981, Ruian Municipal Archives 49-33-18: 18. It is unclear how “Catholic” was defined in this report. Local Catholics seemed to report all of their nuclear family members as Catholics, including those newborns, to local authorities in the 1950s, whereas no such case is found among the surveys of Protestant population.

31 Ruian Municipal Archives 49-43-5: 36-37.
twenty one gathering spots by the end of 1980s. Catholics restored seven churches were restored by then, but only one organized a “church affairs regulation team” (tangwu guanli xiaozu), a sign of official recognition. In the entire Wenzhou region in 1990, local authorities believed that more than ninety percent of Catholics were still under the influence of “underground forces” (dixia shili), that is, Catholic churches royal to the Vatican.32

The Protestant responses to the new religious policy were polarized, but most people in the very beginning did not refuse to reconnect with the government. In Ruian, the County Council of Communication Meeting, a countywide network of five Protestant congregations, except the Seventh Day Adventist Church and some communities of the Local Assembly, reorganized in June 1980. The position of general manager of the Council was abolished and managers of each section (pianqu) were placed into the council, which in retrospect was seemingly a strategic move by those who were pro-Three-self.33 After reshuffling, those who supported the creation of the county Three-self church had the majority. In July, the general council formally voted to support the Three-self church.34 Some Protestant leaders left the council in protest, but the majority of council leaders plus some leaders of the Seventh Day Adventist church participated in and established in 1981 a Three-self church containing Ruian County Protestant Three-

32 Ruian Municipal Archives 49-43-5: 36.

33 A section roughly corresponded to an administrative district. Tangxia was the only exception. It has two sections.

34 Ruian jiaohui, Ruian jiaohui shi, 22-24.
self Patriotic Committee (Ruian Jidujiao Sanzi Aiguoweiyouhui) and Ruian Protestant Council (Ruian Jidujiao Xiehui).\textsuperscript{35}

The reestablishment of the Three-self church created a platform for Protestants (that other religions did not enjoy at the time) that allowed them to reach out to the government in a crucial period of religious development. The county’s Buddhist association was formed in the end of 1988 and the organization of the patriotic Catholic association was even later in 1999.\textsuperscript{36}

Christians and church observers have for long viewed the Three-self church as merely a puppet for the government to control Christianity, but which is not entirely true. In the 1980s, the Three-self church played a pivotal role in restoring churches. The central government in 1980 mandated the return of religious properties to religious organizations only.\textsuperscript{37} The church restoration procedures that Ruian county government issued in 1982 also stipulated that only religious organizations were qualified to apply for the return of churches. A difficult issue for local officials before the establishment of the Three-self church was to identify legal religious organizations. Because no law recognized local Christian communities as legitimate organizations, the return of churches could only be negotiated in an informal way between relevant parties (e.g. local Christian communities and occupiers of church buildings). Even with a negotiated

\textsuperscript{35} The Protestant/Catholic council was a new setup created within the Three-self (self-governance, self-support and self-propagation) church and implemented nationwide since the 1980s. The division of labor between the committee and the council, according to the Three-self church itself, was that the former aims at promoting unity of Christians and the Three-self movement whereas the latter is in charge of internal affairs of the church such as theological education and publication.

\textsuperscript{36} One reason I learned in an interview with Pan Yiheng is that monks were traumatized and did not want to take the responsibility. Master Daofa, the first head of Buddhist Association hesitated to take the position for years until he was finally persuaded by Master Yuanche, a friend and the general secretary of national Buddhist association at the time.

\textsuperscript{37} Ruian Municipal Archives 4-31-34: 16-19.
agreement, Christian groups could not guarantee that the return of their churches would actually be implemented. The county government’s concerns were even greater, as being left out of the negotiation process meant that they could not have effective control over local churches, which was an essential purpose of church reopening per the central government’s directives. All county governments in the entire Wenzhou region faced the same issue before the formation of the Three-self church.\textsuperscript{38}

After the formation of the Ruian Three-Self church in July 1982, the Three-self committee suggested to the county government: “some district and commune leaders proposed that regarding the issue of [reopening] churches, it ought to be the patriotic organization that files the petition. Once the county government approved, local [government] leaders should do their work to carry it out.”\textsuperscript{39} They said that making the Three-self committee the proxy in church reopening “is conducive to building up the authority of the Three-self patriotic organization.”\textsuperscript{40} The suggestion was accepted.\textsuperscript{41} In the same year, the Three-self committee first asked to reopen Lower village church at Xinmin Commune, Xincheng. This request was immediately approved. The next year, the county government formally issued a notification, requesting the establishment of a church affairs committee at Lower village church. The main hall and parts of the attachments were returned. In 1986, the remaining property issues were settled between

\textsuperscript{38} “There was no church that was reopened at the lead of the government….Yet by March of the year (1981), in the entire[Wenzhou] region, the number of religious activity sites, which reopening were spontaneously resolved, has reached near one hundred.” See Ruian Municipal Archives 7-29-46: 31.

\textsuperscript{39} “Guanyu kaifang Xinmin Xiacun jiaotang de baogao” (Report on reopening the Lower village church at Xinmin Commune), November 20, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-3-50: 58-59.

\textsuperscript{40} Ruian Municipal Archives 4-3-50: 58-59.

\textsuperscript{41} In the registration of religious properties later, all churches have to be nominally registered in name of the Three-self church since they are considered legal organization of Christianity.
Lower village government and the county Three-self committee with the mediation of the county government.\textsuperscript{42} Once this pattern was proven viable, in November 1984, the county government authorized at once a total of “seventeen Protestant churches to be Protestant activity sites (\textit{jidujiao huodong changsuo})…the applicable church properties…should be returned to religious organizations.”\textsuperscript{43} Property issues regarding major churches at eight districts were eventually settled pursuant to this notification. By early 1995, fifty four of fifty nine churches, that is, nearly ninety two percent of the churches that Protestants had in 1949, have been returned, with only a few cases remaining to be settled. At least thirty seven of those fifty four churches were reestablished through the collaboration of the Three-self church with the county government.\textsuperscript{44}

In addition to those fifty nine old churches, official permission was given to the construction of new church buildings in a few cases. One of them is Qianbu church of Xincheng. It is the largest among all communities of Local Assembly in Ruian. The community did not have a formal church building before 1949, and therefore initially was not on the list of churches to be reopened, though its membership had significantly grown during the Maoist years. Only with the petition of the Three-self church was Qianbu church later allocated a piece of land to build a permanent church.\textsuperscript{45} The reason that the Three-self church gave was that nearby Lower village church, historically the China

\textsuperscript{42} “Guanyu jiejue Xincheng Xiacun jidujiaotang fangchan yiliu wenti de qingshi” (Request of settling the remaining problems on Protestant church at Lower village, Xincheng), March 26, 1986, Ruian Municipal Archives 72-19-6: 42-46.

\textsuperscript{43} “Guanyu huifu shiqi zuo jidujiaotang de tongzhi” (Notification on restoring seventeen Protestant churches), November 10, 1984, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-35-16: 17-18.

\textsuperscript{44} Ruian jiaohui, \textit{Ruian jiaohui shi}, 29.

\textsuperscript{45} Ruian jiaohui, \textit{Ruian jiaohui shi}, 30.
Inland Mission’s headquarter in Ruian, which was already overcrowded during Sunday meetings, could not possibly hold over two thousand members of Qianbu church. This for sure posed an issue to county officials as the central government required to channel Christians to sanctioned church meetings rather than family assembling in order to keep control of Christian communities.

Unlike those aforementioned churches, however, most newly erected churches in the 1980s and early 1990s were neither on the initial official list of Protestant churches to be restored nor given any formal permission for construction from the government. To take the Seventh Day Adventist church as an example, it was the smallest among six Protestant denominations in 1949. They only had three churches and a few temporary gathering spots at that time. However, by 1992, besides those three churches that had been restored, six of the eight remaining Adventist communities had built new churches.\footnote{Shu Chengqian, \textit{Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi} (Memoirs of Fifty Years Life in Church), unpublished manuscript, 2002.} None of those six churches had the permission for construction from the county government.

The construction of new churches was on the one hand motivated by the hope to secure and further the development of the church through the creation of a permanent gathering place, and on the other hand greatly encouraged by the accommodating attitudes of local authorities. Most churches built without official permission, plus the church organizations attached to them, were allowed to register themselves with the government as long as the Protestant communities participated in or admitted the
leadership of the Three-self church, sometimes paying a certain amount of fine.\textsuperscript{47} In the case of the Seventh Day Adventist church, for instance, because Shu Chengqian, the most important leader, and some other leaders participated in the Three-self church, their new churches were soon acknowledged.\textsuperscript{48}

In this fashion, the number of “patriotic associations” (\textit{aiguohui}), that is, legally recognized churches in Ruian had a leap in a short period against the backdrop of a “building-church fever” (\textit{jiantang re}) that swept the entire Wenzhou region in the 1980s and early 1990s. By 1990, Three-self churches spiked to 126, including sixty seven of a total of eighty nine newly built churches.\textsuperscript{49} In 1995, the total number of Three-self churches reached 185, including 131 newly constructed churches.\textsuperscript{50}

The accommodation of local authorities to newly erected churches was above all grounded in local realities. Though the central government only asked to selectively open a small number of churches, the expansion of Protestant churches in Ruian during the Maoist years made it unrealistic to do so. After thirty years, Protestants not only greatly increased in number but also became more widely distributed throughout the whole county. It was almost impossible to squeeze a Protestant population that has multiplied into those fifty nine churches initially permitted to reopen. Equally if not more important, the political needs of the Chinese government in its interactions with Protestant churches

\textsuperscript{47} Zhu Yujing, “Guojia tongzhi, difang zhengzhi yu Wenzhou de Jidujiao” (State Rule, Local Politics and Christianity in Wenzhou) (PhD Dissertation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2011), 158.

\textsuperscript{48} In contrast, a sect led by Chen Dengyong, which separated itself from other Adventist groups, did not recognize or join the Three-self church. They could not be legally recognized as the heir of old Adventist churches nor the churches they built.

\textsuperscript{49} Ruian Municipal Archives 1-38-6: 32.

\textsuperscript{50} Five of fifty nine old churches were still not retrieved.
facilitated the acceptance of new churches. The guideline of the central government’s new religious policy in the 1980s was to channel Christians from underground (*dixia*) to above-ground (*dishang*), and from family gatherings to church meetings. In this situation, allowing the construction and recognition of new churches was in accord with the principle of channeling Christians into formally recognized churches.

**Schisms among Protestant Churches**

Legalization and proliferation of churches were not the entire story of the interactions of Protestants in Ruian and Wenzhou with the new political and institutional environments of the 1980s. There was another side of the story that local Protestants would not consider a blessing. As Protestant leaders sought to exploit the new religious policy to retrieve, rebuild and/or legalize their churches, tensions and rifts, which already existed within the church, also deepened sharply. All things related to the Three-self church once again permeated every major aspect of church life. Power struggles and personal enmities were repackaged as differences in choices regarding the Three-self church. Theological disagreement blended with disputes on the Three-self church suddenly became so irreconcilable. The delicate unity among Protestant communities became seriously shattered. Alliances forged not long ago during the Cultural Revolution quickly fell apart.

**Preexisting Discords**

The unity among Protestant churches in Ruian and the Wenzhou region before 1978 was doomed to be fragile due to its weak institutional underpinnings. One of the
most important consequences of Maoist rule on churches (temples and monasteries as well) in Wenzhou was probably the flattening of hierarchy within the church. Managing institutions of each denomination in Wenzhou broke down with the departure of missionaries, the discontinuation of foreign aid, and the persecution of Chinese clergies in the 1950s. Individual Protestant communities consequently became more independent. The network of Protestant communities reestablished during the Cultural Revolution, whether the self-styled Unified church (Heyi jiaohui) behind the Ruian County General Council and the trans-county Wenzhou General Council, or the trans-regional network of the Adventist church in southern Zhejiang, were not formal organizations with a coherent internal structure but rather a form of loose cooperation formed in special circumstances to better weather the political storms of the Cultural Revolution. There was no superior/subordinate relationship or financial dependence between an individual member community and the regional or county council, or between different member communities.\(^51\) In other words, those networks of Protestant communities essentially lacked the means to curb or prevent schism.

Moreover, discord or feuds existed within Protestant churches, as they would in any social organizations. Some such discord might even have been planted before 1949.\(^52\) The Three-self patriotic movement and other political campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s further widened old rifts and caused much deeper new rifts. As I have shown in the previous chapter,\(^53\) many Protestants gave in to political pressures and publically

\(^{51}\) There were financial mutual aids, but in no case it was seen that a gathering place entirely lived on the financial support of others.

\(^{52}\) Shu, *Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi*, chapter 12 (section 2).

\(^{53}\) See also Zhu, “Guojia tongzhi,” 105-106.
denounced their Christian faith. Or even worse, some could even attack and betray fellow Protestants and churches for their own survival or other interests. There were of course faithful Protestants who were never intimidated and always resisted collaboration, but in general religious persecution catalyzed strong antagonism toward the government and also ripped apart the church, creating an atmosphere of distrust, disdain, and even resentment among Protestants. Such sentiments were so pervasive that they could only be temporarily swept under the rug when the ubiquitous need to endure severe political environments surpassed all other needs for Protestant communities during the Cultural Revolution. Though contained, these sentiments never went away.

Other preexisting issues were less personal, at least at first glimpse, but no less divisive. Before 1949 most local Protestants received gospels through their own denominations, which were different in theological stances, ritual practices, versions of hymns, etc. Preachers of the same denomination also could have different theological interpretations and practices that they would like to pass onto and implement among followers. Denominational boundaries were quickly melting when fierce political storms forcefully pushed communities of different denominations to stay in solidarity during the Cultural Revolution. Miao Zhitong, a preacher from Ruian, recalled that, however, when traveling to preach in the Wenzhou region in the early 1970s, he had heated debates with some other preachers, in particular with preacher Yu Dubin of Yueqing County on the issue of who is qualified for salvation. Their disagreements in theology and ritual

---

practices eventually ended up with Yu leaving for the Three-self church in the early 1980s.\textsuperscript{55}

Efforts were made to patch up denominational differences (e.g. sharing preachers and unifying the version of hymns).\textsuperscript{56} Not everything would be compromised or tolerated, however. The Wenzhou Regional Council of Communication Meeting (\textit{Wenzhou Qu jiaotong zonghui}), a loose intraregional alliance of all pre-1949 denominations (other than the Adventist church) forged in 1971, ruled the “head-covering” (\textit{mengtou}) custom of the Local Assembly as a heresy.\textsuperscript{57} It is unclear what caused this decision. The implication was clear though. Communities insisting on this custom would not be accepted into the alliance. The Adventist church too was labeled as heresy and even an evil cult for proselytizing among churches of other denominations.\textsuperscript{58}

Similar accusations appeared within the southern Zhejiang network of Adventist church around the same time. Jiang Xinhua of Hushang’ao village of Yueqing was a senior preacher of Adventist church and very influential among Adventists of surrounding communities. He allegedly attached great importance to the practice of the Ten Commandments but laid much less emphasis on the significance of the salvation grace (\textit{jiuen}) of Jesus Christ. Because he considered the cross as a form of idol worship, display of the cross in any form was prohibited in his gatherings. Water baptism was also

\begin{footnotes}
\item[55] Yu only stayed briefly and then left after losing in the power struggle of the Three-self church, according to Miao.
\item[58] Shu, \textit{Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi}, chapter 9.
\end{footnotes}
abolished, as were dietary rules of the traditional Adventist church. These unorthodox practices worried other Adventist leaders in the region. After persuasion proved futile, Jiang and his gatherings were declared heresy and cut off from all connections with other Adventists in 1975.\(^{59}\)

All these internal issues—personal discord and feuds, frictions in theological stances and ritual practices—resurfaced soon after the end of the Cultural Revolution, which was a few years before the reestablishment of the Three-self church in the Wenzhou region. In May 1978, the network of Adventist communities in southern Zhejiang experienced the first major split in May 1978. The cause of the split seemed to be certain reform measures by Shu Chenqian and other leaders that involved hymns and the Saturday worship. The reform of the Saturday worship included adding a procedure of worshipping the Holy Spirit and the Father and allowing multiple people to individually lead prayers (rather than just one or two people as in the traditional practice). Wu Buxun, a young preacher in the Wenzhou municipality, maintained that worshiping the Father must be done before worshiping the Holy Spirit because the Father, he believed, is greater than the Holy Spirit. He also disagreed with the revision of the number of hymns and content of some hymns. After realizing he could not persuade other leaders to adopt his suggestions, Wu asked to take a share of the common fund for his gatherings and no longer welcomed visits of preachers from other Adventist gatherings.\(^{60}\)

The split initially was only limited to a small number of gathering spots in Wenzhou Municipality and its suburbs that were under the influence of Wu and Zhao


\(^{60}\) Shu, *Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi*, chapter 12 (section 1).
Dianhua, another young preacher. Yet schism turned out to be catastrophic as it soon spread to member churches of the entire network in southern Zhejiang, including Wenzhou region, neighboring Taizhou, Lishui, and Fuding of northern Fujian. Shu Chenqian in his memoir blamed some old pastors and preachers standing behind Wu and Zhao for the escalation of schism. According to Shu, these old church co-workers had been away when the church was suffering, hiding themselves and not daring to participate in gatherings, not to say preaching or serving the church. Then they suddenly reemerged and wanted to take over the leadership of the church, and could only achieve that by stirring up rifts in the church.\(^{61}\) The separatists referred to themselves as the old sect (*laopai*), emphasizing their connections to the pre-1949 church and the authenticity of the path they took. All of these, Shu argued, were convenient labels that did not reflect the truth and only served the separatists’ interests of splitting the church, and many who did not join in the old sect were also old coworkers who had really suffered for the church.

The split of the Adventist church previewed a thorny situation that all other Protestant churches sooner or later would face. The lifting of political coercion was certainly a boost to the growth of the flock as more people would be encouraged to return to or join public participation in church activities. On the other hand, internal issues previously sealed by political coercion also came to the surface, quickly eroding the fragile unity among Protestant communities.\(^{62}\)

---

\(^{61}\) Shu, *Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi*, chapter 12 (section 2).

\(^{62}\) The Unified church in 1978 have not yet had to deal with the great split that the Adventist church experienced at the time. There were not without signs of discord with in the Unified church though. Some perennial issues such as the form of water baptism, the cup issue of communion (one cup or many cups), and the issue of salvation were frequently brought up to debate among rival groups in the meetings of
**Tensions Generated by the Three-Self Church**

If the loosening political environments had the effect of re-opening schisms in Protestant churches in Ruian and Wenzhou, the government’s plan to recreate the Three-self church then profoundly hastened the course of schisms, making it almost unavoidable. In 1979, the government set out to restore religious work offices as well as “patriotic religious associations” at all levels. December of that year, twelve former members of the Three-self church in the 1950s were convened to reestablish the Wenzhou Three-self Protestant Patriotic Association. The government then with the assistance of the Wenzhou Three-self association sought to reestablish the Three-self church at the county (municipality) level.

The restoration of the Three-self church almost immediately sparked off controversies in churches in Ruian and the entire Wenzhou region. Both anti-Three-self and pro-Three-self views found supporters in the Wenzhou Regional Council of Communication Meeting and the Ruian County Council of Communication Meeting. For many who were petitioning to the government for the return of churches,\(^{63}\) having a Three-self church as a liaison could help take back church properties and allow people to meet again in church halls (as opposed to temporary family gathering spots). Endorsing the creation of a Three-self church therefore was aligned with the overall interests of the church. But the opponents “insisted that church hall meetings would allow the government to control the church. The government is atheist and wants to eliminate us.

\(^{63}\) Zhu, “Guojia tongzhi,” 115.
Therefore we should not congregate in a church hall.”

Antipathy toward the formal church hall meeting turned to antipathy toward the Three-self church because pushing people to the church hall was a major task given the Three-self church by the government.

The strongest opposition to the Three-self church originated in long accumulated distrust and resentment against the government and the old Three-self church under Maoism. Having suffered religious persecution for decades, many church leaders not surprisingly held very strong antagonism toward the government. They seemed to feel even more strongly against those working in the Three-self church, considering the latter as non-true believers and even betrayers of church. Twelve founding members of the new Wenzhou Three-self church in 1979 are all members of the old Wenzhou Three-self church in the 1950s. Most former Three-self church leaders were clergies and have been absent from the church for decades as no evidence shows any of them as actively engaged in church activities during the Cultural Revolution. As Miao Zhitong, an anti-Three-self church leader criticized, the Three-self church leaders “in the past had either betrayed God and friends or committed blasphemy, and denied their Christian faith.” A few of them, Miao believed, were in fact communist party members. Return of such people therefore only reinforced antipathy toward the Three-self church.

---


66 The reemergence of former church leaders, from the perspective of power, could be a challenge to regional and county Communication Meeting and church leaders at the time. Council members of Communication Meetings, that is, those who were leading Protestant churches in Wenzhou in 1978 were all non-clerical church coworkers including those preachers and church elderlies. In this case, there was understandably unrest among incumbent church leaders over the return of former clergies and the Three-self church they attempted to reorganize.
With the polarization in attitudes toward the Three-self church inciting and exasperating old issues, the self-styled unified churches in Wenzhou braced the first major split around 1981. Members of the Wenzhou Regional Council had attempted to reach some basic consensus in dealing with shifting social and political conditions in March of 1980. No agreement seemed to be reached. Though some claimed that the council came to terms with an anti-Three-self stance, others denied the existence of such an agreement.67 The next year, Lin Naimei and Jin Daoxing,68 two of three standing committee members (the other one was Miao Zhitong), decided to participate in the activities of the Three-self church and left the council. The Wenzhou Regional Council of Communication Meeting then virtually disintegrated with only Miao and his fellows remaining.

In Ruian, after the reshuffling of the County Council of Communication Meeting in June 1980, Miao Zhitong, the most vocal opponent of the Three-self was marginalized. In July, the general council formally voted to support the Three-self church. The Ruian County Council of Communication Meeting dissolved with most council members joining in the Three-self church formed in September 1981, though Miao and his fellows in Ruian continued to operate under the name of Communication Meeting. In 1987, Miao and his fellows reorganized a new Wenzhou Regional Council of Communication Meeting with him elected as one of the co-directors.69 Miao’s leadership, however, was

67 Zheng, Mengfu zhi lu—Jidu yu siyi de rensheng, section 2 of chapter 5.
68 Both soon stopped engaging in the activities of the Three-self church.
never unchallenged. Member churches of the Communication Meeting in Ruian split again in 1986 into two sects—Zhitong sect (zhitong pai, named as the leader Miao Zhitong) and John sect (Yuehan pai) — in 1986. These two sects controlled fourteen churches and developed seventy six gathering spots with a total of seven thousand eight hundred and eighty followers.  

In the 1980s, anti-Three-self, for its effectiveness, became almost a universal mobilization strategy for any group or individuals within the church to initiate a separation from their own communities or from other communities. It was so convenient that some anti-Three-self sects would distinguish themselves by questioning and attacking other anti-Three-self sects’ motivation for and determination in going against the Three-self church. In that climate, a Yingling sect named after its founder, which wanted to dominate among non-Three-self churches, even criticized Miao’s sect for personal communications of some leaders with those who stayed contact with the Three-self church, considering them as being “polluted” (dianwu).  

At the same time as the regional and county Communication Meetings church split, the Shouters (Huhanpai) were quietly infiltrating Protestant churches in the Wenzhou region. The Shouters were named for their distinct practice of shouting the name of the Lord during worship. The sect organizationally was a direct offshoot of the Local Assembly and mainly solicited among communities related to the former Local Assembly. Besides their distinct theological stances and practices, the most significant

---

70 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-38-6: 34-35. See also Miao, Wenzhou qu jiaohui shi, 189-191.

71 Miao, Wenzhou qu jiaohui shi, 192-193.

72 Theologically they stressed to rediscover the true meaning of the Lord and use a recovery version of bible that was heavily annotated by their founder Lee Changshou. The Shouters’ theological stands are controversial even among Christians. Many church leader considered the Shouters a heresy even today.
way in which the Shouters appealed to Protestants was none other than its determined opposition to the Three-self. In their propaganda, they reportedly analogized, as other anti-Three-self groups did, the Three-self church to an “adulterous woman [a Biblical metaphor], a tool that the Communist Party utilized to eliminate Christianity.” They said that they “would defeat and bring down Three-self (organizations),” and “occupy church territory and firmly grip the power of the church.” The fact that twenty seven churches and gathering spots, that is the majority of the anti-Three-self former Local Assembly communities, turned to the Shouters in early 1983 certainly had something to do with the success of this strategy.

Within the Adventist church, the 1978 split did not have much to do with the Three-self church as some major leaders of the “old sect” also participated in activities of the Three-self church. In 1984, however, after a leader Wu Huanwen accepted the ordination of pastors of the Three-self church, serious disagreements arose between Wu and another leader Chen Dengyong of Ruian. They consequently broke up and each formed their own sects. Chen renamed his sect the Church in the Wild (Kuangye jiaohui), suggesting that it was the one left to endure persecution and glorify God in the wild.

Objecting to the Three-self church was made the core appeal of the Church in the Wild. They refused to register under the name of the Three-self patriotic church. They again analogized those Adventist churches participating in the Three-self church to an

---

73 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-35-41: 47.
74 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-35-41: 47.
“adulterous woman”, and the action of registering with the government in name of the Three-self church to “worshiping the beast” (a Biblical metaphor).\footnote{Shu, \textit{Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi}, chapter 21 (section 3).}

With the sharp acceleration of schisms among Protestant churches in the 1980s, theological disagreements that were in fact not fundamental were repeatedly reinforced to justify the opposition to the Three-self church. By doing so, people wanted to in turn justify the existence and expand the influence of their own sects. Many theological ideas of Wenzhou churches were actually from the outside world, from the Shouters in the 1980s, to Arminianism and Evangelicalism in the 1990s, and Reformed theology in the 2000s. These imported theological stances were intentionally emphasized and even exaggerated to underscore the correctness of the path chosen. The result was often another split in the church.\footnote{Within the network of Wenzhou Regional Communication Meeting, for instance, there was a great debate on the issue of “being saved” between some Yueqing churches following Reformed theology and Ruian churches (under the leadership of Miao Zhitong) insisting on Arminian theology in 1995. See Nanlai Cao, \textit{Constructing China’s Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 103-104. The former advocated “once saved, always saved” whereas the latter believed that being saved is a lifelong process. So they instead advocated for “always believe, always saved.” As people could not agree with each other, the western Liushi section of Yueqing churches split. Some created their own ally with many member churches were still allied with Ruian churches in the issue of “being saved.” Generally speaking, Evangelism that features Wenzhou Municipal Communication Meeting and Arminianism that features Wenzhou Regional Communication Meeting are two major lines of theology among house churches in the region today.} The Adventist church in Wenzhou experienced more splits after the 1980s. Some within the “new sect” (xinpai) were strongly influenced by Evangelicalism and eventually formed their own sect, which was conveniently called the new-new sect (xinxinpai). Today there are at least fourteen sects in the Adventist church in Wenzhou.\footnote{See Duan Qi, “Cangnan fuyin dahui yougan” (Comments on the Cangnan Evangelical Meeting), \textit{Maitian}, Autumn issue, 2010, http://www.mtfy.org/magazine.php?mod=view&id=212 (Accessed on April 29, 2015).}
Consequences of Schisms

Pervasive schisms in the 1980s brought about lasting effects on Protestant churches in Ruian, Wenzhou and even beyond. Not all of them were detrimental to the development of church in Wenzhou. Some turned out to be beneficial to the outward expansion of Wenzhou churches. First of all, the immediate outcome of internal splits was the proliferation of Protestant communities. In many cases, rivaling groups within a certain community would entirely cut off connections with each other. Two or more communities were then created with their own sites and believers. All of these were pretty common phenomena especially in the 1980s.

Second, the suppression of dissident groups refusing to participate in Three-self organizations or cooperate with the government, in a different light, added impetus to the government’s initiative to “settle [the issue] of religious activity sites,” which then in turn benefited those communities that had built or wanted to build churches and who were also willing to recognize the leadership of the Three-self church. In 1983, for instance, the central government launched a nationwide campaign against the Shouters, whose rapid dissemination, overseas connections, and nonconforming political stances deeply worried central leaders.78 In Wenzhou, a crucial measure to counter the influence of Shouters was to open more churches and legalize family gatherings. As Yuan Fanglie, Wenzhou Party secretary said in a meeting on the handling of the Shouters sect: “one of the means employed by the Shouters to expand their power was to force people to comply by occupying churches. We should fully utilize church space as a front to fight the Shouters. Different places should draft internal plans of church opening and (re)open

some churches accordingly… based on their own conditions… Regarding believers’ family gatherings, they are not allowed in principle and we should actively induce them to come to churches for gatherings. In places where people have no church or churches have been destroyed… [you should] merge dispersed ‘family gathering spots’ into joint gathering spots and implement the regime of fixed members, fixed locations, and fixed time [of worship] in order to reinforce the regulation of believers.”

Finally, schism precipitated the pace of Wenzhou churches’ outward expansion in the country. Starting in the 1980s, Christians from Wenzhou, in particular businessmen among them, have strived to spread gospels to people of other regions and even directly established many new churches throughout the country. The internal split of Wenzhou churches significantly contributed to this movement as it pushed some preachers to seek development outside Wenzhou. Chen Dengyong, for instance, adamantly refused to register his “Church in the Wild” (Kuanye jiaohui) in name of a Three-self church. Also, in the process of creating his own organization, Chen did not have strong local support and had to rely on the endorsement of pastors of the Adventist church in Shanghai and Hangzhou. Its development in Ruian is very limited and it has not even built a church yet. Therefore since the end of 1980s Chen has spent most of his time preaching and ordaining new pastors to build up his personal influence elsewhere in the country.

The case of Miao Zhitong is more complicated. The difference is that Miao’s organization remains a major sect in Wenzhou. However, competition from other sects was also an important reason that drove him to develop his church and his own

79 “Yuan Fanglie tongzhi zai chuli Huhanpai wenti baogaohuishang de jianghua” (Comrade Yuan Fanglie’s speech at the meeting on the handling of the Shouters issue), May 17, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-31-63:15-16.
organization outside Wenzhou. Considered as a major separatist in the Protestant church in Wenzhou, Miao had been under heavy surveillance by local authorities since the early 1980s, which appeared as another factor pushing for Miao’s nationwide activities. Miao has been much more active outside Wenzhou since the-mid 1980s, which helped achieve nationwide fame for him personally. By the time of his death in 2013, he was eulogized by many as a major house church leaders in China.

Many repercussions of schism in Wenzhou churches are yet to be studied. Splits in local churches have likely intensified internal competition as different sects faced the same pool of potential converters in local society. The interactions of rival churches, as church leaders admitted, sometimes got very ugly and in extreme cases even went from squabbles and friction to actual fights, which could have harmed the reputation of the church among the society at large. If all these are proved true, schism might have been slowing the progress of Protestant churches in Wenzhou. A curious phenomenon that I learned is that local churches have rarely been proselytizing among native local residents (other than migrant workers) in recent years. In addition, nationwide activities of Wenzhou preachers were also a process of propagating their personal theological concepts. From this perspective, widened theological differences among Wenzhou churches, via Wenzhou preachers’ national activities, might have had a national impact on Christianity in the entire China.

Conclusion and Discussion: the Maoist legacy and the Contemporary Rise of Protestantism

---

80 Zheng, Mengfu zhi lu—Jidu yu siyi de rensheng, section 2 of chapter 9; Shu, Wushi nian jiaohui shenghuo huiyi, chapter 12 (section 3-5).
The historiography of Protestantism in contemporary China has not clearly charted the transition of Protestant communities at the grass-roots level from underground family gathering to church meetings after the Cultural Revolution. This chapter provides a rare look into this transition. It has demonstrated that this dramatic passage generated both prosperity and chaos for churches in Ruian and Wenzhou. Although Christianity had never been a majority religion in Zhejiang, the continued growth of Christian churches, especially Protestant churches under Maoism, made Christianity a regulatory priority for the government against the background of the relative decline of Buddhism and village temple activities during the same period. Pragmatism of most Protestant leaders in their attitude toward the reestablished Three-self church, a liaison backed by the government, enabled Protestant communities to fully take advantage of the regulatory priority status. Catholic communities in comparison could not do so for their constant refusal to collaborate with the Three-self church and the government.

The loosening political and institutional environments, however, were a mixed blessing within the Protestant church. The government’s accommodating attitude toward formal church meetings (as opposed to family gatherings) considerably accelerated the legalization of churches (old and new) and encouraged the construction of more new churches. But the reappearance of the Three-self church and polarizing views surrounding it also profoundly shook the fragile unity of churches previously achieved during the Cultural Revolution. Schism tore apart Protestant communities at every level from the network of Unified church to the network of Adventist church in southern Zhejiang to a small village church. The appeal of anti-Three-self, mingled with often
exaggerated theological disagreements, repeatedly ignited schism, which appears to have become a new normalcy of church ecology in Wenzhou since the 1980s.

The foremost importance of the Wenzhou case is that it reveals strong continuity in local religious life across 1978. Most scholars have assumed strong discontinuity when observing the seemingly astonishing surge of religiosities after 1978. This prevailing historiographical view also partly has to do with the lack of studies of religion under Maoism. This chapter shows that Protestant churches were far from starting from scratch in the reform period. At least in parts of China, Protestant Christianity’s phenomenal success was a continuation of a trend going back to the Cultural Revolution or even further back. The cumulative effect of church development under Maoism also has downsides. While Protestant churches benefited from growth before 1978, they also inherited historical rifts and wounds that continue to shape today’s church in a way that could potentially undermine their expansion.

The continuity across 1978 could help explain not only the rise of Protestant Christianity but also, from a comparative perspective, its leading position in religious revival today. Flexibility and pragmatism of Wenzhou Protestant communities in transforming their organizations to cope with shifting political and institutional environments enabled their churches to thrive under Maoism. In comparison, other religious traditions in the same period did not fare as well as Protestant churches. In particular Buddhism was profoundly devastated and as a result Buddhists were pretty much left to fend for themselves in the reclamation of temples after the Cultural Revolution. Believers of local deities were in a similar situation. The revitalization of village temple activities could have been quicker if not for the continued imposition of
the derogatory label “superstition” (even though with much reduced frequency and intensity) in the critical 1980s. This is not to say that religious policy was the determining factor in the leading position of Protestant churches. What I want to stress here instead is that the uneven distribution of religious revival was a result of a cumulative process of interactions between various communities and the shifting institutional and political arrangements, in which religious policy was a contributing factor. The next chapter will continue to address this process with the focus on village temple activities.

Protestant churches were not merely a beneficiary of religious policy in the 1980s. Evidence presented in this chapter have demonstrated that they were also, from a perspective of intra-church relations, a victim of religious policy as the latter prompted waves of schisms that created many (potential) negative repercussions in Protestant churches. In addition, from the perspective of the church’s relationship with the community at large, this policy framework and local dynamics over it might have also alienated Protestant churches from the village, the larger community in which church is embedded.

The legalization of old churches and many newly built churches by the government in the 1980s was the de facto confirmation of the territorial expansion and further infiltration by the church in the Wenzhou region since 1949. The 1980s also ushered in a period of revival of village temple activities. To non-Christian villagers, the assistance that the government gave to Christian communities in reopening churches was in striking contrast to the government’s denunciation of and attack on village temples. It appears to them that this contrast revealed nothing other than favoritism of local authorities for Christianity and non-Christian villagers had strong grievance with and felt
it difficult to understand such favoritism. A very common scenario that local cadres encountered in handling “superstition” sites, that is village temples, was challenges from villagers on the fairness of state policy. The answer that cadres could give was to tie temples to illegal superstition and church to legal religion. No one would be convinced. Even cadres complained and questioned why “believing in Fo is inferior to believing in Jesus?” and why “the homegrown (guochande) is inferior to the imported?”

The stipulation of the new religious policy on property rights of church buildings could also have estranged churches from their villages. Because only state-sanctioned church organizations could legally claim property rights to those occupied churches under the new religious policy, the village had no right to do in the case of village temples. Christian communities and the Three-self church that represented them, and the village government often appeared as opposing parties in the struggle for ownership of old church buildings, a situation that seemed unlikely to occur in the case of a village temple, where villages and village governments were supposed to be aligned. Most church buildings were eventually returned in one way or another. Yet the transitions were not always smooth and the settlement of property rights often involved the interference by the county government, sometimes after years of standoff. The Protestant church in Lower village, Xincheng did not get the entire church building returned. Its plan to rebuild a new church was delayed for decades due to opposition from villagers living

---

81 “Ruian Xian Mayu quwei guanche Yaobang tongzhi pizhi: xindong xunsu, yaoguo xianzhu” (Mayu district government of Ruian county implemented the instruction of comrade Yaobang: the action was swift and the effect was remarkable), March 22, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-31-36: 12-22.
nearby. In a few extreme cases, old churches were even demolished by non-Christian villagers after negotiations came to no avail.\textsuperscript{82}

It is difficult to overgeneralize these instances of hostility and attack as a sign of the deterioration of Christian and non-Christian relations. But they seem to represent one stream of sentiments toward Christians, which indicates a certain level of historical continuity. Of course, how non-Christians live with the much increased presence of Christians (for which the government reinstated legal protection) since the 1980s, is an issue that needs further studies.

\textsuperscript{82} “Guanyu Tangxia Xinhua Qianchi dadui jiaotang bei chaihui de baogao” (Report of the demolition of the church of Qianchi brigade, Xinhua [Commune], Tangxia [District]), March 25, 1982, Ruian Municipal Archives 49-34-22: 28-30; “Renzhen zuohao dang de zongjiao gongzuowei woshizhili zhengdun he shenhua gaige fuwu” (Taking the Party’s religious work seriously to serve rectification and readjustment and the deepening of reform in our city), May, 1990, Ruian Municipal Archives 109-9-15: 77.
Chapter Five


Village temple activity for the worship of local deities, the majority religious tradition in Wenzhou society, did not experience revival during the Cultural Revolution like Protestant churches, nor was it placed in the scope of religious activities that Document No. 19—the Communist Party’s new guideline for religious affairs in the reform era—pledged to protect. Document No. 19 even singled out the task of suppressing “superstition,” and the worship of local deities was considered a major type thereof. Though many communities in Ruian had found ways to carry on ritual practices, only a handful of communities were reconstructing or renovating temples at the end of the 1970s. Most village temples remained either closed or occupied, many by state-owned institutions.

Yet the situation changed dramatically within a few years. In Mayu District alone, there were at least eighty village temples reopened before 1983, seventeen of which

1 The full name of Document No.19 is “Basic Viewpoints and Policies on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period,” which was issued in March 1982. See chapter four for detailed introduction of Document No.19.


3 Many temples, though not being occupied, were demolished altogether with statues of divinities and other facilities inside the temples in the name of various construction projects (e.g. building stock farm or smelting iron in the 1960s).

4 Eighty temples were a lot to a district. There are currently at least 1400 village temples in Ruian, including more than 1200 unregistered temples that the 2010 investigation found, those registered as Daoist pavilions that are around 180, and unknown number of village temples registered as Buddhist monasteries. Those village temples are distributed in eight districts. On average, each district has about 175 temples. For village temples registered as Daoist pavilions, see Ying Weixian, ed., Ruian Shi Daojiao zhi (History of Daoism in Ruian) (Ruian Daojiao xiehui, 2011).
were rebuilt and eleven of which were taken over from schools.\textsuperscript{5} It was not uncommon in some village temples that “[workers are] setting up seats for deities in the main hall where incense fire are burning all day long, but the aisles on both sides are [still] classroom where [one can hear] students loudly reading the textbook.”\textsuperscript{6} “At one end, artisans are carefully carving statues of divinities whereas at the other end, school teachers are intently grading student’s homework. They are face to face but do not interfere with each other.”\textsuperscript{7} In six counties (out of seven) of Wenzhou, “almost every village has rebuilt temples…A large number of temples and ancestral halls, which during the land reform had been turned into public facilities such as schools, factories, and hospitals, were forcibly seized back and rebuilt,” wrote a 1983 internal report.\textsuperscript{8} These familiar scenes easily remind us of when schools started to take over temples in China in the first half of the twentieth century. The campaign of seizing and converting religious

\textsuperscript{5} “Mayu Qu quanmian shaochu fengjian mixin huodong changsuo” (Thoroughly eliminating feudal superstition activity sites), March 18, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives: 1-31-38:18. Schools of various levels had been a major, if not the largest, occupant of temples and monasteries, most of which were village temples. As statistics indicates, schools were using two hundred and seventy temples and monasteries in 1970. See Ruian Shi jiaoyu weiyuanhui Jiaoyu Zhi bianzhuan zu, ed., Ruian Jiaoyu zhi (Ruian Education History) (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1992), 275. It is worthy to mention that what accompanied the return of temples was the revival of communal rituals. The annual rite of Dragon Boat Rowing resurfaced in a number of communes in the suburb and Xincheng in 1980, after a discontinuation of more than a decade. Next year, it spread to the entire plain areas, including some communes that did not have this tradition. The amount of dragon boats rose sharply to 157, more than four times of the figure the year before.

\textsuperscript{6} Ruian Municipal Archives: 1-31-38:18.

\textsuperscript{7} Ruian Municipal Archives: 1-31-38:18.

\textsuperscript{8} See the report: “Wenzhou nongcun shehui zhian yu dangfeng buzheng de yanzhong qingkuang” (the serious situations of public security and incorrect party ethos in rural areas of the Wenzhou region). It was published in Qingkuang jianbao, January 21, 1983, 2-7. Qingkuang jianbao is an internal journal edited by the Policy Research Office of the Central Party Secretariat. It also mentioned that the wave of ancestral hall reconstruction and genealogy compilation, starting at the late 1980, swept all seven counties in Wenzhou by spring of 1982.
properties began at the turn of the twentieth century and reached its climax in the 1950s. But this time the process was turned over its head and went in the opposite direction.

The massive reclamation and restoration of temples in the 1980s and 1990s were perhaps smaller in scale than the requisition of temple properties in the Republican and Maoist periods. But its meaning is both substantial and symbolic. Religious communities reclaimed and reopened temples and ushered in a new era for Chinese religions. In a limited political sense, the wave of temple reclamation and restoration is comparable to social movements, as the return and restoration of temples mobilized group actions and sought to reshape social and political order in local society.9

The origin of religious revival in contemporary China as a broad phenomenon, of which the temple reclamation movement was a part, has been interpreted from a range of cultural and economic perspectives. A number of studies propose that the revitalization of local temples and rituals was driven by the desire to reconcile with the communities’ troubled past and to rediscover neglected historical and cultural meanings of communities.10 Some have tied the revival of local temples and rituals to economic incentives of interest groups, be it developing tourism or attracting investment from the overseas Chinese.11 Others have more explicitly given credit to local and trans-local

9 For a study that compares religious revival in China since late 1970s to a social movement, see David Palmer, “Religiosity and Social Movements in China: Divisions and Multiplications,” in Social Movements in China and Hong Kong: The Expansion of Protest Space, eds. Gilles Guiheux and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 257-282.


activism, whether motivated by the belief in the efficacy of local deities, by Buddhist morality culture, by the entrepreneurial logics of boss Christians, or by competitions among religious groups and local communities.¹²

All of the previous studies capture part of the truth. Some motivations to revive village temples that they reveal are more constant such as those cultural ones. Others are tied to the post-1978 socioeconomic environment. However, absent or not well articulated in these studies is what made such motivations to be realized, especially factors beyond local community. After all community actors did not operate in a vacuum. To the contrary, they had to operate in an environment where the government only became less hostile against religion. As a matter of fact, the closure, seizure, or demolition of village temples under Maoism or in earlier years all stemmed from the government’s secularization projects. It is therefore important to know how much shifting institutional environments facilitated and stimulated the actions, however motivated, to take back and revive temples and ultimately made the religious revival possible. This is a major question that this chapter attempts to answer.

This chapter examines the wave of temple reclamation and restoration in Ruian in the 1980s and 1990s from a historical and institutional perspective. During Mao years, I show, the belief that the community was stripped of protection and blessings of deities after the shutdown or destruction of temples had always haunted villagers and at times mobilized people to rebuild the temple and the statues of divinities. A massive wave of temple restoration as successful as the 1980s one, however, was never seen under Maoism even though local communities always wanted to take their temples back.

The restitution policies at the end of 1970s, including the new religious policy, created an atmosphere that stimulated actions to take back occupied village temples. Meanwhile, changes to institutional environments including the waning significance of certain occupying institutions and the transformation of others, along with the collapse of the commune system and the end of the command economy, opened up the new possibility for local communities to take back occupied temples. The reclamation of temples was repackaged as the assertion of “property rights,” and the protection of “historical relics” (lishi wenwu) or “revolutionary sites” (geming yizhi), etc. None of these discourses, however, were universally applicable. The use of them in the quest for the return of temples often encountered legality issues as the stigma of “superstition” continued to haunt village temples-. The chapter then looks at how, in local communities’ attempts to cope with legitimacy issues faced by the campaign of temple reclamation and restoration, the rise of village Old People’s Associations (OPAs) and related discourses profoundly changed the situation. The chapter concludes by highlighting the connections between the Maoist legacy and the revitalization of village temples, between
reinvigoration of village temple activities and the changing organizational dynamics in Ruian villages.

**Village Temples by the End of the Cultural Revolution**

There was not without calls and actions for the return of village temples in Ruian in the Maoist era. In the summer of 1953, a year after the land reform, a prolonged drought had invoked pervasive rainmaking ceremonies and a small campaign to take back confiscated temple properties. Some believed that the blessing of deities went along with the deities themselves when their temples were occupied or destroyed. The fear of losing divine protection and blessing continued to motivate people to bring back temples and deities in the ensuing decades. There was another ephemeral surge of religious activities in the early 1960s when the county was recovering from the Great Famine, and mediums called for reconstruction of temples after tying natural disasters to the destruction of temples.

In the late stage of the Cultural Revolution, some rural communities began to renovate or rebuild their temples, possibly as a result of the loosened control of rural

---

13 “Guanyu benxian gedi fasheng quanzhong xing zhaofo quyu ji saodong shijian de baogao” (Report on (the incidents of) conjuring up deities to make rain and disturbances throughout the county), August 5, 1953, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-5-3: 77.

14 When cholera was epidemic in the county in summer of 1962, a possessed woman at Xingguang Brigade, Tangxia, threatened her audience in a mass meeting that “Buddha of West Heaven has descended. [He said] first of all you do not observe a vegetarian regimen. Second, you do not practice moral teachings. Third, you carelessly destroyed temples. [I will] take the life of all of you…if you want peace, you have to rebuild all the temples, big or small.” (“Huli daxian yuanxing bilu le! Yige fanzui fenzi liyong mixin jinxing pohuai huodong de shihi” (Fox medium entirely revealed himself in true colors! The fact of a criminal using superstition to conduct destructive activities), June 11, 1963, Ruian Municipal Archives1-15-143: 6) But the calls to advocate temple reconstruction at that time were probably more widespread than the actions to do so.
society by the government when the latter was preoccupied with factional politics.\textsuperscript{15} According to a history published by the Ruian Daoist Association, eleven village temples, among about 170 registered as Daoist pavilions, had renovation or reconstruction in the years between 1970 and 1978.\textsuperscript{16} This gives us a sense of the extent of restoration of temple activities before the Cultural Revolution was officially ended in 1978. More communities at that time had perhaps planned renovating or rebuilding temples but had been intimidated by the potential political price and the amount of efforts that had to come with such an attempt. Most temples remained closed or occupied. Any attempt to reopen temples, especially reclaiming a temple occupied by state-owned institutions, would be easily construed as a challenge to the political order that the Communist government imposed, and thus be punished. In Chenshanping brigade, Huling District in February 1973, a few mediums helped catch the thief who stole fertilizer from the brigade, and in exchange asked for restoring a Lord Yang Temple occupied by the brigade’s elementary school. The county government, once informed of their plan, asked to arrest and sentence those who instigated the reconstruction project.\textsuperscript{17} Also in Huling, in June 1977, Zheng Qingzan of Datong brigade asked the brigade to remove a factory from the ancestral hall


\textsuperscript{16} Ying Weixian, ed., \textit{Ruian Shi Daojiao zhi} (History of Daoism in Ruian) (Ruian Daojiao xiehui, 2011).

\textsuperscript{17} “Guanyu dui Huling Qu Chen Wencong, Chen Wenzhu fengjian fubu an de chuli yijian baogao” (Opinions on handling the feudal restoration case of Chen Shicong and Chen Wenzhu of Huling District), March 30, 1973, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-21-9: 30-31.
of the Zheng family. He was subsequently convicted as a “counterrevolutionary” for restoring feudal order.\textsuperscript{18}

Though the mass wave of temple reclamation and restoration was yet to come, local society in Ruian, as elsewhere in the country, was otherwise experiencing significant changes at the end of 1970s that prepared for the precipitous dissolution of the collective. Business activities began to boom in Wenzhou, which back then was still very poor by the national standard.\textsuperscript{19} “Study camps” (\textit{xuexiban})—makeshift centers for temporary detention at the time—were packed with peddlers, smugglers, and profiteers (\textit{touji daoba fenzi}), but were also frequented by Christian catechists, Buddhists and other “superstition heads” (\textit{mixin touzi}).\textsuperscript{20} Since the early 1970s, sojourners who traveled elsewhere in order to make a living had multiplied. Many found ways to leave the collective.\textsuperscript{21} They went as far as Yunnan, Xinjiang and the Northeast, doing all sorts of petty business such as cotton quilting, shoe repairing, beekeeping, or peddling. Those left at home also had their own side occupations. They set up private handcraft workshops and small factories, many of which were under the umbrella of collective enterprises,

\textsuperscript{18} “Guanyu Huling Qu Zheng Qingzan jinxing fengjian fubi de chuli jueding” (Decision on the handling of the case of feudal restoration of Zheng Qingzan in Huling district), July 8, 1977, Ruian Municipal Archives 82-27-1: 260-261.

\textsuperscript{19} Average income for rural residents in Wenzhou had never exceeded RMB 60 before 1978, which is way lower than national average income of RMB 133 as of 1978. See Zhongguo shehuizhuyi yanjiuyuan maliyuan diaocha zai 1984, 288.

\textsuperscript{20} Interview with Buddhist leader Pan Yiheng, May 15, 2013. See also Wenzhou Protestant leader Zheng Datong’s experience in the study camp. See Zheng, Datong, \textit{Mengfu zhi lu--Jidu yu siyi de rensheng} (The Path of Blessing--Poetic Life In Christ) (Hong Kong: Xundao weili zhongxin, 2010,) 62-83.

\textsuperscript{21} Interview with Zhou Zexian, May 12, 2013. People would pay certain amount of money to the collective. The latter then would either buy grains from black market or hire other people to farm the land of those who left.
often with the acquiescence of cadres. In the meantime, the household responsibility system (lianchan chengbao zerenzhi) quickly spread over the entire county prior to any authorization from the county government. It was against this climate of loosening social control and disintegration of the collective that village temple reclamation, which represented an awakening traditional community identity, emerged and swept the entire Wenzhou region.

**Property Rights and the Temple Reclamation Wave**

In 1978, the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP officially ended the Cultural Revolution. Chinese government entered a period of “bo luan fan zheng” (to correct wrongs [of the Cultural Revolution] and return things to normal), to use its own term. Document No.19—the religious policy guideline—was formulated under the aegis of this principle. There were also new policies on private real properties (e.g., houses of overseas Chinese) and real properties of “religious organizations.” The elimination of the people’s commune and related institutions and the endorsement of the household responsibility system in agricultural production were also a crucial part of “bo luan fan zheng.” All these institutional changes, in particular the disintegration of the commune system, stimulated passions and actions for the return of occupied village temples.

None of the “Bo luan fan zheng” in religious policies or the new policies on private properties was devised with the aim to protect or benefit sites of “superstition”

---


23 The year 1984 saw the Third Plenum of the Twelfth Central Committee that launch another round of more encompassing economic reforms.
such as village temples. However, they created a tense atmosphere and villages were motivated to seek the return and restoration of temples. Villagers raised grievances with local officials due to different treatments of different religious groups by the central government policies. County officials observed that “people (Christians) were happy that you helped reopen churches. But if you did not allow reopening Niangnianggong (village temples), people (non-Christians) would be mad at you, and [even] act against you. [it was] raucous … [we] really don’t want to cope with this situation.”25 People widely questioned the religious policy’s fairness. For instance, when Rock Head Palace, a village temple in Mayu town was dismantled, villagers raised four “could not understands” (xiangbutong). Two of them said: “Catholics of the brigade wrote reports [to the government] asking to remove the rice factory and recover the Catholic church. The united front department sent people to comfort them. Yet Niangniang Palace (an alternate name for Rock Head Palace) is treated as inferior. We could not understand…The Constitution stipulates ‘religious freedom.’ Why aren’t we allowed to believe in Niangniang? We could not understand.”26 When non-Christians’ complaints did not bring favorable policy changes, they were further stimulated to seek solutions for their temples using their own ways, including outright resistance to the government’s antisuperstition initiatives, which I will show below. Village and town cadres, who had to directly face the criticism and pressures from non-Christians and were asked to stay away from

24 Niangnianggong literally means the Empress’ Palace. It is a common name for the temples dedicated to the worship of famous goddess Chen Jinggu in Wenzhou region. But in this context, it refers to village temples in general.


26 Ruian Municipal Archives 66-35-4:140.
“superstition” and destroy temples, sometimes also questioned the fairness of the religious policy in front of superior officials. “Yesu (Protestants) and Tianzhu (Catholics) are the worst headache. Yet they spread all over the place unchecked. Are Pusa (local deities) supposed to be demolished only because they are mute? Yesu and Tianzhu clamor all the time. But we can do nothing to them. People say that we the Communist Party only bully honest people!”

This sentiment shared among many town and village cadres also created leeway that indirectly encouraged the revitalization of temple activities. If new religious and other policies inadvertently generated a new environment, what gave villagers what they believed to be legitimate reasons and made the cause of temple reclamation and restoration possible is the dissolution of the commune system and a chain of consequent institutional changes. By February 1981, 9,617 of 12,349, or about 77.3 percent of, brigades in Ruian have spontaneously adopted the responsibility system without formal authorization from the government, an official record indicates. The formal endorsement of the responsibility system by the central government only came within “minutes of the national rural work meeting” (quanguo nongcun gongzuo huiyi jiyao) about a year later in January 1982. Ninety five percent of brigades in Ruian have implemented the responsibility system by then. In the same year, the new Constitution stipulated that town[ship] government and village committee in rural areas should be established as separate entities from local organizations of collective economy. This provision basically declared the end of the people’s commune. Because the people’s

---

27 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-31-38: 25.

commune was deprived of its political functions as a grass-roots regime crucial to the organization and implementation of the commune’s economic institutions, it could barely function as it did during the collectivization period.

When the commune system fell apart, the quest for temple reclamation and restoration quickly reemerged and was reframed as a battle to win the rights over real properties (chanquan) historically belonging to communities. A letter from self-styled representatives of Jiuli place (difang),29 Xincheng, to the county headquarter of the sale-and-supply co-op nicely encapsulates the reasoning bolstering such a request. Jiuli Temple was co-owned by villages of the entire Jiuli place. It had been occupied by the Shangwang division of Xincheng supply-and-sale co-op since the 1950s. In a letter asking for the return of Jiuli Temple in 1989, the representatives wrote:

“Jiuli Temple historically has been a public site collectively owned by several thousand households in our ‘place’ (difang)... After Liberation, the government uniformly claimed that temples are owned by all the people [of the nation], but this was just rhetoric for the sake of the overall interest [of the country] and the government had never gone through any procedures. During the collectivization period, agricultural cooperatives, supply-and-sale co-ops, and credit cooperatives were integrated into one. [Since supply-and-sale coops] became a commune enterprise, we temporarily lent Jiuli Temple to the [Shangwang] supply-and-sale co-op to carry on the business of agricultural materials and everyday supplies. The nature of the various cooperatives has altered given the current development and situation. In addition, temples elsewhere have been returned to their former appearance. We Jiuli place only had one temple and one palace (yi gong yi miao). Without exception, we should also get them back and let the people of the whole place share [them].”30

As representatives of Jiuli place made clear here, both the change to the ownership of Jiuli Temple after 1949 and the occupancy of the temple by the supply-

29 “Difang” literally means place. A “difang” in local context here refers a geographical area that is roughly equal to the center of a town(ship) and surrounding villages.

and-sale co-op during the collectivization era were a state imposition, which the community was forced to accept. Since the commune system has collapsed, those arrangements related the commune must be straightened out. In other words, it was no longer legitimate for the supply-and-sale co-op to continue occupying Jiuli Temple.

When people dared to request for the return and reopening of temples in the Maoist era, their requests could be easily treated as “feudal restoration” (fengjian fubi) or politicized by implying the involvement of counterrevolutionary forces. When the same request (now couched as a claim to property rights) was made in the 1980s, it might still be turned down or opposed by imposing the label of superstition, which is what the government and occupying entities did in many cases. However, it became increasingly impracticable to intimidate or punish people simply by coercive measures as the government did during the Maoist era, especially when the discourse of class struggle was fading out and the central task of the government moved to economic development. Coercive measures became much less practicable also because the disputes over property rights reemerged, not as sporadic cases, but as a ubiquitous phenomenon.

Many institutions that occupied temple buildings found themselves in a tricky situation when confronted with repeated requests and even direct encroachment from local communities. Village temples were given to them to use with the forced consent of communities under the extraordinary circumstance of political campaigns. But their possession of village temples in most cases was a temporary measure that served to facilitate the collective economy and commune system in the Maoist era. The government back then did not intend to give them permanent ownership through
Therefore those occupying institutions could not find many regulations that validated their occupancy. On the other hand, if they simply ignored the requests of local communities without demonstrating legitimacy of using temple buildings, it then gave excuses to the latter to forcefully retake the temple. In this situation, it indeed happened sometimes that local residents directly moved in or even demolished buildings in the temple sites to build a new temple. More often, those institutions that occupied temples had to deal with repeated requests and daily presence of protesters until they were willing to negotiate a solution.

Their own relations to the government were also changing significantly along with the dissolution of the commune system and the fading out of the command economy. Among major occupants of village temples, supply-and-sale co-ops faced the most delicate situation. Villagers relied on the co-ops in selling agricultural products and buying everyday supplies in the collectivization period. But since the early 1980s, with the overall policy changes and the competition of private business, the co-ops no longer monopolized agricultural inputs and production. Additionally, they also had to deal with the pressure from the central government who pushed for restructuring the co-ops from nominal state-owned enterprises into real collective enterprises.

31 The Land Reform Law did not stipulate to seize and distribute real properties of religious organizations. Temples, and churches were not included in what ought to be confiscated (moushou) and expropriated (zhengshou) for they “usually belong to public (gongyou 公有) properties and shared (gongyou 共有) properties of a certain group of people,” according to a supplementary explanation by the Zhejiang provincial government in 1953 to the Land Reform Law (“Duonian wuren zhu guan zhi citang miaoyu deng fangwu chuli wenti fu xi zhiyou,” July 9, 1953, Yueqing Municipal Archives 30-12-34). Common real properties might be leased, but occupying entities had to pay rent (“Zhejiang Sheng gongyou fangdichan guanli shixing banfa” (Zhejiang Province tentative regulations on common real properties), June 1952, Ruian Municipal Archives 4-4-91: 76-80). As a matter of fact, these laws and regulations were a mere scrap of paper at that time. Temples and churches were taken over with no cost.
Another major occupant was the county grain department. Grain remained a key concern for the Chinese government. However, both the role of the grain department in the grain economy and the peasants’ dependence on them were declining along with the abolition of the unified purchase and sale of grain (tonggou tongxiao). The grain system, albeit ups and downs in the policy, was on the whole being transformed in the 1980s. In Zhejiang, the government first decreased the grain procurement quota (1979-1981) and then fixed it for three years (1981-1984). In 1985, the central government formerly abolished the unified procurement of grain that had existed for more than 30 years and replaced it with a contracted procurement system. Under this change, the grain department’s grip on local agricultural production was substantially weakened because the government no longer needed the grain department to forcefully enforce agricultural production quotas. When the importance of these occupying entities was rapidly declining, they found that the county government became much less motivated in defending their interests. The supply-and-sale coop, which was forced to surrender many properties in the 1980s found itself in a position without much support of the government.

A representative of Ruian county supply-and-sale coop even co-drafted, with the representatives of the government’s grain system and education system, an unusual proposal to a 1995 meeting of the people’s political consultative committee, urging city leaders and relevant departments “to take forceful measures” in dealing with “the loss of state-owned and collective assets.” This is unusual because those institutions, either

---


33 See “Zhou Sifa deng weiyuan guanyu guoying jiti zichan bei feifa qinzhan xuyao zhujin chuli de ti’an” (Consultative Committee member Zhou Sifa et al’s proposal on hurrying up in the handling of state-owned collective assets illegally trespassed), March 4, 1995, Ruian Municipal Archives 109-14-23: 52.
supply-and-sale coops or the grain system or education system, especially the former two, were crucial to local governance during the Mao years. They would not have to go through the not-so-important platform of the people’s political consultative committee to express their grievance at all had they remained importance as they had before.

**Temple Restored: A Seesaw Ride and the Legality Crisis**

Although the cause of temple reclamation and restoration found new impetus via the property rights claims, and occupying entities were retreating from villages, the final return of village temples was never easy. The label of “superstition” and the illegal status of village temples continued to place local communities in an inferior position in the battles over property rights and in the interactions with local government.

The return and restoration of village temples took a variety of forms due to the complex circumstances surrounding different temples. In cases where temples had been left empty or torn down, there usually weren’t many disputes over property rights. The task was to renovate or rebuild the temple. Yet in probably the majority of cases, the task was first to seek the return of the temple. The most ideal result for local communities was the return of the entire temple, but that could take a long time. The Universal Salvation Palace (*Tongjigong*), Ruian, for instance, was initially returned the third row (among five rows) of its buildings in 1993. In the 2000s local communities were able to bring back the rest of the buildings from the occupant, a lock factory, which became possible because many collective and state-owned enterprises like the lock factory entirely disintegrated and local policies on temples further loosened in the 1990s and 2000s.\(^{34}\)

---

In other cases, the temples were not returned, but compensation, in the form of cash or land or both, was agreed to during the course of negotiation over property rights claims. The communities consequently rebuilt temples in different locations. Ye Pan Hall, Starlight brigade, Xincheng, was given to five “five guarantee household” (wubao hu) as residence during the land reform. It was then “borrowed” (jieyong), with the permission of district and commune governments, by Xincheng District Public Health Center in 1962. Those five families of course were not happy with the arrangement. In 1971, the health center accepted a settlement to pay RMB 5,450 plus two cottages to those five families and in exchange everyone acknowledged the health center’s possessive rights to the properties. In 1980, a group of old men, in the name of “religious freedom,” attempted to take over old houses of Ye Pan Hall to use as a “superstition site.” While the old men’s claims could be dismissed as uneducated, the Starlight brigade government now claimed that they always had ownership rights to Ye Pan Hall, thus invalidating the health center’s claims. “Ownership right [to Ye Pan Hall] belonged to Starlight brigade after those five families were qualified as ‘five guarantee household’ (wubao hu).” Then the health center filed complaints. After investigation and negotiation, the Xincheng district government recognized the health center’s possessive right to Ye Pan Hall. “Those old people who did not know the truth should be educated.” However, the district government noted that the house sold to the health center in 1971 “originally only occupied 1.2 mus. Now it has expanded to around 3 mus. Four rooms were not actually

35 Five guarantee household is a special program for those families without capability to make a living.

sold to the health center.” Therefore, “based on these facts and negotiation of two parties, the health center should give RMB 5,000 to Starlight brigade as compensation.”37 Thus the district government was in fact agreeing with the brigade’s claim to ownership rights, upon which claim was founded the health center’s obligation to further compensate. The transition of property rights in the Ye Pan Hall case was comparatively smooth. However, in many instances recounted in the governmental documents the processes were not smooth and sometimes even violent. Guan Yue Pavilion of Puqiao village, Changqiao town, Tangxia, was initially sold to the county’s second handcraft bureau (erqìngjiù) to build a metal handcraft factory in the 1950s. After villagers asserted their rights, the bureau repeatedly rejected their claims, even though the bureau could not provide evidence of its own ownership. Then in 1994 villagers who no longer wanted to wait for further negotiations tore down the bureau-run factory that occupied the temple and prepared to build a new temple,38 which then provoked another round of interaction involving many government offices and the newly erected Ruian Daoist Association until the case was finally settled a few years later.

In some other cases like Rock Head Palace (Yantougong), the actions to take back temples ultimately failed after years of stalemate and clashes with occupying institutions and local officials. Neither were temple buildings/sites returned nor was compensation given in exchange for property rights. Rock Head Palace is dedicated to the worship of Chen Jinggu (Chen Shisi niangniang in local dialect), a popular goddess in China’s

37 Ruian Municipal Archives 162-2-1: 1.

38 “Ying Weixian weiyuan guanyun xunsu jiejue Changqiao Guanyueguan de chanquan wenti de tian” (Committee member Ying Weixian’s proposal on swiftly resolving the ownership issue of Guan Yue Pavilion at Changqiao), March 26, 1995, Ruian Municipal Archives 109-14-23: 60-61.
southeast coast. After 1949, the entire compound was given to the Mayu District Elementary School. In spring 1980, a small group of young and old ladies, led by the mother of brigade head Wu Shoukui, with contribution from villagers, took over and renovated the palace and made new statues of divinities. These ladies had the village cadres’ backing from the very beginning. The Mayu Office of Ruian Education Bureau who was in charge of district schools brought the case to the county government, feeling that help from the Mayu commune and the Mayu district government was inadequate. On October 4, the county executive Peng Kexing and other county and Mayu district officials went to Rock Head Palace and forcefully wrecked religious facilities. Then some brigade youths who were reportedly instigated by temple leaders and some village cadres took revenge in the name of defending brigade possessions. They damaged part of the school’s wall, tables, and windows. The school had to temporarily suspend classes. The situation was only pacified with multiple mediations of the district party committee. Ever since then, the school tended to avoid direct confrontation with the brigade, and villagers once again set up religious facilities in the palace.

Yet the situation changed dramatically again two years later. In January 22, 1983, Hu Yaobang, the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Secretary, after reading the aforementioned internal report of social and religious issues in Wenzhou, sent a special handwritten instruction \( (pishi) \) to Zhejiang Party Committee, asking to

---

39 I did not learn this from the government reports, but from Zhu Chenlan, one of ladies who initiated the actions to restore Rock Head Palace. She gave up her job at the supply-and-sale co-op and has served in the temple since the early 1980s.


41 See footnote 5.
immediately investigate conspicuous social issues in Wenzhou. In order to carry out Hu Yaobang’s instruction, local authorities launched the largest anti-superstition campaign since the Cultural Revolution in the following months. “By the end of March, according to incomplete statistics in the [Wenzhou] municipality, suburbs[of Wenzhou municipality], Ruian, Wencheng, Ouhai, and Yueqing, [the government] mobilized nine thousand and three hundred people, shut down six hundred and twenty odd superstition sites, and demolished more than one thousand clay statues(nipusha).”42 Ruian county government somehow picked up Rock Head Palace as a major target perhaps due to the special circumstances surrounding it: The temple was just slightly opposite to the district government across the street. After years of standoff, however, the government still could not take the temple (school) back as it met persistent resistance of the community and village cadres.

In January 28, Mayu district government dispatched a group of fully armed policemen along with district officials and county court officers to Rock Head Palace, who worked nonstop overnight, tearing down the temple and then immediately erecting a two-level house in its place the next day. Before the action, all brigade cadres were convened and apparently warned not to support or instigate any counter-actions. The county government later praised and promoted the attack of Rock Head Palace as a model act of anti-superstition in response to Hu Yaobang’s special instruction.43

42 "Guanyu guanche Yaobang tongzhi pishi jingshen de qingkuang baogao" (Report on implementing the spirit of comrade Yaobang’s special directive), March 5, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives, 1-31-63: 48.

43 Curiously, I learned from villagers, on the very day when Rock Head Palace was totally demolished, people were able to move statues of the goddess and some other facilities to Five Office Lord Palace (Wufuyedian), another smaller temple in the same village, which interestingly was not destroyed at that time. The statue of Lord Yang was also carried to Five Office Lord Palace because his own temple was also
Rock Head Palace in many ways exemplifies a common issue that all local communities in the early 1980s faced, that is, the issue of legality, whether to ensure the continued existence of temples that had been returned and rebuilt or to carry on the efforts to reclaim temples that remained occupied. The quest for property rights to old buildings of village temples gave a certain level of legitimacy to the cause of temple reclamation. The use of old temple sites as space for village temple activities nevertheless was illegal to the government who did not stop physically attacking village temples though the intensity of everyday propaganda had been largely reduced.44

The continued stigmatization of communal temple activities as “superstition” and the occasional campaigns against “superstition” significantly affected the recovery of communal temple activities. During the attack on village temples in Mayu that was concurrent with the demolition of Rock Head Palace in January 1983, schools repossessed a dozen temples that had been restored. Two months later, in March 1983, the county government “mobilized 3,970 odd cadres, cleared 774 superstition sites, demolished 1,682 divine statues, ... [and] retrieved 114 once occupied schools, factories, and public sites.”45 Villagers for sure could, as they always did, rebuild temples and

---

44 Besides the 1983 anti-superstition campaign, in Ruian in May 1986, more than one thousand cadres were dispatched to strike against superstition sites, with five hundred superstition sites cleared and one thousand and fifty four statues destroyed (“Jiji caiqu cuoshi ba hualongzhou huodong yin shang jiankang guidao” (Take active measures to channel dragon boating race into a healthy track), May 21, 1986, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-34-8: 101-105.

45 “Ruian Xian guanche zhongyang lingdao tongzhi pizhi de qingkuang” (On the situation of Ruian Party committee in carrying out the instruction of central leaders), April 18, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-
shrines, but which could not stop them from worrying about the existence of their temples until they found an institutional niche that would allow their temples to stably carry out daily activities without interruption or attacks.

In addition to illegal status of village temples, another aspect of the legality crisis of the temple reclamation and restoration wave lay in its organizations. Both official records and accounts of local temples show that old people played a prominent role in organizing and leading communal rituals in Wenzhou. They were the most active group in staging rainmaking ceremonies in response to the great droughts of 1953 and 1967 in Ruian. Most local campaigns to restore temples and ancestral halls in the 1980s were initiated in the name of village elderlies.

Throughout the Maoist years and earlier periods, some organizations were already operating on behalf of senior village residents in Wenzhou. In the collectivization era (1950s-1970s), communes in Ruian had built pavilions that were known as Old People’s Pavilions (laorenting), as a common area for senior village residents to rest and chat. Some of those Old People’s Pavilions were formalized and turned into an organization

---

31-36: 15. See also “Ruian Xian Mayu quwe guanche Yaobang tongzhi pizhi: xindong xunsu, yaoguo xianzhu” (Mayu district government of Ruian county implemented the instruction of comrade Yaobang: the action was swift and the effect was remarkable), March 22, 1983, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-31-46: 12-22.

46 Old people’s organizations also appeared in other regions in China. In northern Guangxi, among the Dong people there was the long tradition of tribe elderly meeting (zhailaohui) that were in charge of village affairs. OPAs in this region, some scholars argue, are just the traditional tribe elderly meeting with a new name. In Guangdong and Fujian, Gan Mantang believes that OPA in these two provinces originated from Old People Group (laorenshui) before 1949 formed to help take care of funerals of old people. OPA therefore was a renaissance of traditional organization.

47 Wang Ximing, “Zuzhi wangluo, jingji shi yu yu laoren fuli—Zhejiang Ruian laonian xiehui diaocha” (Organizational networks, economic entities and old people welfare—an investigation of senior resident association in Zhaozhai Village, Ruian, Zhejiang), Wenzhou Luntan, 3(2009): 48-55. As people in the region traditionally went to village temples for leisure and social activities, Old People’s Pavilions seemed to be built as a replacement of certain functions of a temple.
most commonly referred to as Old People’s Group (laorenzu) in the early 1970s, which mainly prepared ritual services for deceased members and the group’s Qingming festival feasts. 48 Similarly there were organizations formed by old people who frequented Tea Pavilions (Chating) that provided tea for passengers in transportation juncture points, existed in Yuecheng town, Yueqing, another county of Wenzhou, around the same period. Its history can be traced back to the pre-1949 period. 49

These earlier societies of old people could only exist in a loose form due to political environment at the time. Any attempts to further institutionalize and formalize these societies could be labeled as politically motivated and therefore face serious consequences. Hence in the battle for the return of temples, these societies and ad hoc organizations created for the cause of temple restoration, however they portrayed themselves, were all caught in the issue of legitimacy in representing villages to negotiate with outside institutions. They would be easily dismissed as a small handful of people (yixiaocuo ren)—to use a familiar rhetoric of the Chinese government—who were misleading people to restore feudal superstition. 50 Local communities thereby urgently needed a legal institutional form to lead the quest for the return and restoration of temples.

**The Rise of the Old People’s Association**

---

48 Wang, “Zuzhi wangluo, jingji shi yu yu laoren fuli.”

49 Gao Yideng and Nan Xian, eds., *Yuecheng Zhenzhi* (Yuecheng Town Gazetteer) (Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe, 1990), 301-302.

It was during the legality crisis of local campaigns to seek the return and restoration of village temples that the Old People’s Association (hereafter OPA) rose abruptly in villages of Ruian and the Wenzhou region since the mid-1980s, which sustained the existence and development of village temples in the ensuing decades. The appearance of village OPAs in the critical moment of temple reclamation and restoration allowed local communities to lodge a new existential form and weave new narratives that were acknowledged and needed by both the communities and the local officials. The emergence and prevalence of OPAs did not fundamentally solve the legality issue of village temples—even today village temples and temple activities cannot avoid the label of “superstition” or occasional temple destructions launched by the government. However, villagers could appropriate OPA-related discourses and narratives to justify the quest for the return of their temples and in this process essentially used the state-recognized OPA as the organizational form of temple activities in their interactions with officials and occupying institutions.

Old People’s Association, as its name indicates, is an organization of and for old people. Generally speaking, males sixty or older and females fifty-five or older are qualified to join OPAs. OPA membership seems to be automatic in some villages since no application is needed. Religion-wise, it should be safe to say that in Wenzhou OPAs are basically a non-Christian organization. Christians historically did not participate in

---

51 Some villages have different standards. Man and women who are fifty-five years old or above are qualified. In other cases, it is sixty-five (fifty-five) for man and sixty (fifty) for woman.

52 Local Christians in Wenzhou did not seem to have its own old Christian organization, but there are many ways that old Christians are engaged in activities of Christian communities (for instance, attending Sunday worship or other church meetings) and are taken care of. As a tradition, local churches have people visit Christian families, including those old Christians, in a regular base (weekly or monthly), providing spiritual or sometimes material helps.
communal ritual activities.\textsuperscript{53} Today Christians even tend to avoid walking by village temples in daily life for fear of being affected by demonic forces that they believe local deities represent.\textsuperscript{54} Village temple activities, however, are a major commitment of OPAs. Offices and activity space of OPAs are usually set in village temples. Christians thereby generally do not engage in OPA activities even though the latter is open to every old village resident. Leadership-wise, OPAs in Wenzhou and other regions are exclusively male-dominated, indicating the patriarchal nature of this organization. I did not in my fieldwork or other studies see any instance where women are leading an OPA. From this perspective, OPA has strong continuity with traditional rural organizations such as lineage organizations or ritual organizations that were mostly led by men. OPA was originally created to solve the pervasive problem of population aging in the post-Mao era through old people’s self-government and self-support. In the collectivization era, the collective was responsible for providing support for aging villagers. After the disintegration of the collective in the late 1970s and early 1980s, without financial and material aid from the collective, many senior village residents had difficulty providing for themselves. Some were simply too old to farm. At that time legal cases of old people suing their children for failing to provide for them sharply

\textsuperscript{53} Christians in Wenzhou like elsewhere in the country, for religious reasons, refused to participate in or donated for any communal rituals (for instance, the most important annual ritual of dragon boat rowing) in the very beginning when Christianity was brought to the region, which had led to some incidents of violent attacks of Christian in the early twentieth century. See Shih-Chieh Lo, “The Order of Local Things: Popular Politics and Religion in Modern Wenzhou, 1840-1940,” (PhD dissertation, Brown University, 2010), chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{54} For a detailed study of Christian self-isolation from space, activities and objects related to communal religious beliefs and practices in Wenzhou, see Zhang Jieke, “‘Zui’ de fuzhong: Huadong moucun Jidutu fan ouxiang chongbai de tianye diaocha” (Binding of ‘Sin’: A Fieldwork Research on Christian Iconoclasm in A Village in Eastern China) (MA Thesis, Zhejiang University, 2012).
increased.\textsuperscript{55} To promote old people organizations in the countryside was one measure that the central government adopted to solve the aging problem. Other measures included creating nursing homes, the pension system, and etc.\textsuperscript{56} Following China’s participation in the International Conference on Aging in 1982, the government created a permanent national committee on aging issues. It was from then on that aging related institutions started to be set up at provincial and lower levels.\textsuperscript{57} In the government’s design, an association would create a sense of community and allow old people taking care of each other. In showing its support, the central government also asked local governments, from provincial to village governments to provide space and funding for OPA.\textsuperscript{58}

For the cause of temple reclamation and restoration, the timely appearance of the OPA provided a convenient operational platform equipped with both a set of narratives and a sustainable organizational form, which could justify the act to retrieve and restore village temples. When OPAs were established, a narrative that repackaged the mission of retrieving/keeping traditional ritual space as an effort to demand activity and office space for old people’s activities instantly became extremely popular in Ruian and the Wenzhou region. A petition letter from Zhupaitou, a suburban neighborhood, for the return of a Lord Chen Temple nicely summarized this narrative: “That we want our temple to be


\textsuperscript{56} Liu Shuhe, “Yingjie nongcun renkou laolinghua de yixiang zhongda juece—lun fazhan nongcun laonian xiehui” (A major measure for the aging problem in rural areas—on developing old-age associations), \textit{Renkou xuekan} 5(1993): 61-64.

\textsuperscript{57} Deng Yanhua and Hengfu Ruan, “Nongcun yinse liliang heyi keneng? Yi Zhejiang laonian xiehui weili” (How is gray power in rural China possible: A case study of Old People Associations in Zhejiang), \textit{Shehuixue Yanjiu} 8(2008): 136.

\textsuperscript{58} Instead of giving money periodically, most villages in Wenzhou chose one-time solution by giving a piece of land or houses to OPAs, which turned out to be more sustainable as the latter could make profit from them and provide for old villagers.
back is not to do superstition activities of burning incense and worshiping deities but to have a place for old people’s activities. This is indisputable and should be supported by the entire society.” 59 A meaningful thing about this narrative is that it did not just make a legitimate call for space for harmless old people’s activities endorsed by the government (as indicated in its advocacy for the establishment of OPA). It also resonated with concerns of local officials as people acknowledged and pointed out the difference between temple for superstition activities and space for old people’s activities. The narrative therefore provided a convenient discourse and approach that not only communities but also local officials frequently appropriated to their own ends.

The concept of the temple as public space for recreational activities was hardly an invented, but rather re-awakened. Village temples historically were and still are the most important place for rest and tea for village elderlies. This concept of village temples as a multifunctional public space had been almost entirely overshadowed by the long-standing label of “superstition” imposed on village temples since the turn of the twentieth century. The appearance of OPAs allowed the function of village temples as public recreational space to serve as a cover for the main function of temples as ritual space.

For local communities that were still struggling for the return of their temples, OPA-related narratives significantly added to the existing list of narratives that they could legitimately invoke in dealing with occupying institutions. The quest for the return or reconstruction of temples had previously been framed primarily in two sets of discourses. One was property rights, which, as I have showed above, though viable in some cases,

encountered difficulties in many others due to the resistance of occupying institutions and the interference of the government. The other set was to frame a temple as a historical site, such as “historical relics” (lishi wenwu) or “revolutionary sites” (geming yizhi), that needed to be preserved and protected. To be recognized as “historical relics” or “revolutionary sites”, however, could be time consuming as people had to deal with government offices and procedures at various levels.

None of these discourses was as universally applicable as the OPA-related discourse because every village was eligible to create their own OPA and thereby demand activity space for it. To register an OPA, moreover, was somehow made very easy. Because the central government considered the OPA as part of the old-age enterprise (laoling shiye), its registration was placed under the jurisdiction of the local Old-Age Commission (laolingwei), instead of the local Civil Affairs Bureau (minzhengju) as most civil associations were. This way local communities avoided otherwise rather complicated application and approval procedures. Since the Old-Age Commission’s only goal was to promote old-age support, it did not have much administrative power and had no incentives to regulate or control the boom of OPAs.

In addition to narratives, OPAs also supplied a convenient yet sustainable organizational form that fundamentally altered and precipitated the course of village temple revival. A fundamental difference between the OPA and other old people’s organizations that predated it lies in legal status. When the OPA first appeared in the

---

60 The Communist guerrillas before 1949 often used village temples and Buddhist monasteries to cover their activities.

early 1980s, it was a state-sanctioned civic association in Chinese villages. The use of the OPA as a proxy for seeking to restore and protect village temples were a game changer. Though local communities could not entirely avoid the allegation of conducting superstitious activities, the bottom line remained that, other than the government itself, no one could deny the legitimacy of the OPA, which was sanctioned and promoted by the government.

The OPA ever since its appearance has functioned as the representative of villages on the matter of village temples. It has absorbed most if not all preexisting old people’s organizations. With the popularization of OPAs, those prior groups attached to tea pavilions or old people pavilions or those providing ritual and burial services for old people have by and large if not entirely disappeared. In the interactions with local authorities, rather abstract self-references such as “the old people of our village/place” (ben cun/difang laoren) or “the entire village” (quancun) were ubiquitously replaced with “cun laoxie” or “cun laoren xiehui” (village OPA). This is not only a change in rhetoric but rather a way to confirm the legitimacy of the temple reclamation campaign by putting it under the umbrella of a state-approved, standardized old people association. The OPA provides an overarching organizational structure that village religious organizations could latch onto and/or operate under. It represents village religious organizations in front of local authorities while overseeing or being directly in charge of temple and communal ritual activities.

The OPAs were not only welcomed by villagers as providing legitimizing narratives for village temples, but equally importantly, they were also perceived and utilized by local officials as useful intermediaries in dealing with the village community.
Local officials, both county officials and village and town cadres, in the 1980s were supportive of OPAs and sometimes even encouraged the creation of OPAs, ironically for the purpose of controlling and curbing the spread of village temples and communal rituals. Dragon boat rowing, the most important annual ritual in the plain areas of Ruian, was completely restored within a few years after 1980 in spite of multiple official prohibitions. What came with it were mounting conflicts and regulatory difficulties for the county government, especially inter-village violence sparked by dragon boat rowing activities. For instance, the collective fights in June 1981, which involved more than fifteen thousand people of eighteen villages, interrupted water transportation in Wen-Rui Tang River, the most significant transportation route at the time, for four days.\(^{62}\) There was also the widespread phenomenon of seeking temple reclamation and restoration. It was against these backgrounds that the county government at the time had hoped that old people’s organizations could assist in controlling the situation. The leadership of the OPA or other old people’s organizations predating it mostly (and today to a certain extent still does) consisted of retired cadres and veterans,\(^{63}\) whose networks remained influential in their villages. They were also close to the government because of their former positions. All of these made them the ideal intermediary for the government to reach out to local communities.

A report by Ruian Cultural Bureau in 1982, for instance, depicted “old people group” (laoren zu) of Xiyi brigade, Meitou town, as the defender and contributor of


\(^{63}\)To only give one example, when in 1987 villages in Tangxia town established their OPAs, their registration were submitted to a Tangxia Retired Cadres and Retired Factory Worker Association (Tangxia li tui xiu ganbu zhigong) because the town did not have an old-age commission (laolingwei) yet at that time. This arrangement suggests strong connections of retired cadres with OPA in the 1980s.
“socialist spiritual civilization.” Not only did the Old People Group take the responsibility to help educate young people to abide by the law and cultivate patriotism but they also firmly opposed feudal superstition, according to the report. They sawed up the brigade’s dragon boat with the community’s consent, citing the fact that villagers rowing on this dragon boat previously had fights with dragon boat teams of other villages. The end of the report wrote that leaders of the old people group persuaded a group of old women who had previously pulled together some money to restore the Great Yin Palace, not to spend the money on re-erecting statues of divinities but instead to set up the site of the palace as a “cultural activity room” (wenhua huodong shi) for youths. In 1986, the county government explicitly stressed that “letting old people fully exert their special influence” should be a central strategy in regulating dragon boat games of the year. In May, the government convened a meeting of old people representatives from all over the county, hoping that they could “help lead dragon boat activities to develop healthily.” Similar meetings followed in each district. After meetings, “old people took actions one after another, establishing and optimizing OPAs ... some OPAs in Xianjiang took a hand to ‘clean up’ superstition sites themselves and destroy facilities of feudal superstition activities ...”

We should not take for granted the roles of OPAs portrayed in these official reports and simply assumed OPAs were just tools of the government. Those old people

---

64 The group head and two vice heads are retired cadres and old party members. Two former village party secretaries were among fifteen council members elected.

65 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-34-8: 2.

66 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-34-8: 2.

67 Ruian Municipal Archives 1-34-8: 3.
who assisted the government to saw up dragon boats or destroy temples and shrines were
often the same group of people who initiated ritual and temple activities. Their actions
like sawing up dragon boats or destroying temples and shrines are better interpreted as
strategic retreat or temporary compromise. As commonly happened, they made new
dragon boats and built new temples later when the government’s anti-superstition
initiatives ended. Due to their dominance in temple and ritual activities, however, local
cadres had to reply on them to perform a duet that seemed to only fool superior
governments.

Indeed a tiresome situation that local officials often had to confront was what they
called “demolish today and rebuild tomorrow” (*jintian chaimiao, mingtian jianmiao*),
that is, people would rebuild temples or repair temple facilities immediately after they
were torn down or demolished by officials. The same circle went on again next time
when local officials were ordered to destroy superstition sites. The local officials would
be constantly questioned about the fairness of religious policies, which questions were
sometimes mixed with verbal insults and even physical attacks. For many villages and
town cadres whose family members were believers of local deities, they could also face
family pressures or had religious taboo (mostly fear of divine retaliation) themselves. The
emergence of OPAs as state-acknowledged associations inadvertently added an option for
grass-roots cadres in handling “superstition” activities. Instead of destroying and shutting
down temples, they could “remodel [temples] into Old People’s Pavilion (*laoren ting*),

68 “Guanyu qingli miaoyu jianju shazhu fengjian mixin he fengjian zongzu waifeng de tongzhi” (A
notification on suppressing village temples and decisively stopping the bad ethos of feudal superstition and
carry out normal recreational activities, and enrich the later-year life of old people.”69

The cadres were certainly fully aware that worship of local deities could soon, if not already, be embedded in facilities like Old People’s Pavilions or Old-Age Palace. Yet the co-existence of temples and OPA activity carved out some room for them to maneuver orders from superior governments and complaints from local communities. On the one hand, village temples embedded in various OPA centers were less intrusive and more tolerable because the OPA itself is legally permitted. On the other hand, containing the existence of temples in/as OPA activity space greatly helped avoid the “demolish today and rebuild tomorrow” phenomenon and other conflicts with local communities.

Words like “building old-age palace to enrich later-year life” belonged to discourses shared by both grass-roots cadres and local communities. It suggests that the quick popularization of the OPA was due to its ability to provide an existential form for village temples that was accepted by both officials and villagers at the critical moment of religious revival in the 1980s.

Since the mid-1980s, OPAs have proliferated in Ruian and the Wenzhou region. In Ruian, local communities started to establish and register their OPAs with the government around 1985. OPAs popularized swiftly within a few years. In Tangxia district alone, by the end of 1987, 115 out of 135, that is more than 85 percent of all villages have established and registered their OPAs.70 Governmental publications have many records of the construction of “later-year palaces” (wannian gong) after 1985, some of which were grounded on old sites of village temples. In 1990, the Taoshan district

69 “Daomiao gantan pochu mixin” (Demolishing temples and driving away fortune tellers to eliminate superstition), May 21, 1986, Ruian Municipal Archives 1-35-40: 41.

government for instance gave permission to build a later-year palace in Xitu Village, using the site of the village’s Xidian Palace (Xidiangong), which seemed to have been demolished or abandoned. The term “later-year palace” literally refers to a cultural center for old people that one would see everywhere in China’s urban and rural areas. Similar centers may be called different names such as “old-age palace” (laoniangong), “old people activity room” (laoren huodongshi), or “old people activity center” (laonian huodong zhongxin), etc. These old-age centers were not created merely as a disguise of village temples. Rather they allowed people to embed ritual space within recreational space and therefore secure the existence of the former. In most instances, the old-age centers serve dual purposes, that is, both as an old people recreation center and a temple. Sometimes the temple and old-age center are separated into different floors in the same building. In other instances, they were located in separate buildings in close proximity to each other. Today these old-age centers are almost a synonym for village temples in Ruian and Wenzhou.

The relationship between village OPAs and communal religious organizations in Ruian currently unfolds in two dimensions: relations between OPAs and temple organizations; and relations between OPAs and intra-village or inter-village ritual organizations. Generally speaking, OPAs and temple organizations can be either two separate entities or one entity. In either case, OPAs and temple organizations are closely interrelated. OPAs and ritual organizations are always separate entities but they tend to keep close cooperation in ritual activities. In some villages, the OPA is more all-encompassing in that it takes care of both old-people’s affairs as well as temple activities. No temple committee exists separately. In other villages, on the other hand, it is common
that temple management committees coexist with OPAs. Whether a temple has a
management committee or not has to do with several factors. The first is the history of
temple restoration. In many villages the initiation of temple restoration is earlier than the
appearance of OPAs. Some of these temple management committees are ad hoc groups
created for the cause of temple restoration and before the formation of the village OPA.
Founding members and/or their chosen heirs are still serving the temple, for example, in
the case of the aforementioned Rock Head Palace. Though temples belong to either a
village or a place (in local conception), the legitimacy of those initiators’ leadership is
still acknowledged because of their contribution to the temple. In the case of Rock Head
Palace, Mrs. Zhu Chenlan is one of a few ladies and old man who launched the actions to
re-occupy the temple in 1980. Chen Jinggu, the main deity worshipped in the temple,
according to Zhu, designated her as the deity’s medium in a dream. Both Zhu and her
husband resigned from their jobs and have served in the temple since then. Wu Zhenwei,
the current head of the temple management committee, was invited and elected as head
partly because his father was also one of the initiators.  

The second factor is the size of the temple. There are two types of temples in the
villages of Ruian. One is owned and exclusively regulated by a single village. The second
type belongs to a “place” (difang) constituted of a group of villages, which in some cases
is roughly equal to a town center. The aforementioned Jiuli Temple and East Hall Temple,
for instance, are of this type. A “place” temple and some village temples with sizable
“incense fire” (xianghuo)—a metaphor for the number of visitors who come to burn
incense and pray—will have separate management committees to cope with daily affairs

---

71 Interview with Zhu Chenlan, July 23, 2012
such as temple maintenance, ritual services, finance, etc. The reconstruction of Bishan temple, Bishan Town, Taoshan District, for instance, was initiated in the name of an old people’s organization in 1982. In 1987, the initiators formally registered their organization with the government as Bishan Township OPA. In 1990, a separate management group was created to deal with the expanding enterprise of Bishan temple. In this case, the formation of the management group was probably also a measure to keep the temple financially independent from the Bishan Township OPA.  

Ritual organizations and OPAs are always separate entities. Dragon boat rowing and “field circuit blessing” (*lan yang fu*), two major communal rites in Ruian, all have specific organizations and organizational mechanisms historically, some of which are still in use today. The “Eighteen She” (literally eighteen villages) has been and still is the organization for the “field circuit blessing” ritual in Dongpu town, Taoshan District. Every time the ritual is to be performed, eighteen participating villages would recommend and ultimately select a great general manager (*dazongli*) and five vice managers (*fuzongli*).  

Both temple management committees and ritual organizations are in a collaborative relationship with village OPAs in collective activities. Co-existing in the same village or “place,” there is understandably a lot of overlap in leadership. Most

72 Huang Dingfa, “Ruian Bishansi ji Yangfuye xinyang” (Bishan Temple and the Worship of Lord Yang in Ruian), *Wenzhou Yangfuhouwang Xingsu Wenhua Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwenji*, Cangnan, June 2011, 176-177. Another important reason to have a management committee has to do with the legitimation of some village temples. Since early 1990s, a small portion of village temples have sought legalization through the registration at the Daoism association. Today about one hundred and fifty village temples are members of Ruian Daoist Association. To be a Daoist temple, it is mandatory to form a specialized regulation group.

chairs of village temple management committees and council members are members and, more often than not, leaders of OPAs. It is very common for the head of an OPA to concurrently serve as the chair of the village temple management committee.  

The overlap in the OPAs and temple management committees and ritual organizations then allowed the latter to operate in the name of OPA when organizing major events such as annual rites. The call to reconstruct Rock Head Palace in the new location in 1998 was made in the name of the village OPA. The “field circuit” team of each village and the preparation of sacrifices in “field circuit blessing” of Dongpu are all organized by the OPA of each respective village. It is true that temple management committee or ritual organizations might run major events without resorting to OPAs. However, OPAs can help pull together more resources. In the case of reconstructing Rock Head Palace, I was told, except for the head of the temple management committee, who was also the head of the village OPA, was male, all other standing members were female who felt that they could not accomplish the task without assistance of more resourceful and powerful males in the village. The other probably more important and apparent reason that people did not tell me is the lack of illegal status of both those temple management committees and ritual organizations. In this circumstance, state-sanctioned OPAs are relied on to serve as not just a protection cover for temple and ritual activities but also a liaison between communities and the government.

---

74 The current director of Rock Head Palace management committee had long served as the head of the OPA in Rock Head Village. He gave up his position at the OPA only upon the requirement of Ruian Religious Bureau a few years ago. Interview with Wu Zhenwei in Rock Head Palace, May 12, 2013.

75 Cheng, “Xinyang shichang de jingjixue fenxi.”
The OPA’s roles in village temple activities, from temple reclamation and reconstruction to management of temple and ritual activities, is critical for the OPA to firmly embed itself into rural life in Ruian. When communal religious activities revitalized in the 1980s, village government could not directly act on behalf of the village with respect to this matter even if they were supportive of the revival of village traditions. The creation of OPAs timely filled the vacuum of leadership in this significant sector of village life. Since 2013, Wenzhou government at the request of the central government has been experimenting with legalizing village temples under the category of “folk beliefs” (minjian xinyang). However, the OPA’s dominance in village temple affairs will most likely continue because the leading role of the OPA in the realm of village religion has been stabilized and fully institutionalized over the past three decades.

**Conclusion and Discussion: the Boom of Religion and the 1980s Legacy**

With the Cultural Revolution coming to an end and the government initiating its plans for reform at the end the 1970s, communal religious traditions swiftly resurfaced in rural Ruian. The new religious policy not only did not give village temples activities legal recognition but even singled out the latter as “superstition” to be suppressed. However, the restitution policies did create an environment that strongly encouraged a wave of temple reclamation and restoration. As the commune system rapidly fell apart in the 1980s, the cause for temple reclamation and restoration found new impetus. In particular, the downfall of the commune system further stimulated the claims to property rights over occupied temples, which claims were previously politically too sensitive to be raised. Moreover, the return of sites of legal religions (e.g. Christian churches and Buddhist
monasteries) and other properties under the restitution policies greatly arouse the passions and actions of local communities in reclaiming occupied village temples and created pressures on local cadres to treat and accommodate village temples equally. In contrast to the growing strength of village communities reclaiming temples, the major occupants of village temples faced delicate situations in the 1980s. The supply-and-sale co-op and the grain department were losing their importance to both the government and the communities given the disintegration of the commune system and the fading out of the command economy. The county government therefore became less motivated in defending their interests.

The return and restoration of village temples were hardly peaceful and often violent because the label of “superstition” was still looming over village temple activities. The occupying entities could easily label seeking the return of temples as a pretext for restoring “superstition” and therefore reject the request of the communities. Returned temples at times faced the danger of being occupied again or demolished in the government’s campaigns to eliminate “superstition” in the early 1980s. Local communities therefore had to constantly search for better ways to secure the successful return of their temples and ensure their continuous existence. Organizations, both those societies of senior villagers existing before 1978 or ad hoc groups created for temple reclamation and restoration, were similarly caught in the issue of legality.

The rise of Old People’s Associations since the mid-1980s came at such a moment of legality crisis for the temple reclamation and restoration movement. The discourses and narratives associated with the OPA did not help village temple practices get rid of the label of “superstition.” What it did was to revitalize the traditional concept
of the temple as a multifunctional public space and hence superscribe a layer of protection for village temple practices. In a way, the interpretation and disguise of village temples as recreational space that OPAs provided for senior village residents formed a middle ground for both local communities and local state agents with respect to the issue of village temples. For the latter, who did not have much interest in keeping constant pressure on village temple activities, the OPA could serve as a vehicle to accommodate the existence of village temples and save them from the hassle of having to suppress village temple activities and then face criticism from village residents.

The OPA also provided an organizational form acknowledged by the state, which greatly facilitated the mission of temple reclamation and restoration both within and without the village. In particular it gave local communities a platform to reach out to local authorities and occupying entities on the temple issue. Today village temples remain a major commitment of OPAs in Ruian. In some villages, OPAs directly manage village temples and organize ritual activities. Other villages adopted a dual structure. Temple management committee/group is in charge of the daily activities and maintenance of village temple whereas OPA oversees matters related to village temples. In either case, OPAs would represent their villages in interactions with state agents and other villages.

Village OPAs in Ruian and the Wenzhou region have in many ways moved beyond religion and old-age support and are moving into the core of village politics as a major player. The influence of village OPAs raises when the power of village party committee and villager committee are weakening and when local society is on the way to rapid commercialization and urbanization. Against these backgrounds, OPAs have not
only taken over many public affairs in villages but also become a pioneer of contentious politics in fighting against interest groups within and outside villages, recent studies show.⁷⁶

In sum, the campaign of temple reclamation and restoration in the 1980s and 1990s was not just a wave of religious revival that sought to bring temples back to village public life. It was also a social movement that reinvigorated and institutionalized traditional rural organizations, which subsequently reshaped village power dynamics in a major way. Of course the OPA is not purely a continuation of rural organizations before the reform era, but in the case of Wenzhou, it does have its roots in preexisting rural organizations and traditional patriarchal power. The birth of the OPA and its expansion once again demonstrate the agency and resilience of local communities in coping with the challenges and opportunities of modernity in village life. The trajectory of the village OPA is not unique to Wenzhou. It is also observed in other parts of China such as in Fujian.⁷⁷ In fact, this chapter only reveals one dimension of how OPAs have revived traditional rural organizations. Studies on other regions in China have also demonstrated

---


the connections between the revival of lineage organizations and the boom of village
OPAs.\textsuperscript{78}

Conclusion

This dissertation is a case study of the evolution of religious and social life in rural China under Maoism and its contemporary legacies for rural religious organizations in Ruian and the Wenzhou region. It shows that the Communist government’s restructuring of rural society after 1949 led to two revolutionary changes in the religious landscape of Wenzhou society. The first one is the rise of Christianity, especially Protestant Christianity. Mao’s revolution dramatically facilitated further integration and expansion of Christianity into local society, which then precipitated an explosive growth of the latter in the reform period. The second one is the reinvention of communal religion, the majority religious tradition in the region. Maoist rule profoundly devastated the traditional leadership and organizations of village temples and rituals. Paradoxically it also greatly stimulated the renewal of communal religion by forcing local communities to create/adopt new institutional forms, operational patterns, and narratives in order to reposition and perpetuate village temple traditions in the sociopolitical environments of the post-Mao era.

Christian churches, in particular Protestant ones, rose vis-à-vis traditional religious organizations, largely thanks to the hypermobility and adaptability of the former’s organizations and activities, which were grounded in pre-1949 developments. Despite serious setbacks suffered in the Great Leap Forward and the early stage of the Cultural Revolution, Protestant communities expanded into vast new territories and swelled in membership in the later stage of the Cultural Revolution through multiplying and scattering family gatherings. Expansion under Maoism gave Protestant churches
leverage in the legalization and creation of new churches subsequently and laid the foundation for the explosive growth of church membership in the reform period.

This project is more than a story of a foreign religion finding a new home in China, however. The acceptance and expansion of Christianity, I contend, was more importantly a manifestation of local people’s capacity to absorb new social forms to maintain community autonomy. That same capacity also showed itself in the community’s efforts to carry on communal religious traditions during the Maoist years. Unlike Christianity, communal religious traditions had to exist in the shadow of the “superstition” label and were constantly targeted as the subject of state secularization projects since the turn of the twentieth century. Communal religious traditions met the most difficult times in the Maoist period. However, religious explanations deeply entrenched in local culture at times drove the resurfacing of communal religious activities and even the reconstruction of temples during the Mao years. In the 1980s and 1990s, to get around the legality issue of village temples, the communities creatively co-opted state-sanctioned institutions (e.g. the Old People’s Association, Daoist Association, etc.) and discourses to take back temples and reestablish temple and ritual organizations.

Today Old People’s Associations have extended their reach into village affairs that are far beyond religion. Not only do they provide public goods and perform philanthropy for villagers, but they are also asserting stronger influence on village politics in some areas of the Wenzhou region.

In addition to the religious communities themselves, this project is also about the state. Although it focuses on the evolution of the religious landscape in Wenzhou, this evolution from the very beginning unfolded against the background of the government’s
plans to subdue religion. State-making in the twentieth century turned traditional Chinese religions into the targets of the government as the symbol of the backwardness of Chinese civilization and a major obstacle for the government to economically and politically penetrate its power into local society. This very process reached its the peak during the 1949 revolution. By extending bureaucratic system into villages, the Communist government’s control of society was unprecedentedly powerful. But such an extensive political system was doomed with inherent issues. As religious policy constantly fluctuated with political campaigns, grass-roots cadres who were appointed as state agents were at a loss as to what to do and thereby could not provide the support the government needed. They sometimes even resisted directives on religion from their superiors, and some in fact actively participated in and sheltered religious activities. Without the full support of local cadres, even the most powerful Communist government could not subdue, not to say eliminate religion, in the long run.

Though the Communist government’s attempt to subdue religion was largely a failure, the government stilled showed flexibility and an ability to learn from its failures. Throughout the Maoist period, the formal religious policy was never outright anti-religious but instead required keeping a balance between limited tolerance and suppression. Such a policy failed in actual implementation and things often went out of control and completely leaned towards suppression during the Cultural Revolution. Such extremities then propelled the government to take up more accommodating stances in religious issues in the reform period. They used various new discourses (e.g. local culture, cultural heritage, etc.) to cope with the resurgence of traditional communal rituals and acquiesced in some village temples registering as members of Buddhist associations and
Daoist associations. Most recently, with flourishing communal religious activities, the government even formally added “popular beliefs” (minjian xinyang) to its categories. Thus the relationship between the state and the local communities on religion is not a zero-sum game. Rather the dynamics consist of both struggle and mutual accommodation.

Putting the Maoist period in the larger context of social and political changes to local society in Wenzhou since the late nineteenth century, we see the need to reconsider historical continuities and discontinuities. I discern significant continuities across both 1949 and 1978, which suggest that the extent to which these two years were watershed years needs to be reassessed. The growth of Christian churches and redemptive societies began in the turn of the twentieth century and extended beyond 1949. Dragon boat rowing ritual, one of the most important annual communal religious rites in the region, did not disappear after 1949, but continued on and off into the mid-1960s (and resumed at the end of the 1970s). Moreover, my study indicates that religious revival in Wenzhou in the post-Mao era did not happen overnight, but was already in the making in the later stage of the Cultural Revolution. The revitalization of Protestant churches began as early as the late 1960s and was critical to the church’s phenomenal growth in the post-Mao era. Since the early 1970s, large Buddhist gathering began to emerge and a small number of communities had begun to renovate and reconstruct village temples, paving the way for the post-1978 revival.

Zooming out further, we can discern some common threads and trends that ran through the history of religion in the region since the late nineteenth century. In a nutshell, traditional village religious traditions (in a broad sense, including the worship of local deities, Buddhist and Daoist ritual activities) were forced to undergo a process of renewal
and re-institutionalization. In the meanwhile, trans-regional millennial traditions, including redemptive societies and Christianity, arose in the local religious ecology since the turn of the twentieth century. The Communist’s rise to power in 1949 inadvertently stimulated both processes, especially promoting the integration of Christianity into local society while silencing redemptive societies.

The Wenzhou case has national implications on several fronts. First, it represents one type of path that village religious and social organizations in China took after 1949, which help us observe changes to social life in other regions of China. Empirical evidence shows that some regions of both south and north China shared similar experiences with Wenzhou in the Maoist period. The surge of religious activities in the early 1960s, for instance, was not limited to the Wenzhou region. During the years 1961-1964, across China (from the northeastern provinces to Guangdong of south China) there were widespread phenomena of temple and ancestral hall reconstruction and genealogy compilation. And many “superstition professionals” including mediums and fortunetellers resumed activities. My discovery of the growth of Christianity during the Cultural Revolution seems to be counterintuitive. But Wenzhou was very likely not the only region that witnessed such a development. Some regions in the northern provinces of Henan and Anhui and the southern provinces of Guangdong and Fujian also show signs of growth of Christianity in the later stage of the Cultural Revolution. Especially noteworthy, these regions, such as Xinyang and Nanyang of Henan, were also where Christianity spread the fastest in the reform period. Second, more than a model for comparative studies between regions, Wenzhou Christianity also has national influences. As early as the late 1970s, Christian businessmen hailing from Wenzhou started to
disseminate “Wenzhou Christianity”—a type of Christianity heavily invested with localized practices and models of operations unique to Wenzhou—to the entire country and overseas Chinese communities. Today Wenzhou churches have established numerous so-called “brother churches” in a vast region from the northeast to Yunnan of the southeast, and also in Wenzhounese communities throughout the world.

Last but not the least, the story of Wenzhou is also a story of globalization. It reveals how two global currents starting from Europe intersected in a geographically isolated region in East Asia and fundamentally transformed local society and life since the late nineteenth century. The first current is secularism and the second is the global expansion of Christianity. When Western powers defeated the Qing Empire in a series of wars in the late nineteenth century, one of their requests was to allow Christian missions to travel to and work in China. Being one of the earliest treaty ports, Wenzhou was then exposed to the dissemination of Christianity. In the beginning of the twentieth century, secularism as a political ideology arose in Asia with the ascent of the nation-state. Western concepts of “religion” and “superstition” were imported via Japan into China and became the foundation of secularism in China. The modern Chinese state launched a series of political engineering projects to promote the institutionalization of religion and suppress “superstition activities.” These two streams converged in Wenzhou as in many other local societies in China. Against this background, actors with different interests in the region—state agents or believers of different religious traditions, including Christians—entered into a long contestation over such categories and discourses (e.g., “religion” vs. “superstition”) to seek a new place for their traditions in the religious field.
What I have attempted to present in this study are the processes of the contestation and its consequences.

This project also begs many questions. The first is what are the implications of the rise of Christianity in the local religious landscape? On the surface, the rise of Christianity initiated the transition of Chinese villages from ascriptive communities to voluntary communities as Christians refuse to participate in village temple activities. Local Christian communities are not based on villages but trans-village regions and they do not stress village identity but rather trans-regional Christian identity. How much would these changes impact village identities? Would it lead to the further decentralization of traditional communities? How will the community at large respond to the increased religious diversity? The second question is the evolution of communal religion since 1949. I have focused on the organizational dimension of this evolution. But there is much more to study, for instance, changes to the operation of village temples, ritual practices (e.g. ritual content and relative relevance of different rituals), and the worship of different deities (and their relative importance in the village). The third question is about the history of redemptive societies after early 1950s. We do not have much information in this regard. However, it is a very important phenomenon that deserves more attention. If, as Lian Xi suggests, the rise of popular Christianity in China was part of the ascent of millennial traditions in the twentieth century that were deeply entrenched in the Chinese past, the popularity of redemptive societies surely belonged to this larger phenomenon. Those indigenous redemptive societies seemed to fall into a long period of silence after the 1950s. Would they come up again in near future? A probe into its history and entanglement with village communities might help answer this question.
The last question is a comparative study of different regions. Wenzhou only represents one pattern of religious development in rural China since the late nineteenth century. From what we currently know, a lot of other regions seemingly experienced far more severe disruption in religious activities under Maoism. If this were true, why? What paths did religious activities in these regions take? Only in this comparative light can we better understand the overall effects of secularism on the making of religious modernity in China.
Bibliography

Archival Sources and Internal Documents

Longquan Municipal Archives, Longquan City, Lishui, Zhejiang.

*Neibu Cankao* (Internal Reference), 1954-1965, the Xinhua Agency, Beijing.

Pingyang County Archives, Pingyang County, Wenzhou, Zhejiang.

Ruian Municipal Archives, Ruian City, Wenzhou, Zhejiang.

Taishun County Archives, Taishun County, Wenzhou, Zhejiang.

Wencheng County Archives, Wencheng County, Wenzhou, Zhejiang.

Wenling Municipal Archives, Wenling City, Taizhou, Zhejiang.

Wenzhou Municipal Archives, Wenzhou Municipality, Zhejiang.

Yueqing Municipal Archives, Yueqing City, Wenzhou, Zhejiang.

Local Gazetteers and Records of Local Religious Institutions

“Chengong jinduo sanshi zhounian shiji jianjie” (A brief introduction to deeds of priest Chen at thirty anniversary of his ordination).

“Wenzhou jiaoqu de chuanjiao sishi” (Catechists of Wenzhou Diocese).


Chen Shangsheng. “Xiantan Xiang xiangzhang quanjia guizhu” (The Whole Family of Xiantan Township Head Converted). *Xiaduo yuekan* 1.6(1937): 36-37.


Chen Jianmin, et al., eds. *Longwan quzhi, zhengzhi yundong juan (xu)* (A History of


Huang Dingfa. “Ruian Bishansi ji Yangfuye xinyang” (Bishan Temple and the Worship of Lord Yang in Ruian). In Wenzhou Yangfuhouwang Xinsu Wenhua Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwenji, Cangnan, June 2011, 176-177.


Miao Zhitong. Wenzhou qu jiaohui shi (Church history in Wenzhou). Internal document, 2005-2006?


**Secondary Works and Other Materials**


-----.“Wenzhou jiaohui yigong fazhan lichen” (The Development Course of Workers in Wenzhou Church). *Jinling shengxuezhi* 3(2010): 24-44.


Harrison, Henrietta.


