

Legitimacy, Organisational Capacity, and Church Growth in Rural China: 1978-2018

I JIANGHUA YANG is Professor of sociology at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Xi'an Jiaotong University, No. 28, West Xianning Road, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, 710049, People's Republic of China (yangjianghua@xjtu.edu.cn).

I YUJIE WANG is a PhD candidate in sociology at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Xi'an Jiaotong University, No. 28, West Xianning Road, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, 710049, People's Republic of China (wangyujie102021@163.com).

ABSTRACT: The resurgence of rural Christianity in mainland China after reform and opening up has been a significant phenomenon. While previous studies have predominantly examined this revival through macro- or micro-level interpretations, this paper adopts a neo-institutionalist theoretical perspective to explore the growth of rural Christianity. Specifically, the study investigates the interaction between church organisation and the external environment, identifying religious legitimacy and organisational capacity as two central mechanisms that affect the divergent development of rural churches. By analysing the dynamics of these mechanisms, this study sheds light on the factors that have contributed to the differentiated growth of rural Christianity in mainland China.

KEYWORDS: religious legitimacy, organisational capacity, church growth, neo-institutional approach, rural China.

Introduction

After reform and opening up, religions began to revitalise in the Chinese Mainland, with the rapid growth of Christianity as an important manifestation (Yu 2010; Yang 2012). Among them, rural churches have been the focus of academic research on the Christian revival in mainland China (Leung 1999; Bays 2003), because they are of unique significance in terms of either the evolution of Chinese churches or the spatial distribution of believers (Stark and Wang 2015; Yang 2018). The previous studies on the rapid growth of Christianity in China mainly follow three lines of thought: modernisation theory, the religious economic approach, and the institutional approach.

Inspired by Max Weber's classical work on the relationship between religion and modernity, some scholars argue that rapid socioeconomic transformation brought about the loss of Chinese traditional moral values, and a crisis of professional ethics and intellectual identity, providing favourable conditions for the spread

of Christianity (Yao 2004; Gao 2005). Most of the studies in this vein adopt an ethnographic approach, discussing the cultural and contextual factors behind the rise of Christianity. Cao (2010) argues that the rise of the Boss Christian group in Wenzhou is the result of moral and cultural identification among social elites, which represents a Christian-inspired moral culture of modernity that differs from secular business groups, as well as from other Christian groups among the lower social classes. Similarly, Kang's (2016) empirical research in Linyi (Shandong Province) points out that in the context of rapid urbanisation, the rationalisation of Christian theological doctrine, the professionalisation of church leaders, and extensive networks among local and outside churches have played an important role in facilitating the modern transformation of house churches from rural to urban. Although modernisation theory provides an important contextual perspective for understanding the revival of Christianity in China, this theory hardly explains why this revival began first in the countryside and then in urban areas; indeed, the foremost conversion factors for

rural Christians are physical illness and the demonstration effect of homogeneous social groups in villages (Leung 1999; Yao 2004), rather than the modernisation of moral/cultural identity or church theology building.

The most influential theory explaining the Christian revival phenomenon in China is the religious economic approach, consisting of the religious market theory and political economy approach. Based on the religious market model, Yang (2006) formulates a triple-market theory to explain how religion survives and thrives under the state's repressive regulation; in particular, he emphasises the importance of the "grey market" (religious organisations and practitioners of ambiguous legal status) in understanding the rapid growth of the house church in China. Yang developed his theory further by using political-economic theory. He argues that socialist religious economy is by nature a shortage economy, in which strict regulation produces a state-church relationship characterised by religious oligopoly, where normal religious demand is largely suppressed, thereby pushing religious organisations and believers into the black and grey market (Yang 2012). The religious economic approach does provide a very scientific theory for understanding Christianity's revival in China, but as some scholars (Koesel 2015; Kang 2016) have pointed out, this approach adopts a static perspective on religious regulation, overlooking the dynamic interaction between religious groups and the state, so it is difficult to explain why some religious groups are growing fast while others are declining under the same hostile political regime.

The last category of argument on the religious revival in mainland China is the institutional approach. Some studies have revealed that the affinity of emphasis on miracles (*lingyan* 靈驗) between Pentecostal theology and Chinese folk religion provides an important institutional context for Christian missionary work in rural areas (Leung 1999; Gao 2005). Researchers have also found that networks of church organisations and believers are crucial for the expansion of rural Christianity to suburban areas (Chen and Wu 2005; Kang 2016). Empirical findings by scholars in the scientific study of religion demonstrate that the social and emotional support functions of religious groups could well explain the mass conversion of peasants to Christianity characterised by "physical healing" (*yinbing xinjiao* 因病信教) (Zheng, Ruan, and Liu 2010; Ruan and Liu 2011).

Differing from the above institutional analysis that focus on the cultural context or organisational functions of Protestant churches, Sun's (2017) institutional approach on religious revival places the interaction between the state and religious organisations at the core of her case study with a historical sociological perspective. Sun reveals six institutional features of Chinese Protestantism (i.e., zero-sum evangelism, congregational structure, insistence on church autonomy, polycentric structure, glorification of martyrdom, and global support network) that contribute to the rapid growth of religion in specific sociopolitical contexts in which the state is the most powerful actor in creating and shaping the context. Although Sun's study takes a major step forward in the institutional analysis of religious revival by emphasising the important role of the state, her analysis of the interaction between the state and religion is mainly from a macro-perspective, while

neglecting the practical interactional logic between grassroots governments and churches. Indeed, local governments and village cadres are the actual implementers of religious policies and regulations in rural areas (Liu 2006). Moreover, Sun's findings are convincing in explaining the overall rapid growth of Chinese Protestantism since the late 1970s, but still cannot explain at the meso-level why rural churches show differentiated growth in the similar sociopolitical context shaped by the same state.

We hold that rural church growth and changes result from the synergy and dynamic interaction of both contextual and institutional factors, rather than from the decisive effect of either of them as suggested by their typical separate treatment in existing studies. Continuing the institutional approach, this paper will focus on the interactional logic between the two-dimensional variables and their effect on the variation of church growth through a meso-perspective on church organisation. We intend to contribute to two main aspects: First, in theory, drawing on neo-institutionalism in organisational sociology research, we construct an analytical framework to explain changes in church growth, which result from two main mechanisms: legitimacy and organisational capacity when churches face different local religious regulation. Second, in empirical research, we adopt a comparative case study of two counties in Henan Province, where we selected four churches based on the core explanatory variables set by the theoretical framework, while keeping other variables as similar or consistent as possible in order to provide more persuasive explanations for rural church growth.

Theoretical framework and research design

As early founders of neo-institutional theory in organisational sociology, Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that organisational behaviour must be understood from the institutional context in which organisations are featured. They proposed that the legitimacy mechanism was a new force influencing organisational behaviour, as opposed to the logic of economic performance emphasised in existing research. In their study, legitimacy mechanisms are the conceptual forces that induce organisations to adopt certain organisational structures and behaviours that could be considered normal or essential. Here, "legitimacy" encompasses both the role of the legal system and some normative forces that can have an impact on organisational behaviour, such as the cultural system and social concepts or expectations (Zhou 2003). In short, the legitimacy mechanism is concerned with the behavioural logic of an organisation that is socially acceptable or justified in its environment.

On the basis of Meyer and Rowan's work, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) further expanded research on the legitimacy mechanism, but placed more emphasis on the active selection function of the organisation itself. They argued that organisations did not passively obey the external environment, but actively chose organisational structures and behaviour based on their own self-interest. Therefore, the relationship network between organisations and their internal operation mechanisms is more important. Organisational capacity, on the other hand, refers to an organisation's ability to achieve its own interests, such as the degree of institutionalisation,

competitiveness, adaptability, and sustainability. Eisinger (2002) applied the concept of organisational capacity to research on nonprofit social organisations. In his opinion, organisational capacity is composed of a series of traits conducive to the organisation's mission and purpose, but these traits are generally latent and can only be realised when they are mobilised and utilised.

The empirical objects of neo-institutional theory are typically companies, enterprises, and even some nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). However, the theory has seldom been applied to religious organisations. We believe that the concept of legitimacy mechanism and organisational capacity can be used to explain church growth in China. Its theoretical relevance is justified as follows:

First, in terms of theoretical logic, research on organisational behaviour by using the institutional approach reflects the analytical thinking of interaction between external and internal perspectives, which is consistent with the contextual and institutional factor analyses in previous studies on church growth. Second, in terms of empirical fact, the rural house church, as one of the most representative forces of Christianity's revival in China after reform and opening up (Yu 2010), lacks institutional legitimacy because of being outside of the official religious regulation system. Establishing social legitimacy is therefore crucial for house churches to survive and develop in the countryside. The process of social legitimacy-building can capture the dynamics of interaction strategies between grassroots governments and house churches overlooked in previous studies.

Religious legitimacy

Existing research points out that the external environment of religious organisations falls into two categories: state regulation, mainly manifested as explicit legal provisions; and social regulation, mainly embodied as sociocultural identity or exclusion (Stark and Finke 2000; Grim and Finke 2007). In terms of the hard and soft regulatory attributes facing religious organisations, legitimacy can be operationalised into two types: institutional legitimacy (*tizhi hefaxing* 體制合法性), that is, whether it conforms to current state laws and policies on religious management, manifested empirically as the legal status conferred by the official religious regulation system; and social legitimacy (*shehui hefaxing* 社會合法性), i.e., whether the activities of religious organisations are accepted and recognised by the people around them, mainly depending on the social opinions and attitudes of ordinary believers and nonbelievers.

In terms of religious legal identity, the types of Christian organisations in China are mainly divided into churches within the system, usually called "Three-Self Protestant Church" (TSPC, *sanzi jiaohui* 三自教會), and those outside the system, mainly called "house churches" (*jiating jiaohui* 家庭教會). The concept of institutional legitimacy can be used to explain the development and changes in the two major types of Christian organisations in mainland China. In addition to legal identity status, the development of churches relies heavily on the attitudes of the people in the local community, i.e., the social attitudes of the common people toward the Christian faith, and the public

recognition and acceptance of a church organisation and its members' behaviour. An underlying friendly public opinion environment is therefore very important for building the social legitimacy of church organisations, especially house churches.

Organisational capacity

From the institutional perspective, church growth is closely related to its organisational construction and governance capacity (Stark and Finke 2000). Church growth studies find that a church's development has much to do with the characteristics of its leaders (Dean 1972). The theological resources, preaching capabilities, interpersonal skills, and personal characteristics of pastors, elders, and evangelists may have a direct effect on the organisational leadership of a church. For most rural churches in China with a low average level of institutionalisation, church development rests more with their leadership. Therefore, the first key indicator in measuring the organisational capacity of a church is the leadership standard of their leaders.

Closely related to leadership is the organisational structure, which mainly takes charge of relations with the authorities and church affairs. For most rural churches, there is no uniform model of organisational governance, which usually evolves according to the actual situation, especially in the face of an uncertain religious regulatory environment in which the organisational adaptability of the church is very important for its survival and revival. We use the resilience of organisational structure to describe this self-adaptability. Greater resilience indicates stronger adaptability. The more the church can adapt to changes in its external challenges, the better able it will be to increase its viability and growth rate.

The third indicator is the openness and learning capacity of church organisations. Institutionalism in organisational sociology argues that the reason why organisations exhibit institutional isomorphism in the face of external environmental challenges stems from mimetic and learning mechanisms among organisations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and therefore organisational openness is an important institutional factor for organisations to maintain their vitality and competitiveness. We define the openness of a church organisation primarily in terms of its relationship with other churches. With more external contact and exchanges, a church may have better access to resources and opportunities from the outside world, thus facilitating its development. However, it should be noted that greater openness in a church is not always better, and certain boundaries are necessary. If the church loses its independence because of excessive openness, its development will be restrained.

The last indicator is the interactive strategy adopted by the church in the church-state relationship. The church-state system in mainland China is not monolithic, to the extent that the system changes in different periods and may vary among church organisations even within the same period. This is mainly attributable to the weak religious legal system in China, and its actual operation depending more on the discretionary power of local governments (Zhang 2014). This means that in the face of the existing church-state system, the strategy adopted by the church in its interactions with the government is of great importance. If a church can coordinate its relationship with the government

effectively, its institutional space will expand, and the church is likely to establish a model of church-state relations that serve its development goals. Therefore, at the empirical level, we're going to look at the ability of churches to establish benign church-state relations through certain strategic means, which is an important demonstration of the church's organisational capacity.

Research method and empirical cases

In mainland China, rural churches in Henan have always been the focus of academic research, both in terms of Christian population and external influence (Li 1999), especially Christianity in Wan City in southern Henan Province (by academic convention, pseudonyms are used for the respondents and places), which is typical of Chinese Christianity's developmental history (Lambert 2006).¹ Henan is also the province with the most problematic development of Christianity in China, with more than ten controversial denominations or even sects that have originated or spread in Henan (Zheng 2006). Added to its location in one of the most populous provinces in China and with a relatively concentrated distribution of Christianity (Yang 2018), Wan City in southern Henan is therefore a prime choice for empirical research.

We began our fieldwork in Wan City in 2008, and extended it at the end of 2009 to cover urban areas and seven townships and villages in Fang County and Tang County.² Nine years later, in the summer of 2018, we went to Wan City again for a tracking survey to follow up with seven churches. We obtained a wealth of information and data from three surveys. In total, we visited 18 churches and gathering points (*juhuidian* 聚會點), and interviewed 20 church leaders, more than 30 ordinary believers, seven heads of religious groups, five village cadres, and five religious affairs officials. The three surveys were mainly carried out through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaire surveys.

Given the explanatory variables selected in the theoretical analysis framework, we focused on four cases from our surveys for the empirical data, namely Dongjie Church, Fangzhuang Church, Dingshan Church, and Dahe Church. Among them, the first two are Three-Self Protestant churches, and the latter two are house churches. Each group includes a well-developed church and a poorly developed one, and they vary greatly in terms of intergroup development. Therefore, the four empirical cases feature both intragroup and intergroup differences, in line with the requirements of comparative case analysis.

Legitimacy and rural church growth

Institutional legitimacy

In 1982, the Central Government issued Document No. 19, "Basic Views and Basic Policies on Religious Issues in China during the Socialist Period" (*Guanyu woguo shehui zhuyi shiqi zongjiao wenti de jiben guandian he jiben zhengce* 關於我國社會主義時期宗教問題的基本觀點和基本政策), which marked the legal status of church organisations and church activities under the leadership of the government-approved "two organisations" (*jidujiao lianghui* 基督教兩會, or *lianghui* 兩會) that include the Three-Self Patriotic

Movement of the Protestant Church, or TSPM (*Zhongguo jidujiao sanzhi aiguo yundong weiyuanhui* 中國基督教三自愛國運動委員會) and the Chinese Christianity Council, or CCC (*Zhongguo jidujiao xiehui* 中國基督教協會). This was the basic policy basis for the Three-Self church to become the only officially recognised Protestant church organisation in mainland China.

Dongjie Church, the earliest restored Three-Self church in Tang County, and also the headquarters for the Committee of the TSPM and CCC (*lianghui*) at the county level, has the highest degree of institutional legitimacy in Tang County. This enabled Dongjie Church to have the largest number of clergy and the first independent congregation building in the county. The number of church participants did grow significantly from around 20-30 in 1983 to more than 200 in 1995. However, institutional legitimacy does not necessarily secure continued church growth. Being too close to the centre of government power, the church may lose its religious autonomy, which will, in turn, affect its development. During a leadership change in 1995, Elders Li and Liu ran for office. Li was elected President with the help of government connections and covert deals. Very dissatisfied, Liu revealed the inside story in public; a number of fellow church workers and believers left, giving rise to a split in the church. From 1995 onward, the leaders of Dongjie Church served as the main leaders of the Protestant Christian *lianghui* at the county level, cultivating the closest relations with the government. Meanwhile, the church became increasingly bureaucratic, and its clergies' missionary zeal waned as most of them were busy seeking formal positions in the *lianghui*. "Young believers could not be promoted after theological training, and some even gave up and worked elsewhere, leading to a shortage of church preachers."³ As a result, the membership of Dongjie Church stopped increasing substantially during the past 20 years, and it has stayed around 70-80 members.

Fangzhuang Church started out as a believers' gathering place, attended by relatives and neighbours led by several elderly believers at the end of the 1970s. After reform and opening up, with an increasing number of participants and limited hosting capacity among the families, they planned to move into a new congregation building, but the first difficulty was the church's legitimate identity. On the question of whether to register in Tang County's Protestant Christian *lianghui* or be taken over by a Three-Self church, church leader Elder Wang said, "In the long run, registration is the best option, because the government cracks

1. According to an official report provided by the Henan Christian Council, the number of Christians in the province was about 70,000 before 1949, and in 1987 the number of believers grew to more than 800,000, with more than 3,000 churches and Christian activity sites; at the end of 2000, there were more than 1.97 million Christian believers, 80 pastors and 321 elders in the province; by the end of 2011, there were 2,525 Christian churches and 4,002 other fixed places for Christian activities in the province. Henan Christian Council 河南基督教協會, "河南基督教歷史沿革" (*Henan jidujiao lishi yange*, Brief history of Christianity in Henan Province), 27 October 2016, <http://m.fuyinshibao.cn/portal/article/index/id/38090> (access on 27 May 2023). Some overseas scholars have reported that there are nearly 5 million Christians within the Three-Self church in Henan, and about 10 million house church believers (Lambert 2006).

2. The respondents include clergy, ordinary believers, villagers (nonbelievers), village cadres, members of the Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Church and Christian Council, and officials in the Religious Affairs Bureau and the United Front Work Department.

3. Interview in Tang County, ID: TSPC0902A, 8 December 2009.

down on house churches in this region from time to time; but we also won't be like the Three-Self church under the bureaucratic system that is full of power struggles and official restrictions; all we need is an identity in the system."⁴ In 1998, Fangzhuang Church took the initiative to apply for registration as an independent Three-Self church, but didn't accept the clergy assigned by the *lianghui*; the former church leaders remained responsible for the main personnel decision-making and management of daily affairs. With institutional legitimacy and relative organisational autonomy, Fangzhuang Church has entered a period of rapid development since 1998, evidenced by more than 500 believers, making it the most influential Three-Self church in the local area.

Any church outside of the Christian *lianghui* system is not institutionally legitimate, which is the main reason why house churches are often at risk of crackdowns. In rural areas at the grassroots level, the government's practical regulation of house churches is characterised by: (1) non-routine crackdowns, i.e., campaign-style suppression (*yundongshi daji* 運動式打擊), mainly related to unified top-down deployment, such as the most concentrated crackdown movements in 1983 and 1996;⁵ (2) selective crackdown, i.e., "grasping the large, releasing the small" (*zhuada fangxiao* 抓大放小), which focus on the major leaders of team-based large house churches while ignoring ordinary believers and small house churches (usually around 30-50 members). For example, Dahe Church and Dingshan Church in our empirical cases were key targets of several concentrated crackdowns.

Non-routine and selective crackdowns produce two consequences to the development of house churches: First, the crackdowns (if any) mainly target large church organisations, while small groups are barely affected. At this point, the large house church congregants will disperse into small family gathering places of different sizes, so religious activity may withdraw from the public space to the private. As long as the external regulation environment is relaxed, scattered believers begin to reunite, creating resilient church development. Second, when the crackdowns target church leaders, some preachers who are lucky enough not to be arrested choose to preach in surrounding villages in other townships and counties, adopting the strategy of "guerrilla campaign evangelism" (*youji yundongshi chuanjiao* 游擊運動式傳教) to preserve their church growth. This detour strategy is helpful for increasing the chances of survival and the influence of team-based house church leaders, but is not sustainable for church institution-building. Because much of the church's growth depends on itinerant preachers visiting and contacting existing believers, few preachers are able to establish a permanent foothold in other places. We call the development mode of team-based house churches at that time "associative absorption" (*lianjiexing xina* 聯結性吸納), meaning that the loose alliances between churches established during a particular period provided an important foundation for the subsequent development of large house churches.

Social legitimacy

Social legitimacy concerns the degree to which church organisations are accepted and recognised by local society

and culture. The higher the recognition, the stronger the social legitimacy, and the stronger the social foundation on which the church can develop. From 1949 onward, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement led to an important legacy of all Christian religious affairs being conducted by Chinese clergy, while foreign missionaries were expelled one after another. Therefore, compared with the cultural conflicts (the most typical example being the "Anti-Christian movement," Ye 1992: 32-5) that Christianity faced during China's Republican period when foreign missionaries played leading roles, the sociocultural environment was relatively mild after reform and opening up, and even very friendly among urban intellectuals (regarding the Christian cultural fever in the 1990s, see Gao 2005). In rural areas, the social indigenisation and localisation of Christianity has made significant progress, mainly reflected in three aspects: First, in terms of church organisation, church leaders and preachers are local peasants, and the Gospel ministry work can easily build trust through the homogeneous social networks of local face-to-face society. Second, in terms of doctrinal theological features, rural churches lay particular emphasis on religious miracles or personal spiritual experience, which coincides with the religious utilitarianism tradition of Chinese peasants. Third, in terms of Christian self-identity, rural believers tend to construct their belief identity with the local discourse of "Jesus followers" (*xinzhū de rén* 信主的人), while rarely defining themselves as Christians of a particular denomination. It was this mild social and cultural environment that provided a favourable social legitimacy foundation for Christianity's revival in rural areas.

Although the Three-Self church has sufficient institutional legitimacy and is more open as congregations in the public space, its churches are smaller in overall size and less vibrant in religious participation than house churches in Wan City, which we believe is largely due to the house churches' greater efforts to actively construct social legitimacy. This construction process mainly adopts the following strategies: First, "faith for salvation rather than promotion." In 1983, when the Christian *lianghui* system was restored, the leaders of Dahe Church and Dingshan Church made a decision to develop outside the official system, believing that the pursuit of faith takes priority over personal promotion.⁶ It was because ordinary believers and village acquaintances saw the general sincerity of house church clergies' attitude toward faith that they viewed members of the house churches as "owning Christ's life and saved" (*you shengming, neng dejiu* 有生命, 能得救), while those who joined the Three-Self churches were viewed as "lacking Christ's life and unsaved" (*mei shengming, bu dejiu* 沒生命, 不得救), thus assigning higher social recognition to the faith of house church believers. Second, "glorification of faith sacrifice." Without institutional legitimacy, house churches often suffered

4. Interview in Fang County, ID: TSPC0801A, 3 May 2008.

5. In 1983, the province cracked down on the Christian cult known as the Shouters (*huan pai* 呼喊派), and in 1996, it cracked down on another cult called Eastern Lightning (*dongfang shandian* 東方閃電).

6. "There were very few pastors at that time, and if you were willing to come forward and join the *lianghui* of Tang County, you would be guaranteed a position as an ordained pastor, but we preferred to be nameless preachers at first rather than puppet pastors," said one senior preacher at Dahe Church. Interview in Tang County, ID: HC0726A, 23 July 2018.

crackdowns, so the churches' messaging was theologically focused on suffering for the faith and martyrdom in the 1980s. They consciously compared the plight of rural churches to that of the early churches in the apostolic age, and considered it an honour to "suffer for the Gospel."⁷ This is very similar to what Sun found in her empirical case in Hangzhou (2017). Thus, the experience of suffering and persecution for the faith becomes both a way for believers to accumulate personal faith capital and a way for house churches to establish a sacred image among nonbelievers in the village.⁸ In short, these building strategies play an important role in the social legitimacy of house churches, facilitate gaining social trust in the local community, build the quality and impact of faith, establish a group self-image, and create empathy and sympathy. It is by prevailing in social legitimacy that house churches can break through the adverse external environment and grow larger than the Three-Self church.

Institutional legitimacy and social legitimacy: Substitution vs. symbiosis

For the survival and development of a church organisation, institutional legitimacy is the premise, but social legitimacy is more important, since the former is official recognition and the latter social recognition. Without institutional legitimacy, a church could find a way to survive and develop with social legitimacy-construction. The vast majority of house churches fall into this situation, which turns out to be an active force in the religious "grey market" (Yang 2006). On the contrary, with only institutional legitimacy but no social legitimacy, a church can develop but may be unattractive and have difficulty thriving. This conclusion can be fully reflected in the case of Dongjie Church, which drew too close to the *lianghui* leadership and local government and lost its hold on its organisational governance autonomy and religious authority in the eyes of ordinary believers, ultimately resulting in a loss of believers and negative church growth.

Based on the above analysis, we believe that social legitimacy has a certain substitutional relationship with institutional legitimacy, and may, under certain conditions, seek institutional legitimacy or promote the emergence of institutional flexibility. Fangzhuang Church and Dahe Church fall into this category. Fangzhuang Church was initially established and developed outside the official system. Under the leadership of Elder Wang, the church members' acts of faith and participation in social welfare were well recognised by their neighbours in the village, so it enjoyed a high degree of social legitimacy. However, as church membership increased, it became a consensus among church leaders to take the initiative to gain institutional legitimacy through official registration in order to prevent the church from being banned. Unlike Dongjie Church, Fangzhuang Church adopted an approach of "registration only, not union" (*zhi dengji, bu lianhe* 只登記, 不聯合); i.e., apart from registering under the Christian *lianghui* in the county, its church affairs were mainly handled by its original clergy. By maintaining its two legitimacy identities in a harmoniously symbiotic way, Fangzhuang Church has secured the most favourable external environment for its continued growth.

Dahe Church has maintained its independence as a house church and has refused to register within the *lianghui* system.

As one of the few representative team-based churches in Tang County, Dahe Church has often been a key target of religious crackdown campaigns. However, in facing the government's restrictions on rural Christianity cults, Dahe Church has taken a proactive approach in cooperating with the government⁹ by inviting cadres from the Religious Affairs Bureau and the United Front Work Department to visit and investigate, thereby enhancing the government's trust. This had led the local government to "turn a blind eye" to Dahe Church's daily activities. As long as Dahe Church doesn't touch the bottom line (e.g., contact with foreign churches, sermons on politically sensitive issues, church members breaking the law, etc.), the government maintains a certain degree of tolerance and acquiescence. As a result of the government's flexible regulation, Dahe Church has placed greater emphasis on strengthening its social legitimacy, which is an important institutional foundation for its development as a team-based church.

Organisational capacity and rural church growth

The legitimacy mechanism mainly secures the external environment for the development of church organisations, which is the necessary prerequisite for church growth. To seek real growth, the church has to rely on its internal organisational governance capacity.

Church leadership

Well-developed churches, whether Three-Self churches or house churches, have the same core characteristic: excellent leadership. With great emphasis on the role of church leaders, the church growth theory holds that the development of a church is closely related to the leadership of its core leaders, which is fully reflected in the birth and growth of influential denominations throughout church history (Wagner 1989). In our empirical cases, studying the growth and evolution of a church is in a sense equivalent to doing oral history research on the personal faith testimony of the church's core leaders.

The core figure in the developmental history of Fangzhuang Church was Elder Wang. She converted to Christianity before 1949 and held her faith during the Cultural Revolution. She practiced her faith very piously, often fasting for prayer, and all

7. "If anyone was arrested and imprisoned for the sake of the church or the faith, everyone would praise him, and believers respected those who carried the cross for the Lord. On the contrary, among preachers, if they have not suffered for the Lord and come out to preach, they are not considered qualified." Interview in Wan City, ID: HC0902R, 17 December 2009.
8. One of the village cadres interviewed said, "The house church believers are 'true believers,' and these people dare to disregard their personal safety and loss for their faith, which shows that they truly believe in it. Some of the preachers are preaching all over the country and are more famous than us." Interview in Tang County, ID: GB1807L, 9 July 2018.
9. In 2002, some key leaders of Dahe Church were kidnapped by the Christian cult Eastern Lightning. Faced with this dangerous situation, the church leaders did not look for other solutions because of the lack of institutional legitimacy, but resolutely chose to report the situation to the government and asked for help, and assisted the police in solving the case quickly through active cooperation. This accidental incident gave Dahe Church its first opportunity to interact positively with the government, increasing the government's understanding and trust.

her neighbours and friends were willing to join her home prayer sessions and gatherings if they had any difficulties or diseases. In the eyes of outsiders, Wang was full of “magical power”; she could pray for physical healing and exorcise demons, and even studied the scriptures on her own despite her background of illiteracy, knowing Bible stories and characters well and tailoring her preaching to local needs. All this gave Wang high prestige among village believers. In contrast, Dongjie Church leaders had made a negative impression on the public due to disputes between Elders Li and Liu in competing for the position of president in the *lianghui*, and this ultimately led to a loss of believers and a crisis of authority among the church leaders.¹⁰ It is not difficult to conclude from these two cases that the establishment of faith authority is the foundation of a church’s cohesion and mobilisation; otherwise, the church will be too weak to grow.

As the two most influential representatives of rural team-based house churches in Wan City, Dingshan Church and Dahe Church may demonstrate even more prominent leadership. Mr Rong, the core leader of Dingshan Church, was a former “classic Christian village cadre” (*jidutu cunganbu dianxing* 基督徒村幹部典型), which led to his imprisonment during the Cultural Revolution. In addition to his staunch faith, Rong had strong abilities in church affairs management and in building interchurch networks across different townships. Under his leadership, Dingshan Church quickly became the first team-based church in southwest Wan City. Similarly, the establishment and development of Dahe Church was ascribed to Mr Ma’s personal religious prestige and church governance skills. During the 1980s and early 1990s, a number of excellent preachers of faith and ability emerged in Dahe Church and Dingshan Church. Despite their peasant status, many of them were social elites at the grassroot level, such as production team leaders, doctors, teachers, and high school graduates. They were good at preaching, composing hymns (such as *Canaan Hymns*), or praying for physical healing. These different characteristics gave rise to the charisma of the first generation of rural house church leaders, which became an important basis for leadership and vitality in church development.

Resilience of organisational structure

Although the role of church leaders is important, it is not decisive. The most important institutional foundation for a sustainable church is its organisational structure, because it reflects the normality of a church’s internal authority and governance mode, and is an important embodiment of the church’s competitiveness.

The organisational structure of Fangzhuang Church was paternalistic in its early days. However, after the establishment of the congregation in 1998, Elder Wang chose to resign from her leadership, mainly serving as a behind-the-scenes coordinator. With Elder Jin (also a woman) taking over the leadership position, the church is governed by a six-member team (one elder and five deacons), and important decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. In terms of church ministry, the five deacons have their own duties and manage the ministry groups separately. Each ministry group is composed mainly of the group leader, deputy group leader, and fellow workers. The six-member governance team

serves full-time to ensure the stability of governance in the church. Ministries are organised through the voluntary participation of believers, with relatively free personnel adjustment and specific activities, thus ensuring a certain flexibility in church governance. The transformation of the organisational structure of Fangzhuang Church shows that establishing an elastic internal governance structure is the institutional basis for the church’s sustainable growth.

From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Dingshan Church was basically under paternalistic governance with Mr Rong at the core. In 1994, Dingshan Church received discipleship training from overseas pastors and began to practice team-based church governance in an attempt to correct the problem of too much power being centralised with individual leaders. Yet in this process, Mr Rong came into conflict with fellow workers, and combined with a personal sex scandal, his religious authority was greatly diminished, and the Church became divided among several medium-sized teams. Later, because Mr Rong was arrested and imprisoned by the authorities several times, Dingshan Church lost its opportunity to integrate its various teams and entered a period of declining starting in 2005.

Similar to the early organisational model of Dingshan Church, Dahe Church concentrated its leadership authority with Mr Ma, who played a key role in the early development of Dahe Church. However, in the mid-1990s, the government repeatedly cracked down on the church, to the extent that Ma and other leaders were arrested successively, creating a vacuum in the church’s core leadership. To avoid the leadership uncertainty created by paternalistic governance, Dahe Church began to explore a new governance model in 1996, and ended up with a joint governance structure shared by a central leader and several major leaders in emulation of the Presbyterian Church in the West. Since then, Dahe Church has gradually transformed from its early paternalistic model to a multi-hubbed hierarchical governance model, i.e., “national committee (national level) – regional federations (provincial level) – pastoral areas (municipal level) – congregations (county or township level) – gathering points (grassroot level).” Since 2007, it has gradually focused on congregation-building by strengthening church planting and team cultivation. Owing to self-renewal of its organisational governance structure, Dahe Church has become one of China’s most influential team-based house churches, with strong sustainable development capacity.

The rural churches in mainland China were rebuilt from scratch after the reforms, making the early organisational structures generally paternalistic. In a particular period, this organisational structure has its objective social basis and plays a positive role in the development of churches. However, it is undeniable that paternalism is a fragile structure of church authority. Without changes in due course, it will pose major challenges to the sustainable development of the church, and the best way is to

10. For example, Dongjie Church was often used as an example in house churches to criticise the problems of government-run churches, such as “the president’s rights being superior to God’s will” and its members having “no life, no salvation,” and to call on believers to “recognise the true face of the TSPC.” Interview in Tang County, ID: THC0805B, 2 May 2008.

establish a resilient organisational structure by escaping the disadvantages of paternalism.

Openness and learning ability

After reform and opening up, Chinese Christianity first revived in rural areas, where churches are full of developmental problems, especially in terms of devolving into “sects and cults” (*yiduan xiejiao* 異端邪教) (Zheng 2006). The problem of rural “sects and cults” is partly related to the overall weakness of rural preachers in terms of theological resources, but it is more related to church openness and learning capacity.

In 1980s, several so-called Christian sects spread among the churches in Wan City, namely the Shouters (*huhannpai* 呼喊派), the Spiritual Born-again Movement (*chongshengpai* 重生派), Once Saved Always Saved (*yici dejiu yongyuan dejiu pai* 一次得救永遠得救派), and Eastern Lightning (*dongfang shandian* 東方閃電). Their hybrid theologies mainly came from two sources: the preacher’s personal interpretation of scripture, and the theological teachings of foreign missionaries; the former constituted in the majority, which had something to do with the insufficient theological training and governance abilities of rural church leaders.¹¹ In contrast, Eastern Lightning was regarded as an evil sect by most Chinese churches, not only because of its theological radicalism, but also because of the physical and mental control it wielded over believers (Zheng 2006). The danger of Eastern Lightning to house churches was greater than that to the Three-Self church. This is not to say that house churches have fewer theological resources than the Three-Self church, but rather that house churches lack institutional legitimacy and therefore sometimes choose to go underground when government crackdowns occur. Being compelled to develop in a secretive manner and giving up contact with the outside world provides opportunities for “evil cults” such as Eastern Lightning to spread and infiltrate the faith community. It is therefore very important for house churches to choose their development strategy when faced with political pressure. Those who choose to develop in isolation due to oppression tend to fall into theological radicalism or to be invaded by “evil cults.” On the contrary, if they can maintain contact and communication with other churches, they will not only know the advantages and disadvantages of various theological information, but will also seek help and support from local church networks.

The reason why Dingshan Church and Dahe Church could develop from small local churches into cross-regional team-based churches was closely related to their emphasis on maintaining openness and building extensive interchurch networks, which became a major channel for church resource mobilisation. Beginning in 1980, with the connection of personal relationships among believers, Dingshan Church and Dahe Church established contact with churches in coastal Zhejiang and Fujian, and were helped with supplies of bibles, hymnbooks, pastoral theological materials, radios and recorders, and other much-needed resources. At the same time, some outside pastors and evangelists were brought in to carry out leadership and theology training. These favourable external resources soon changed the situation of severe resource shortage and insufficient theological equipment

in Dingshan Church and Dahe Church, and accelerated their development to a large extent. However, some potential crises and consequences began to emerge in the meantime.

For example, some overseas trainers introduced the theological thoughts of Pentecostalism, emphasising the importance of “being filled with the Holy Spirit” and speaking in tongues; others brought new models of church governance (such as discipleship training), emphasising the leadership role of young preachers. This external support caused some dissension among fellow workers and believers in the process of exchange and learning, which became an important trigger for the eventual split of Dingshan Church.¹² During the same period, Dahe Church faced similar problems and challenges, but did not split as a result of the controversy. This was not because the leaders of Dahe Church had higher theological attainment or governance capabilities, but rather because the church maintained certain principles regarding church openness during external exchange and learning. Regarding theological views that were prone to argument, they absorbed the useful parts and discarded those liable to be misunderstood or overinterpreted, and they demanded that controversial ideas not be circulated publicly in worship services. Despite its openness to training by foreign pastors, Dahe Church paid special attention to the absorption and digestion of alien theological thought and church governance training, so as to avoid disputes and conflicts caused by simple implantation without verification.

To sum up, there is not a simple linear relationship between the openness of a church organisation and church development, but rather it is a matter of maintaining appropriate boundaries, which we consider to be the ability of the church organisation to maintain self-autonomy along with a well-defined ability to learn in the process of communication and learning from the outside.

Strategy for handling church-state relations

In mainland China, despite formally clear rules and regulations in the system of church-state relations (such as the Regulations on Religious Affairs, *zongjiao shiwu tiaolie* 宗教事務條例), there is a great deal of arbitrariness and flexibility in practical implementation, which is closely related to the technical strategies that different churches adopt in church-state relations.

The most obvious institutional constraint of the Three-Self church in the government religious system is embodied in the “three fixed” policy (fixed place, fixed district, fixed personnel: *dingdian, dingpian, dingren* 定點, 定片, 定人), which has become

11. For example, the Shouters mainly originated in nearby Fang County, and the group was not heretical at first. Subject to the preachers’ emphasis on certain theological concepts, some rural churches’ theological orientation became more and more radical by simplifying related scriptures into a slogan-like phrase: “If you feel saved, shout out,” which is how this group of believers became known as the Shouters. Interview in Fang County, ID: HC18072A, 2 July 2018.

12. For example, during a sermon by Pastor Ning, invited from overseas, his exaggerated hand-waving during preaching and praising, and his promotion of being filled with the Holy Spirit, created a great stir in Dingshan Church, which was used to religious conservatism, and many preachers felt uncomfortable with it, believing that Ning’s theology might be heretical, so they began to resist him somewhat. Another example is the discipleship training brought by Pastor Chen from Hong Kong, who advocated the promotion and reappointment of younger preachers, causing tensions between new and old leaders in Dingshan. Interview in Fang County, ID: HC09121D, 21 January 2009.

a key obstacle to the organisational vitality of the Three-Self church. Regarding the “three fixed” policy, churches are not uniform within the TSCP system; instead, some churches may take a more flexible approach. After registration, in addition to paying tithes and cooperating with the supervision and guidance of the Christian *lianghui* at the county level, Fangzhuang Church maintained its independence in personnel and management rights. Especially when it came to making decisions on major church affairs, it adopted the strategy of “just do it, not say it” to avoid potential conflicts with the *lianghui* and government departments.¹³ In this sense, although Fangzhuang Church formally accepted the “three fixed” policy and followed the established rules of church-state relations, it enjoyed a high degree of flexibility in its actual religious practice, such as holding children’s Sunday school, inviting ministers from outside the church to preach (sometimes even inviting preachers from house churches), and selecting and appointing its own clergy.

House churches outside the system face greater church-state pressure and uncertainty. Historically, the government’s control strategy over rural house churches has changed from comprehensive suppression to differential control (Kang and Han 2010); i.e., the large, well-organised, and influential team-based churches among house churches have been the targets of regulation, while those that are small, loosely organised, and serve marginalised groups have been treated with relative leniency. For example, Dingshan Church and Dahe Church suffered repeated crackdowns by the government from 1983 onward. Initially, the two churches’ interaction strategy in the face of government crackdowns was mainly “guerrilla tactics,” with church leaders choosing to go into hiding when crackdowns occurred. This “attack-flight” mode of church-state relations created constant distrust and hostility between house churches and the government. In contrast with Dingshan Church, Dahe Church adopted a more proactive and strategic approach to church-state relations starting in 2002. For example, in order to keep the government informed, Dahe Church took the initiative to clarify its theological standpoint, faith content, church activities, and development status. In areas involving the government’s main concerns (such as overseas church relations, large-scale events), Dahe Church chose to be nonconfrontational, keeping each congregation within the government’s tacitly approved 120 members. The case of Dahe Church demonstrates the importance of a positive church-state relationship strategy for churches outside the system that seek to build a negotiated and trusted church-state relationship. This strategy makes it easier for the government and the church to understand each other’s bottom line, and it enables control of the government’s power over the house church, while deregulation by the government becomes an important condition for house churches to expand their social space so they can grow and develop.

Conclusion and discussion

Based on the theoretical framework proposed above, we constructed several core variables for the comparative case study in two dimensions (organisational legitimacy and organisational

capacity), and summarised the empirical analysis of the four cases by assigning three scores to the ordinal variables (lowest, medium, and highest).

Table 1. A comparative summary of four typical cases

		Dongjie Church	Fangzhuang Church	Dingshan Church	Dahe Church
Legitimacy	Institutional legitimacy	Highest	Medium	Lowest	Lowest
	Social legitimacy	Lowest	Medium	Highest	Highest
Organisational capacity	Church leadership	Lowest	Medium	Highest	Medium
	Resilience of organisational structure	Lowest	Highest	Medium	Highest
	Openness and learning ability	Lowest	Medium	Medium	Highest
	Strategies for church-state relations	Lowest	Highest	Lowest	Highest

Source: authors.

Table 1 shows that among the four rural church cases, the best development performer is Dahe Church, followed by Dingshan Church and Fangzhuang Church, and the last is Dongjie Church. The differences among these four church cases have duality: one involves the categorical difference between the Three-Self church and house churches, and the other involves intergroup differences within these two types of churches, both of which are closely related to the legitimacy and organisational capacity of the church. Although house churches lack institutional legitimacy, this can be replaced or supplemented by the proactive construction of socially legitimate identities, which is one of the main institutional reasons why house churches can survive and grow despite unfavourable religious regulation. From the perspective of organisational capacity, house churches are generally better than Three-Self churches in terms of leadership, organisational governance, openness to learning, and strategies for church-state relations, which is another important reason why house churches became the mainstream in rural Christianity (Yu 2010).

However, it is important to note that there is differentiation among house churches, with different house churches performing variously on the four key indicators of organisational capacity. Comparative case studies show that the more a church is able to balance its leader’s authority and its institutionalisation level, the more likely it is to achieve sustainable development, while in the opposite situation, it may split or fall into stagnation. Similarly,

13. “As church leaders, communication skills are very important. We do better to present facts and reasoning, rather than engage in head-on confrontation, while also not giving up the bottom line of faith, otherwise they will ‘pick soft persimmons to pinch,’ and the church will only be obedient to the government and not to God,” said Pastor Liu. Interview in Fang County, ID: FTSC0801B, 3 May 2008.

there are also differentiations among the Three-Self churches, but if they can achieve a harmonious symbiosis between institutional legitimacy and social legitimacy, their organisational capacity will be released and they can also realise good growth and revival.

This paper's theoretical contribution is in pointing out that a church's religious legitimacy and organisational capacity are a pair of variables in which internal and external factors interact with each other. On the one hand, the church's institutional legitimacy has a constraining effect on its organisational capacity, which is the structural obstacle that leads to the lack of religious competitiveness of Three-Self churches, and is the reason why most house churches exhibit fluctuating growth under the government's periodic crackdown campaigns. Under the constraints of institutional legitimacy, the creative construction of organisational capacity is especially critical. In particular, excellent leadership, resilient organisational structure, moderate openness to interchurch exchange and learning, and a flexible strategy for church-state relations are all important factors that affect a church's sustainable development. On the other hand, neither the symbiotic nor the substitute relationship between social legitimacy and institutional legitimacy can be separated from a church's organisational capacity, because that is an important basis for competition among churches to gain social recognition. A stronger organisational capacity helps a church build its own social legitimacy, thus expanding social space for its survival and revival under unfavourable religious policies. Such a dialectical interaction logic between the legitimacy mechanism and organisational capacity enables us to empirically explain the developmental differentiations among different church organisations in China's rural Christianity.

In summary, this paper discusses the influence of contextual and institutional factors on changes in rural church growth in mainland China since reform and opening up from a meso-level perspective of church organisation by following the institutional approach, and proposes two main theoretical explanatory mechanisms: religious legitimacy and organisational capacity. Although we empirically use the case of rural churches for our argument, we believe it can be extended to the study of urban church growth as well. For example, previous studies have also found that flexible church-state relationships are important for the survival of urban house churches, and that the collaborative strategies of church leaders can facilitate cross-regional urban church networks that help churches thrive (Koesel 2015; Kang 2016). Nevertheless, the theoretical explanation in this paper has its limitations. As it focuses on the meso-level institutional perspective of church organisation and does not sufficiently grasp the macro-level structural variables and the micro-level individual demographic variables, it does not adequately explain the uneven spatial distribution of Christianity's development in China. In addition, an important mechanism of Church growth is intergenerational socialisation, and the lack of attention to individuals and their family backgrounds is also a shortcoming of this study.

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