

Sin and Punishment:

The Art of Churches' Domination and the Resistance of Apostates

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ABSTRACT: This paper is a qualitative analysis of the life experiences of three female believers who were punished for their “sins” and eventually left the Church. It reveals how religious power manifests itself through the condemnation of “sins” such as “demonic possession,” “premarital sex,” and “adultery,” as well as the various kinds of resistance strategies among these “apostates.” I argue that fundamentalist Church doctrines are an essential part of the process of Sinicisation of Christianity, embedded as they are in the disciplinary structures of personal life in China, especially mother-daughter relationships, intimate partnerships, and acquaintance societies, which intensify constraints on individuals. In turn, discussions of moral taboos are themselves deeply involved in Chinese society and culture.

KEYWORDS: sin, domination, resistance, apostates, female believers, Sinicisation.

Introduction

Scholarly discussions of Chinese Christianity often emphasise the influence of political factors. First, religious policy and development are seen as based in an opposition between Christianity and local religions; and second, the localisation of Christianity is framed through an East-West dichotomy. The former focuses more on the effects of state control while the latter deals with strategies of religious expansion.

In both cases, the state is highlighted as the main actor, not only in the sense that the modern Chinese state defines what a religious organisation is, but also in that it acts directly on the sociopolitical context, which determines the direction and degree of influence of the institutional characteristics of religion (Sun 2017: 1670-3). Many studies attribute the growth of Christianity in post-Mao China to the state crackdown on rural local religions, which created a more conducive environment for change, with the decline of traditional values clearing the way for the growth of Christianity (Liang 1999: 216; Bays 2011: 193-4). This argument positions rural Christianity in opposition to local religions. It ignores, however, the fact that the development of rural Christianity is similar to traditional religions in both form and content, and that it inherits the same social context as traditional popular religions (Gernet 1991: 109-11; Lian 2011: 199).

Thus, many scholars have noted that important aspects of Chinese traditional popular religions are involved in the cultural agglomeration that characterises sectarian Chinese Christianity (Bays 2011: 197). This is reflected both in the similarities between the eschatological character of popular religions and Christianity, and in

Christianity's ritual congruence with Chinese traditions. In addition, scholars have also meticulously explored into which local systems Chinese Christianity fits. Huang K. (2017: 134), for example, argues that the indigenous culture of Confucianism has been mobilised to tame spiritual activity among the laity in the Chinese Pentecostal True Jesus Church. Tong and Yang (2014) highlight the similarities between Christianity and Taoism in attitudes towards women. Zhang X. (2009: 264) shows how clan and religion grew simultaneously and interdependently in the Catholicisation process. Scholars also demonstrate that the practical logic of communities of acquaintance shapes the spread of the faith and the structure of the community (Shi 2012: 86-90).

These discussions focus on the practice of religions, demonstrating how features of Christianity and folk religion interact and how people don't necessarily distinguish between or separate which denomination they belong to. Christianity is thus seen as a local structure of interaction. In the vein of indigenous appropriation, scholars emphasise the efforts of the Chinese who took responsibility for indigenising Christianity, focusing on Chinese agents, Chinese redefinitions, and Chinese institutions and practices that created indigenisation in the context of Chinese history to which it belongs (Huang Y. 2017: 213; Zheng 2017: 3-4).

The concept of Sinicisation is peculiar to the case of China. As a recent religious policy, Sinicisation has been rejected by some believers due to its strong political charge and coercion in its implementation. It also tends to fall into the trap of the essentialism of national cultural authenticity and dichotomies of Christianity and Sinicisation (Madsen 2011; Cao 2017: 4). In this sense, the word

“Sinicisation” itself needs more discussion beyond the political project. It would not be a matter of forms of Christianity taking over from non-Christian or traditional practices but of forms of Christianity emerging from, and sometimes transforming themselves back into such practices. In this view, Christianity in China have been and will continue to be sinicised, but into many different aspects of Chinese culture (Madsen 2017: 324-6).

In focusing on indigenous Christians, gender has provoked many discussions, particularly in relation to the complex relationship between female believers’ religious choice, autonomy, and patriarchal culture. Lian (2011: 209) observes that while the revival of Christianity has provided female believers with identity and leadership opportunities, in practice the personal dynamism, creativity, and ambition of these women are invariably constrained by the framework of entrenched male-dominated fundamentals in Christian communities that adhere to Chinese traditional patriarchal norms. Similarly, Cao (2017: 97-125) suggests that there is a remarkable parallel between traditional Chinese and conservative Protestant Christian gender ideologies: both embrace female chastity, submissiveness, subordination, and domesticity. Huang Y. (2017: 223-4) argues that the family and Christianity, as well as the (late) socialist state, act as patriarchal forces in a transnational case. This study also shows that even though female Christians in China are now highly educated and have better jobs and social status, the entire Chinese Christian community places great emphasis on the gendered order of women’s submission.

Christianity as a spiritual discourse therefore forms a complex background in contemporary China, in parallel with other socialist, Confucian, and feminist discourses. More importantly, we need to carefully discern what elements in the practices of women believers act as controls, and to what extent the resources give them autonomy and space.

Rather than discussing state control and the sociopolitical context at the macro-level, or institutional features and Church governance at the meso-level, this paper engages with Carol Smart’s concept of “personal life” (2007: 28-30) to complement the discussions. First, the focus on “personal life” goes beyond the simple debate between the public and private spheres and revisits individual choices and struggles concerning sex, love, emotion, and desire. By discussing individual struggles in emotional micropolitics, it reveals a hidden and emotive mechanism compared to scholarly discussions of female Christians, which often relate to gender ratios (Aikman 2006: 98), church participation, and gender role division in the Church (Cao 2017: 31-2; Huang K. 2017: 133). Second, it helps us to uncover other power structures obscured by the discourse of political persecution (Ma 2019a, 2021: 6-7), showing how power pervades the daily practice of ordinary believers, particularly in families, marriages, and local life. Together, this places the stories of ordinary Chinese Christian women at the centre, challenging some scholarly research where women often appear marginal to the remarkable main story of Protestantism in China (Ma 2019b: 2).

Based on the stories of three female believers who were punished for their “sins” and eventually left the Church, this article asks: How does the Chinese Church define “sin”? What norms and narratives are used to legitimise these judgements? How did these female believers face their moral condemnation? It argues that all three cases embody

a framework of “fundamentalist doctrinal and disciplinary structure” – both of which are themselves the product of Sinicisation.

Fundamentalist doctrines are, on the one hand, a legacy of localisation (Lian 2011: xx-xxx). They offer dualistic moral judgements, a dichotomous framework that more easily simplifies faith into an antagonism between good and evil forces: of God or the devil, obedient or disobedient, sacred or corrupt.

On the other hand, disciplinary structures, including mother-daughter relationships in Chinese families, intimate partnerships, and rural acquaintance societies are woven into the discussion of Chinese traditional elements, such as expected filial piety, preference for male heirs, stress on female chastity, and patriarchal culture.

Ultimately, this paper shows how fundamentalist Church doctrines are embedded in the disciplinary structures of personal life, which further constrains individuals and ultimately appears in the guise of family faith, marital counselling, and local authority. Through the shame, repression, and broken religious lives experienced by Chinese Christian women, we are able to understand how the complicity of both has occurred – providing us with a woman-centred perspective on Sinicisation.

Key concepts and methodology

What I call here the “art of domination” – as a reference to the “art of resistance” coined by James Scott – has two meanings, one of which denotes the invisibility of power relations. James Scott indeed uses the concept “art of resistance” to indicate a variety of covert, subtle, diffused, and hidden modes of resistance by the dominated against the dominant (1990: 4-5), which are also prevalent in my field notes. Second, it contains an approach to power analysis. Resistance, as a catalyst of power, reveals power relations and discovers their uses and methods through antagonism rather than from their internal rationality (Foucault 1982: 780). Therefore, this is a method of analysis to expose religious power and disciplinary structures by showing forms of “resistance.”

The “apostates” – the informants – are not betrayers, atheists, or unbelievers. They are those who have broken Church dogma, those who have been punished by institutional religion, and those who have been disqualified by Church authority and have therefore left the Church.

This article is based on my fieldwork conducted in 2021-2022 in Zhejiang, one of China’s most economically active coastal provinces, where I interviewed 11 women believers. The participants claim to come from evangelical churches, with Mana coming from an urban official church, Ye Xin from a house church,¹ and Chun Mei from a rural church. Behind these identities, however, lie both “unsavoury” events that cannot be discussed openly within the Church, and unspeakable personal experiences that are steeped in doctrine.

I have chosen to highlight three cases out of the 11 with the following considerations: they all have relatively well-rounded

1. In contemporary China, house churches are also commonly referred to as underground churches, unregistered churches or unofficial churches. This term is often used to distinguish them from the official churches led by the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*sanzi aiguo yundong* 三自愛國運動) and China Christian Council. However, it is important to note that in different historical periods and local contexts, the distinction between the two is not always clear. For further discussion, please refer to Vala (2017: 11-5).

narratives; the narrators have moved away from the negative emotions generated by self-attack and have found ways to deal with their “sinful” experiences; the “sins” involved are common to the doctrinal teachings of the entire Chinese Christian community; they reflect different aspects of personal life (mothers and daughters in a family, partners in intimate relationships, and acquaintances in a community); furthermore, these faith experiences lasted for years for the narrators, as they were all involved in complicated relationships that were difficult to exit. These elements make the tensions between domination and resistance clearer and easier to grasp. These three cases, however, are independent: the believers come from different churches, ages, and occupations, and this diversity helps us to compare them and explore potential shared mechanisms among them. In addition, the three cases are obviously not meant to be representative of all female Christians. Nevertheless, their experiences are shaped by broader biblical teachings and structural conditions that are far from unique to them.

Hiding is the prominent nature underlying these stories. Therefore, a highly trusted listener and methods of oral history may be the only way to get close to their experiences. For this reason, I use oral narratives by the subjects as the main source of data. Further, these self-narratives occurred in informal settings, which allowed for more authentic and free expression. They are also embedded in various personal relationships that are rarely presented in Chinese religious studies and which inspired this study.

As a woman, a believer, and a researcher, I am fortunate to have earned their trust. I have used pseudonyms to protect the subjects’ privacy. Each subject’s narrative was formed through multiple conversations. Initially, much of the data was obtained informally, and then I asked for and recorded more details after gaining considerable trust from the subjects. Through the stories of these three believers, I hope both to add a female dimension to the dominant narrative of male boss Christians in Zhejiang (Cao 2010, 2017) and to respond to contemporary debates about the practice of Christianity in China. This presentation based on oral narratives is also a methodological effort to respond to criticism that the study of religion and theology tends to be too abstract and detached from personal experience (Ma 2019b: 9-13).

Mana: “Demon” in the mother-daughter relationship

Mana is a 26-year-old third-generation Chinese Christian. She inherited her grandmother and mother’s faith without hesitation and was baptised at the age of 15. However, her rebellious behaviour of questioning God in high school was denounced by her mother as “demon-possessed” (*mo gui shang shen* 魔鬼上身). For the mother, there is a natural affinity between home and church, both of which being the absolute authority in the moral arena. Therefore, the act of questioning God offended the mother’s unquestionable position in the family, leading to a vindictive mother-daughter relationship.

“My body is a storehouse of memories”

Mana, meaning “fruit of the Spirit,” is a Biblical word given as a name to children by family elders. As the second daughter in the family, Mana not only helped her parents care for her younger

siblings but also took on more household chores than her elder sister. “Obedient, hardworking, and a pushover” was the image the third younger sister had of her. Of all the siblings, Mana was the first to embrace the family faith. However, this always obedient daughter “went astray” during her high school years, which was intolerable for this Christian family of three generations. When she exposed her homosexuality to her family and chose to attend English classes instead of church, her emotions were criticised as unnatural, and her refusal to “keep the Lord’s Sabbath” (*shou zhu ri* 守主日) was seen as “resisting God” (*kang ju shen* 抗拒神) and was strongly opposed by her mother. As noted in other studies, for local religious leaders and believers, orthopraxy (e.g., keeping the Sabbath) and orthopathy are far more important than the orthodoxy itself (Hunter and Chan 1993: 151; Liang 1999: 61, 161; Lian 2011: xxvii-xi, 119).

In fundamentalist doctrines based on the dichotomy of good and evil, Mana’s disobedience was perceived as an act of the devil, leading to coercive evangelical persuasion. Christian elders tried to dissuade and correct her “wrong way” through physical restraints and verbal and physical violence. To keep local believers out of the loop, elders from a nonlocal Church were mobilised by her family members to visit Mana and force her to accept her mother’s ideas. Her mother locked Mana in a room to prevent her from attending English classes and even hit her when she disobeyed her requirements. “Once when my mother tried to hit me, I grabbed her wrist and defended myself and she stopped hitting me after that.” All these actions were based on the mother’s condemnation of her daughter – she was no longer her daughter, but the work of the demon.

“My family is very concerned about keeping face (*mianzi* 面子), so all this happened at home and they don’t want news to spread.” The traditional belief of “never let outsiders know about the ugly affairs at home” (*jia chou bu ke wai yang* 家醜不可外揚) leaves “no space to discuss and voice it.” Young Mana could only cope by “locking [herself] up in [her] room and crying,” “refusing to go to Church,” “rejecting the dogma,” and “keeping a diary.”

Mana’s religious rebellion led to severe physical and psychological abuse, which was intertwined with her status as an unappreciated daughter and her marginalised family position. Compared to her three siblings, Mana described herself as “an alien.” Mana was born in the 1990s (when the family planning policy was strictly executed in urban China) into a traditional patriarchal family favouring boys over girls. Mana was secretly given away at birth and was only taken back at the age of eight when her little brother was born. As a result, she called herself the only abandoned child in her family. She described the transition between different families as “a dark period,” and said she felt disconnected and depressed when she was sent back to her family of origin. Initially, she tried to gain her mother’s attention by being more obedient in religion and more diligent in her chores, but all these efforts were destroyed by her rebellion.

Mana’s rejection of the family faith also implies a rejection of the parental will. This refusal is unacceptable both because it challenges the mother’s inviolable role as the authority of the family and because it violates the moral imperative of absolute obedience by the daughter in the patriarchal family (Fei 2011: 71-83). Mana was accused of being “unfilial,” and thus exposed to physical and psychological violence.

Filial piety, in the classics and in popular thought, means subordination (or obedience) and continuing the family line. The emphasis on filial piety not only reinforced the power of parents over their children (Miller 2004: 36) but also exposed Mana, as a daughter, to injustice from birth.

“I came to know that she was also a victim”

The strained mother-daughter relationship is a family microcosm of patriarchal social culture. In Mana’s view, her mother was also discriminated against in patriarchal culture, having lived a long life under the social teaching that “men should control women and women should obey men.” Eventually, however, this repression led her mother to internalise toxic masculinity – an obsessive need to control, and intense misogyny. “My mother plays the role of a tough man to show that she is stronger than the men.” On the one hand, this is manifested in her mother’s strong family role – the dominant role in financial and family relationships with an uxori-local husband (*ru zhui* 入贅); on the other hand, the mother despises softness and fragility as feminine traits and attributes a woman’s worth to the man she marries, which led her to start finding Mana a “successful” husband in her high school.

Here, the masculine image of motherhood and the expressions of female shame need to be further discussed within a broader social and cultural context that constructs what is perceived as shameful. Born in 1960, Mana’s mother grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and her personal emotional experience of shame was a living manifestation of the gender project in the Mao era. Gender discourses during the Cultural Revolution associated the strong revolutionaries (including revolutionary women) with masculinity and conflated the weak feminine (including feminised men) with the counter-revolutionaries; the latter was to be subordinated to the former (Roberts 2010: 132-4). When the way for women to achieve social recognition was seen to be the same as it was for men, with women doing whatever men do, the male-dominated gender hierarchy was ironically subtly reconfirmed, since masculinity was established as the desirable norm for all, and feminine traits still seen as inferior and in need of repression or denial (Huang X. 2018: 96-7). In Mana’s family, the social oppression and stigmatisation of femininity are reflected in the mother’s tyranny and violence towards her daughter.

Parents and children are naturally connected. When parents are in their unconscious suffering cycle, children often unconsciously take on the responsibility of making them happy. I understood that my resentment was a physical reaction to not being loved well, and her control was self-protection from not being accepted as a woman... Each person possesses a unique blend of masculine and feminine energy, and everyone deserves the freedom to make their own life choices. (Interview with Mana, 21 February 2022)

Therefore, the reconciliation between them was built on Mana’s awareness of childhood traumas and her empathy for her mother as she recognised that they were facing the same social discrimination.

Compared to the relatively monolithic gender landscape of the Mao era, Mana’s notions of masculinity and femininity reflect the characteristics of a heterogeneous and hybrid gender discourse in the

new millennium. China’s neoliberal transition and the development of an increasingly overt gay community since the 1990s have opened new possibilities for nonheterosexual and nonbinary gender expressions (Huang X. 2018: 13). Therefore, female masculinity, androgyny, nonbinary gender articulation, metrosexuality, and transgender identity are competing with the normative ideas of femininity and masculinity (Huang X. 2014). Mana’s understanding of gender extends to her perception of faith. She separated faith from religion, arguing that:

Faith is quite personal, while religion is mixed with fear and control and distorted by human ideas. (...) Overall, I am striving to embrace unconditional love, transcend religion and beliefs, and accept my mother for who she is. (Interview, 4 December 2021)

Family faith mixes up doctrinal discipline with parental governance. The emphasis on piety, a quasi-religious virtue, and a mechanical view of unconditional submission often leads to the understanding that children are the property of their parents (Ma 2019b: 194), culminating in tensions between mother and daughter.

The dualist moral judgement of fundamentalist Church teachings denigrates Mana’s quest for independence as “the devil’s work.” Here, the teaching of Christian ethics does not serve to relieve stress in the family, reexamine the mother-daughter relationship, or heal life’s wounds (Ma 2019b: 198). Rather, it is mechanically appropriated to provide religious justification for mothers to discipline their rebellious children. Meanwhile, maternal power, with the coercive nature of discipline, is severely neglected in a patriarchal culture, and this mother turns to seeking maximum physical and psychological control over the child, further deepening the inequality between the dominant and the dominated in the mother-daughter relationship.

These two aspects interact, reinforce, and conspire with each other, culminating in the demonisation of religion and accusations of unfiliality against Mana. In this context, Christianity does not lead to a significant transformation of ethical norms (Madsen 2011: 135), but rather assimilates into a framework that prioritises filial piety and perpetuates discrimination within a patriarchal family structure. Ultimately, Chinese Christianity becomes a narrative that mirrors traditional Chinese families, characterised by unquestioning obedience to the mother and gender bias. This process itself represents the Sinicisation of Christianity.

Ye Xin: “Unchastity” in intimate partnerships

Ye Xin is a 38-year-old single mother and a university teacher. She was judged to be cursed by God for her “premarital sex,” which led to failed relationships. Based on the accusation of unchastity, she took almost full moral responsibility for each unhealthy intimate relationship, swallowing the bitterness of her partner’s emotional abuse, control, and humiliation. She disclosed herself to spiritual elders to receive marriage counselling, which did not help. Finally, by seeking alternative approaches – the deconstruction of sin and the renarrative of sexual intimacies – she discovered that personality traits actually played an important role in the lack of boundaries within intimate relationships.

“Hiding”: Premarital sex and anxiety

In Chinese churches’ teaching on marriage, “sanctification” is regarded as the guarantee of a good marriage, while “uncleanness” refers to all sexual relations outside of marriage. In this context, chastity is always emphasised and premarital sexual relations are always explicitly forbidden.² Ye Xin, a woman who had premarital sex, reveals how the demands of female chastity and unequal relationships have shaped her self-blaming emotional life for more than a decade.

Ye Xin has endured several toxic relationships with Christian boyfriends who appeared to be devout, well-educated, reliable, and independent. However, her premarital sex was seen as a scandal that her Christian boyfriends could not bear, subjecting her to a constant trauma of slut-shaming, verbal abuse, and inexplicable indifference.

For example, her first Christian boyfriend stigmatised her past relationships, invoking Bible verses to condemn her as guilty of “original sin” and deserving of death by stoning. He became increasingly possessive, resorting to blackmail and manipulation, restricting her interactions with other men, monitoring her social media, and incessantly criticising her previous intimate encounters. In her third relationship, again, she was habitually insulted as “idiotic,” “brainless,” and “stupid,” and was even ignored for months after arguments. Whenever this scenario happened, Ye Xin would apologise, confess, and beg her boyfriend to come back. The prolonged religious intimidation and emotional violence left Ye Xin trapped in fear, believing that this was God’s punishment.

In an attempt to alleviate the “sin” and associated anxiety, Ye Xin decided to hastily marry her now ex-husband, hoping to legitimise their “unclear relationship.”³ However, the hasty marriage did not solve the problems, but rather neglected and exacerbated other underlying issues, eventually resulting in divorce.

All this fear and all this shame was borne by me alone... I was like a fly struggling in a bottle... I even hoped that my husband would die in an accident, or that I would die, so that I could be released from our relationship. (Interview with Ye Xin, 15 May 2022)

During more than ten years of inner torment, Ye Xin sought help from the Church. She recalled some counselling experiences when she turned to a spiritual elder:

The first thing the counsellor did was to ask me to talk about my past relationships. She asked, “what kind of behaviour is it for two Christians to have sex before marriage?” Then she added: “As a student of theology, you must know.”

“It is a sin.” I struggled to find the words, feeling uncomfortable with the question as if she had put the answer in my mouth.

“Have you repented? You didn’t live together afterwards, did you? No more sex, right?” she asked, followed by several more questions.

I replied: “It didn’t happen again.” At that moment, I couldn’t stand the pressure. The weak self in me was cooperating with her, I suppressed my feelings and lied. She seemed satisfied and wanted to give me a sense of release. But that was not

my point at all. I wanted to deal with the emotional trauma brought by my boyfriend. (Interview, 20 May 2022)

The church elder failed to identify her problems at physical, emotional, and relational levels but adopted a more narrowly focused spiritual approach (Johnson and van Vonderen 2005: 7-18). Unfortunately, she was given a “prescription template for atonement,” which succinctly pointed out how “sin” had polluted her emotional life. Such a simplistic explanation could not account for the complexity of toxic intimate relationships, but only made overly generalised moral accusations against women. Here the restriction of biblical discipline was increasingly consolidated by hidden intimate relationships and the Church’s intervention.

“Seeking”: Deconstruction and renarrative

Ye Xin shouldered almost all moral responsibility for every bad relationship, but that did not solve the problem. Then she began to reject “magical thinking,” and tried to renarrate sexual intimacy, replacing the taboo subject of “adultery” with “boundary issues” and “lack of autonomy” as the causes of relationship failure.

I found that the support system within the Church was weak, pale, and false in simply assuming that premarital sex itself causes intimacy difficulties... I object to words such as “lust” or “adultery” to define premarital sex. Furthermore, is sexual intimacy being used to cover up other problems in the relationship? Are the woman’s wishes being fully respected? We need counselling on a deeper aspect of the relationship, not just dwelling on this action. (Interview, 20 May 2022)

In every intimate relationship, Ye Xin usually found herself playing a submissive role, and sometimes even compromising on ill-timed sexual invitations in order not to irritate her partner. Behind the superficial tolerance and concessions were long-established excessive attachment and separation anxiety, stemming from personal weaknesses developed in her family of origin.

Influenced by my family of origin, I became a person who lacked autonomy for decades. I grew up as a very submissive girl who wanted to have someone to rely on. Like many other people growing up in Chinese families, I did not experience rituals of empowerment, such as parents giving their children responsibilities. Without such experiences, I am used to, and even enjoy, relying on others to make decisions for me. (Interview, 17 May 2022)

Here, Ye Xin’s “own weakness” within repressive parental relationships needs to be further explored within specific

2. Such dualistic doctrines are so common that in a sermon dealing with sexuality, the pastor emphasised: “We need to pay special attention to the issue of sexual sanctification, to be especially vigilant and attentive in sexual relationships, for we know that every issue of sexual sin recorded in the Bible resulted in serious bloodshed” (Recorded on 3 July 2022, Hangzhou). Chastity is further emphasised. For example, one house church in Hangzhou lists “premarital sex” as one of the three major sins, along with “spreading heresy” and “splitting the Church,” and believers who commit any of these sins are not allowed to take communion.
3. In my fieldwork, I found that believers avoided “adultery” (understood here as premarital sex) in four ways: (1) by rushing into marriage; (2) by delaying baptism; (3) by lying to pretend to be “holy” in the Church; and (4) by finding sexual partners instead of potential marriage partners. Here, Ye Xin chose the first of these.

sociocultural contexts. Her parents were born in China in the 1950s, a period of political indoctrination, material scarcity, and social rigidity (Ma 2019b: 6). The hardship of their lives and their self-sacrificing commitment to education led to greater anxiety in their parental lives, which they compensated for by placing even higher demands on their children. Like her contemporaries born during the Mao era, Ye Xin's mother adopted an authoritarian (rather than authoritative) parenting style, valuing close interpersonal ties, loyalty, and obligation over individuality (Jackson and Ho 2020: 122-30). Growing up in such an environment, Ye Xin lacked the space to express her own opinions and gradually developed a submissive, emotionally dependent, and evaluation-oriented personality. As a result, she realised how her own personal weakness served an unequal emotional relationship.

Ye Xin's story shows the helplessness and struggle of a female believer accused of sexual crimes in a hidden intimate relationship. During her struggle, the pattern of self-blame is nurtured from two sources: the dualistic doctrines and the structure of discipline in the intimate relationship.

The white-or-black doctrine, which marks Ye Xin on the side of unchastity, brings her constant spiritual anxiety while paving the way for the moral discipline and spiritual humiliation by her male partner. Within this narrative framework, there is a striking congruence between the Church's emphasis and the traditional notion of chastity, a sexual morality that is harsher on women (Cao 2017: 165; Huang Y. 2017: 219).

Furthermore, an unequal discipline relationship – the powerful male partner and a female as an attachment – was further justified by the doctrine of “sexual sins.” Thus, the dominant party is able to aggressively invade women's self-esteem boundaries through a more direct form of moral discipline: slut-shaming and denigration.

Here we see how fundamentalist teachings merge with Chinese conservative notions of sexual chastity, women's subordination, and authoritarian parenting in Chinese society. Together they shape the experience of a female Christian, drawing on a form of male authority that exerts the greatest control over female believers.

Chun Mei: “Adultery” in an acquaintance society

Chun Mei is a 65-year-old village widow who was accused of “adultery” for having two relationships after her husband's death and was then disqualified from communion by the Church for over a decade. During debates on the matter, Elder Hong's proficiency in reciting scriptures, his rational and gentle preaching tone, and his local status created a significant power imbalance, putting Chun Mei at a disadvantage and serving to justify the sin. Meanwhile, Chun Mei's illiteracy limited her expression of faith. Nevertheless, the disadvantaged Chun Mei attempted to undermine the Elder's charismatic authority through local networks, and digested her spiritual anxiety by disconnecting personal salvation from church life.

“Authorities” in local networks

Chun Mei's husband who died of cancer twenty years ago is seen in a black-and-white photograph at her place. After the death of her husband, Chun Mei had two relationships, neither recognised by the local church. She first met and cohabited with a widowed Christian

man when she worked in another city. Later they broke up. However, she was disqualified from taking communion as she had not informed the church leader and was therefore condemned by the Elders as an “immoral woman.” She was also criticised for “sneaking to marry someone” when she registered for a second marriage. Chun Mei was then accused of “adultery” for breaking the biblical doctrine that “a denied woman must not remarry” and continued to be banned from communion. She felt discriminated against and tried several times to justify herself.

However, Chun Mei's defence was not taken seriously; her “lack of education” and impatience made her appear unreasonable. Elder Hong ignored Chun Mei's confessions and explanations and instead skilfully cited verses from the Bible. Illiteracy and lack of education both limited Chun Mei's self-expression of her faith, and reinforced her belief that the written scriptures carried the absolute truth (Li 2013: 96). In contrast to Hong's calm teaching, her sudden emotional eruptions and speechlessness put her at a disadvantage. She was accused of being “intolerant and aggressive,” which further weakened her qualifications as a Christian. Embarrassed, Chun Mei suffered a stifling defeat, her defence looking more like a shrewish outburst than a negotiation. For her, “[he is] patient, tolerant, attentive, never annoyed, and speaking slowly. But what he said hurt more than cursing words... he is an able man” (Interview, 2 February 2022).

This “ability,” for Chun Mei, not only referred to their gap in biblical knowledge but also to their unequal social status. Elder Hong inherited spiritual authority from the previous generation and has been the church's leader for 30 years. He presided over communion and blessed the congregation every Sunday, and handled the church's daily operations. For lay persons such as Chun Mei, who had no idea how the Church made decisions, centralising management was an opaque mechanism contributing to the mystery of the Church's authority and the charisma of the Elder. As a church leader, Hong was respected as a man of greater insight and foresight, and both believers and nonbelievers were willing to follow his advice on matters regarding all aspects of life, such as parenting, buying property, life and death, and marriage.

As a result, when Chun Mei confronted the Elder, she was a “sinner” facing a moral arbiter, an illiterate facing a biblical preacher, a cursing vulgar person facing a gentle persuader, and a village widow facing a local authority. Here, the authority of the pastor over his followers, of the wise man over the illiterate, and of the man over the woman, are mutually reinforcing and ultimately present themselves as power structures in a network of rural acquaintances. It is therefore difficult to distinguish in which way Chun Mei is disadvantaged, as she is disadvantaged on all fronts.

When fundamentalist teachings are applied to practical scenarios, it is clear that Elder Hong has a greater space and advantage of interpretation, which is a highly subjective, intellectual, and spiritual process in sinicising Christianity, as it creates new knowledge by selective appropriation (Zheng 2017: 12). More importantly, this subjective selectivity is in itself embedded in power relations, which in Chun Mei's case is based on the difference between the two in terms of literacy level, Church role, and position within a society of acquaintances.

Spying and gossiping in the neighbourhood

Chun Mei failed many times, but she did not consider herself wrong, only that her inability to formulate arguments and her lower social status in the debate made her wrong. Chun Mei argued that Elder Hong was being discriminatory in his treatment of adultery. She heard that a man in the Church was easily forgiven for his adultery with a “prayer of repentance.” The Elder himself had married a divorced woman after the death of his first wife and had also committed adultery without being questioned. Chun Mei still hoped to dampen Hong’s image and express her discontent at being treated unfairly.

Chun Mei also tried to dismantle Hong’s authority by “spying” and “spreading gossip” in the neighbourhood. She lived on the fourth floor of a small building, with a window facing the gate of Hong’s house, offering her a convenient location to catch “signs of trouble” in Hong’s family. Chun Mei concluded that Hong’s daughter seemed to have been pregnant before marriage, and did not “deliver early” as claimed. To find more evidence, Chun Mei waited and calculated the time of birth of the baby, and she was right. She became even more convinced: “Doctors are so well equipped nowadays, how could it be born at seven months? They all pretended.” Chun Mei exposed the scandal to other brothers of the church, but faced retort. “No one dared to challenge the Elder,” Chun Mei said (Interview, 2 February 2022).

Unwilling to give up, Chun Mei relentlessly collected and spread more negative information about Hong and his family. For example, according to Chun Mei, Hong’s son-in-law was addicted to gambling and in debt, but it was covered up; Hong outsourced the church’s rebuilding job to his stepson and isolated protesting believers; he only promoted and trained his relatives as preachers and thus maintained power in the Church; he persuaded an “obedient sister” to be his daughter-in-law by taking advantage of his position as Elder. Chun Mei would give vivid and detailed descriptions of all her findings through years of close observation.

Here, a locality serves not only as a local resource for the development of an alien Christian culture (Bays 2003) and as an informal network as opposed to official government supervision (Hunter and Chan 1993: 52). More importantly, it is an arena of disciplinary structure where local people conduct Christianity as their life practice.

In Chun Mei’s story, Elder Hong employed a double moral standard to define “sin.” As a gospel agent, Hong plays an essential role in determining when and for whom “unchastity” is defined in local practice. Therefore, this moral critique is far more than a requirement of the faith itself, but rather a justification for the disciplinary structures.

This moral flexibility first comes from dualistic moralism, which allows church leaders considerable freedom – personal discourse to judge good and evil – and that is why beliefs appear to be a contest of plausibility; and second, from the “differential mode of association” (*chaxu geju* 差序格局), a concept coined by sociologist Fei Xiaotong to refer to the elastic social morality that often arises from the closeness of personal relationships (*guanxi* 關係) with “oneself” in Chinese societies (Fei 2011: 32-46). Therefore, the proximity to Hong’s private relations greatly influenced his moral standards and religious judgements.

Thus, Chun Mei’s religious defence is embedded in the wider structure of local social networks intertwined with the church life. In this context, differences in their privacy disclosure, literacy levels, emotional management skills, church affiliations, family finances, and local networks all served the unequal positions between a more spiritually insightful and intelligent Elder and an ignorant and promiscuous widow. It not only put Chun Mei at a disadvantage when dealing with Elder Hong but also consequently left her in marginalised local relations.

Ultimately, Christianity is sinicised in such a way that it dissolves into local structures and appears as traditional patterns of interaction in rural China. Thus, the discussion of acculturation is not only about the conversion of ordinary people (Zheng 2017: 12). It is more deeply concerned with who and how religious interpretations are appropriated within Christian communities and among believers.

Dualist teachings, hidden disciplines, and Sinicisation

Mana, Ye Xin, and Chun Mei, three female believers who were punished for their “sins,” struggled in various aspects of their life: family, intimacy, and neighbourhood relations. Moreover, all three cases are incorporated in a common framework of “fundamentalist doctrines and disciplinary structure,” both of which are themselves the product of Sinicisation.

Fundamentalist tradition, which is widely prevalent in Chinese churches today, is a legacy of indigenous Christianity. Lian (2011) argues that the revival of Chinese Christianity since the 1980s has inherited the forms of popular Christianity in China since the 1930s. In contrast to missionary Churches, localised popular Christianity is born within Chinese society (Gao 2014), and is nationalistic, Pentecostal, and millenarian (Lian 2011: xx-xxx). Among these, radical fundamentalism has served as a common thread driving the growth of Christianity in China in recent years. This tradition of moral dualism based on the distinction between good and evil has been constantly underscored by other characteristics – the Pentecostal charismatic emphasis on the Holy Spirit that reinforces individuality has also given individuals freer ways of speaking for the combination of good and evil (Zhang J. 2018: 352-3). This reveals the subjective nature of religious acculturation, and it’s important to note that this process of subjectivity and selectivity invisibly demonstrates the operation of micropower relations. The fundamentalist tradition attracted large audiences, especially in the 1930s and 1940s, and went on to shape Christianity in China today.

The moral dualism prevalent in the Chinese Church is pervasive in these stories. Ordinary believers are also skilled in this form of interpretation and apply it to the weaker individuals (women and children) in their lives. Besides, the structures of discipline embody unequal power relations, including the dominance of the mother over her children, of the male over the female in a partnership, and of the local “able man” over the village widow. These structures, in turn, affect which Christian concepts are emphasised, accepted, and applied. Furthermore, these structures of discipline embedded in personal life are intertwined with the discussion of Christianity, femininity, and social culture in contemporary China (Table).

Table. Modes of Church's teaching and domination

	Fundamentalist doctrines (dualist antagonism)	Power relations (inherent inequality)	Social culture
Mana	Same-sex attraction and disobedience – demonic possession	Family relationship: a masculine tough mother + an adolescent daughter	Biblical tradition; boy-favouring and filial piety culture; authoritarian blame-based parenting; gender norms of the Mao and post-Mao era.
Ye Xin	Premarital sex – adultery	Intimacy: dominant male + obedient/emotionally dependent women	
Chun Mei	Postmarital sex – adultery/unchastity	Neighbour relations: local able man + marginal “shrew”	

Credit: author.

Mana's story depicts multigenerational maternal relationships in the context of patriarchal culture. Her grandmother and mother both suffered from emotional and verbal abuse for failing to produce a male heir, the shame of which was passed on her. The scriptures on “honour/obey your father and mother” are filtered through the Church's teaching and complement the emphasis on “filial piety” in Chinese society. Like a jealous God, the domineering mother brands Mana as a demonic force and resorts to violence. As far as Ye Xin is concerned, she has repeatedly been involved in toxic intimate relationships. The moral pressure comes from the dominant partner, who plays the role of God, repeatedly labelling premarital sex as impurity and attacking Ye Xin's qualifications as a Christian. Recurring in her narrative is not only a strong partner, but also a strong mother and parenting style. Her weakness and submission within a repressive parental style served the unequal relationships she experienced later.

Both Mana's and Ye Xin's stories are characterised by strong motherhood and authoritarian parenting styles. Born in the 1950s and 1960s, their mothers grew up during the Mao era, a time of political indoctrination, material scarcity, and social rigidity. Women were presented in pervasive images of strong, active women engaged in physical work or traditional male occupations. The slogan “women hold up half the sky” (*funü neng ding ban bian tian* 婦女能頂半邊天) resonated with the images of women as model workers, called the iron girls (*tie guniang* 鐵姑娘) in official propaganda (Chen 2003: 363). In socialist gender discourse, women's identities as socialist workers take priority over their identities as wives and mothers. They were expected to take pride in being “nonwomen” (Huang X. 2018: 4).

However, the Confucian patriarchal regime based on gender hierarchy continued to operate at different levels of public and private life. Thus, Chinese women carried a double burden of “socialist androgyny”: Chinese women were expected to behave and work like men, remaining genderless in public while reverting to the role of the chaste, devoted wife and selfless mother in private (Young 1989: 236). At the same time, women's reproductive bodies were tightly controlled by eugenic discourse and family planning (Evans 1997). This is the background to the misogynistic maternal figure of Mana's mother with a strong desire for control; and the self-sacrificing, authoritarian, and intensive parental cultivation of Ye Xin's mother. Worse still, the religiously charged concepts of

“evil” and “premarital sex” deflect and obscure these causes of difficulties in family and intimacy.

In Chun Mei's case, we see more clearly how adultery, a terse religious accusation, unfolds and is constantly defended within a local network of dominance. Locality is both the accumulation of social relations and simultaneously the support for the Elder's domination and Chun Mei's resistance. For Elder Hong, it is a medium that facilitates the flow of his authority and adoption of a double moral standard; for Chun Mei, being in the neighbourhood also allows her to spread gossip. However, Chun Mei never succeeded in challenging the Elder. Her complaints were made in informal conversations, and only satisfied the curiosity of local gossips.

The moral accusation of “sin” is all the more damaging and destructive that it comes from the mouths of relatives, family, and neighbours. As a result, their resistance always comes at the cost of their personal lives: Mana's rejection of religion is accompanied by the breakdown of her relationship with her mother; Ye Xin's denial of sexual sin is accompanied by the breakdown of her intimate relationships; and Chun Mei's dissolution of the Elder's authority leads to her social marginalisation.

Compared to the women of Chun Mei's generation, Mana and Ye Xin seem to be more active in putting an end to toxic relationships and in choosing what they want for their life. For example, Mana has now travelled to Bali to “choose [her] own life”; Ye Xin, who is a university teacher, is “learning to accept herself.” To some extent, this reflects the close relationship between the new generation's notions of self-fulfilment and the era of economic opportunity and marketisation (Huang Y. 2017; Ma 2019b). But their shared spiritual anxieties and life struggles reveal more about how, when embedded in the cultural context and structure of discipline, individuals' level of education, occupation, and age are overshadowed by traditional values such as the preference for male heirs, the importance of family filial piety, and the emphasis on female chastity.

Conclusion

The discussion of the Sinicisation of Christianity in this article is based on the observation that the process itself is characterised by invisibility (unfolding in private spaces rather than in specific congregational settings), ambiguity of boundaries (concealed

within existing social concepts and cultural elements) and omnipresence (appearing in everyday practices). In contrast to the focus on religious policies and specific places (churches) or practices (congregation) (Cao 2017: 5-7), this paper examines Christian practice in China by focusing on nonpublic personal life (family, marriage, and neighbourhood). This analytic perspective looks directly at people's everyday lives, both to avoid debate over theological orthodoxy (Zhang J. 2022: 2) and to prevent the separation of Christianity from the object of study.

Through the "sin" and "punishment" of three female believers, I capture a hidden pattern of micro-domination, where the harsh doctrines of dualistic antagonism and the power relations in personal life combine to construct a powerful control over individuals. More importantly, the moral accusations endured by female believers are linked to a wider cultural context, which manifests itself in patriarchal social attitudes, authoritarian family structures, and local networks. Accordingly, Church teachings on filial piety, sexual chastity, and obedience are more easily filtered, covenanted, and amplified to reinforce ethical traditions. In the process, conservative morality is constantly being reproduced.

The characteristics of both Christianity and Chineseness are not clear-cut, divided, and defined in isolation (Madsen 2017: 325-6), but rather appear as a composite and ultimately present themselves in individuals' journey of struggle. In this sense, the Sinicisation of Christianity is embedded in the structure of the discipline through a technique of sacred and secular dichotomy, hidden by untold experiences of faith, yet appearing as the dominant form of family faith, marriage doctrine, and local authority within the Chinese Christian community.

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