

Speaking in the Devil's Tongue? The True Jesus Church's Uneasy Rhetorical Accommodation to
Maoism, 1948-1958

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ABSTRACT

During the 1950s, the universal ideology of Chinese Christian churches came to a head with the universal ideology of the Maoist party-state. Christian churches were autonomous moral communities (ideologically self-contained communities within which members collectively claimed authority to define and cultivate moral norms). As such, they hindered the party-state's ambitions for control. Christians, especially Christian leaders, experienced intense pressure to adopt the new code of Maoist speech. Documents from archives in Nanjing and Wuhan and oral history interviews with members of the True Jesus Church in south China show how, despite the True Jesus Church's native inclinations to resist, between 1948 and 1958 Maoist rhetoric and discursive patterns replaced Biblical rhetoric and discursive patterns in the public life of the church. The contest between religious communities and the state to control the terms of public moral discourse demonstrates the significance of such discourse in demarcating and legitimating community authority.

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Introduction

In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party consolidated control—not only over territory and government institutions, but also over the realm of moral discourse. A universalist ideology, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist materialism claimed all-encompassing authority to categorize and interpret all forms of human activity. Beyond analysis of capitalist production, the party-state's ideology also made claims about good, evil, and the nature of human existence. Capitalists and landlords were evil; workers and peasants were virtuous; the meaning of life was entirely contained within the material realities of economic production and class struggle. Maoism was thus a natural rival to many Chinese religious movements (Urban 1971, Kitagawa 1974, Kipnis 2001, Ownby 2008).¹ In particular, the rival universalist worldview found within Chinese Christian churches challenged the party-state's ambitions for ideological control.

Christian churches were communities with a diverse membership held together by moral discourse. Christianity's shared text, the Bible, contained a reservoir of precepts, rites, exemplars, and patterns. Church members and especially leaders who preached from the pulpit drew on Biblical tropes and terminology as they engaged in the realm of moral discourse, defined by Richard Madsen as “an active social process of understanding, evaluating, and arguing about what is right or wrong in a given situation” (Madsen, 1984: 8). The universal scope of Biblical teachings and the self-governing, morality-oriented culture of church communities made Christian churches what I call autonomous moral communities: ideologically self-contained communities within which members collectively claimed authority to define and cultivate moral norms. As independent centers of moral discourse and community authority, churches presented an obstacle to the party-state's goal of forming subjects loyal to the state

alone (Mariani 2015: 2). Not only church leaders, but also representatives of the party-state keenly felt the tie between morality and legitimate authority (Tong 2011; Chesterman, Ignatieff, and Thakur 2005; Jackman 1993: 120; Laliberte and Canteigne 2008; Gilley 2008). This made the struggle between the two realms of discourse production so vital.

Between 1948 and 1958, these two universal discourses, Maoist and Christian, came to a head. During the 1950s, church communities experienced intense pressure—not to explicitly change their beliefs, for freedom of religion was guaranteed under the constitution—but to change their everyday language demarcating right and wrong, beneficial and harmful, the community of the chosen versus adversaries. Political activists pressured Chinese Christians felt to make the rhetorical switch to the terms, tone, and moral categories of Maoism. Such code-switching was not necessarily a sign of speakers' complete cognitive conversion to Maoist ideology, but was rather a submissive “karaoke” or public performance of loyalty signaling acceptance of the state's authority (Clark 2008: 259; Leese 2007; Strauss 2007: 53).

For conservative Christian churches that had historically prized Biblical rhetoric as a symbol of separation from both the secular world and other ostensibly less orthodox or authentic Christian churches, adopting Maoist rhetoric was not simply a matter of cleverly mouthing empty words. Such a shift breached the walls of symbolic language that protected the community's authoritative moral discourse. The transition to Maoist rhetoric and discursive patterns was especially earthshaking in the True Jesus Church, a Pentecostal church which members believed was Christ's one true church, directly guided by the Holy Spirit. The history of how for a period of time the top leaders of the True Jesus Church adopted Maoism's politicized rhetoric and moral frameworks illustrates the significance of language in allowing the

party-state to penetrate the sacred boundaries that had heretofore set the church apart as an autonomous moral community.

Existing literature on Chinese Christianity during the Maoist era

A growing literature on Christian churches during the Maoist era exists, but the body of work is not vast. The field has been shaped by two realities: a dearth of sources, and an abundance of judgment. First, documentary sources from this era are hard to access. One reason for this is the widespread destruction of documents during the Cultural Revolution. With over half a century separating us from the 1950s, potential oral history subjects are also quickly aging out of reach. Although voluminous government reports on religion in the 1950s are stored in Chinese archives, access is usually restricted.

A second factor that has shaped historiography on 1950s Chinese Christianity is the question of moral judgment. In his recent study of Moore Memorial Church in Shanghai, John Keating argued that historians of Chinese Christianity in the 1950s “generally fall into one of two distinct camps, either condemning the church for co-operating with atheist communists or congratulating it on expelling the evil foreign missionaries” (Keating 2012: 90). It is more accurate to say that there are more than two scholarly “camps,” including the middle ground that Keating’s work now occupies, but it is very true that the Christian response to the Maoist party-state was polarizing in the 1950s and is still polarizing today (Keating 2012: 91-94). The story of Chinese Christians in the 1950s is often told in very stark terms as a story of how Christians chose between right and wrong, although scholars disagree over who occupied the moral high ground.

The key point is that the majority of religious practitioners from Buddhists to Muslims cooperated with state programs. One report from a Buddhist monastery listed five categories of monks' response to Maoism that also could be applied to Christians during this era. Those within the first two categories were progressive and studied hard. Those in the third "knew only that they should do what they were told" and "found it troublesome to attend meetings and to study." Those in the fourth "discovered pretexts for avoiding newspaper-reading groups and meetings" and "sometimes used a couple of modern terms" as verbal symbols of their loyalty and membership in good Maoist society. The few monks in the fifth category were like "canned goods" (i.e., hermetically sealed). When forced to attend political meetings, "they neither heard nor spoke. New things held no attraction for them" (Welch 1972: 95). This wide variety in believers' compliance lends credence to the approach of Philip Wickeri, who has argued that most Christians who cooperated with the state were neither "zealous converts" nor "stubborn resisters," but "adapters" essentially concerned with coping with a stressful experience and finding a place in the new society (Wickeri, 1988: 144-45; Wickeri 2007).

A survey of existing scholarship shows that variations in the scope of authority claimed by churches' internal discourse tended to shape their position vis-à-vis Maoist political activity. Churches whose internal discourse claimed sweeping, exclusive authority to interpret morality and cosmic truth tended to resist cooperation with the party-state more than those whose discursive culture was segmented and pluralistic. In the majority of cases, higher levels of natural resistance still ultimately gave way to public capitulation, although it was more likely that underground activities would arise within such church communities.

Among the Christian denominations with stronger claims to authoritative religious discourse was the Catholic church, with its global hierarchical organization, standardized rites, distinctive version of the Bible, set-apart clerical lifestyle, and historical claim to unbroken divine papal authority stretching back to St. Peter, the disciple of Jesus. Most Catholics viewed faith in this worldwide hierarchy as essential. The Catholic Father John Tung (Dong Shizhi) articulated this point of view when in 1951 he declared, “If today I renounce the Pope, then tomorrow I might be asked to deny the Lord himself” (Mariani 2011:1). Many Catholics eventually conformed, but throughout the 1950s and 1960s, significant numbers continued to resist the party-state through enduring imprisonment or taking their practice underground (Harrison 2013; Mariani 2011; Madsen 1998; Myers 1991).

Among the churches with weaker claims to authoritative religious discourse were the Protestant denominations that formed what Daniel Bays has called the Sino-foreign Protestant establishment (Bays 2012: 99-104). These churches existed under the umbrella of nationwide formal Protestant governing bodies and included foreign mission denominations such as the Wesleyan Methodist Church as well as the mission-derived churches like the Chinese-run Church of Christ in China 中華基督教會. The Sino-foreign Protestant establishment churches had been heavily influenced by the “social Gospel” theology of the 1920s and 1930s. They operated the majority of Christianity’s public-sector institutions including hospitals, schools, colleges, and social institutions like the YWCA/YMCA. These churches also tended to be theologically liberal, with many though not all on the modernist side of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy. For example, Wu Yaozong, a General Secretary of the YMCA who later become Chairman of the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement, wrote that in his

formative years as a Christian he had embraced the ethics of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, but could not accept "supernatural" and "irrational" ideas such as Christ's virgin birth, resurrection, and second coming (Wu 1950: 76). Liberal or modernist churches interpreted Christianity's applicability to human experience broadly, sharing the field with the ontological authority of science and the "social gospel" of expressing Christian teachings through secular endeavors in medicine and education. In this sense these churches willingly ceded or shared authority over large territories of meaningful interpretation. Their mixed discourse of Biblical ethics, scientific rationality, social reform, and even political engagement regularly overran the boundaries of the community of believers and connected to the ideas, symbols, and phrases of the wider world. For many of these Christians, embracing China's new materialist political and social order may have been a reasonable and even hopeful choice. In Daniel Bays's study of Chinese Protestant leader Chen Chonggui, who followed this course, Bays argued that Protestants "were not necessarily duped or coerced into state-imposed structures of religious affairs . . . Some may have found it quite natural to work within such structures" (Bays 2003: 164).

Other Protestant churches, especially those with a fundamentalist bent, including most native churches, more closely resembled Catholicism in their strong internal culture of authoritative discourse and corresponding tendency to resist the authority of the party-state (Wickeri 1988: 157-170). These conservative churches tended to emphasize the Bible as their sole authority. Church members and especially leaders consulted it conspicuously to support the veracity of their common beliefs and the sacred value of their individual lives. Shared Biblical rhetoric (quotations from the Bible or references to Biblical tropes, characters, or teachings)

helped to maintain community boundaries and establish a sense of sacred separation from the evil outside.

Although their Bible-centered, authoritative discourse predisposed these churches to resist Maoist control, some were more successful than others. To the extent that they succeeded in maintaining their own culture, they did so covertly, by going underground or keeping a very low profile. Joseph Tse-Hei Lee has shown that local-dialect churches and congregations of the Little Flock in Chaozhou succeeded in worshipping autonomously, avoiding the control of the Three-Self Patriotic Association (Lee, 2005 and 2009). Seventh-Day Adventists, another exclusivist group with boundary-maintenance practices such as Saturday Sabbath observance and special dietary codes, also resisted Maoist programs in Shanghai by boycotting struggle meetings (Lee, 2012). Yet the higher the profile of Christian institutions or Christian leaders, the more likely it was that they would be compelled to eventually demonstrate submission to the new order. Publications of the central Seventh-Day Adventist organization in 1950s Shanghai vividly illustrate the jarring contrast between native Christian and Maoist discourses. A June 1951 publication with a hand-drawn cover that suggested a disruption in regular printing processes asserted the Adventist community's exclusive access to truth and disregard for secular power. It exhorted believers to "Hold high the torch of truth!" and defiantly quoted Paul's epistle to the Hebrews (13:6): "The Lord will help me—I will not fear. What can people do to me?" By January 1955, however, the Adventists' central publication was quoting not the Bible, but anti-imperialist slogans: "If American imperialism dares to obstruct the Chinese people's liberation of Taiwan, then there will be severe consequences" (Shanghai Municipal Archives 103-0-52-90). Despite their similarly fundamentalist and exclusivist positions, the three largest native churches

(the True Jesus Church, Little Flock, and Jesus Family) attracted the attention of the state security apparatus because their size and tight hierarchical structure gave them a strong internal culture. Their top leaders were imprisoned and their congregations were folded into the official Three-Self Patriotic Movement structure (Wickeri 1988: 159-164; Wickeri 2007: 119-122; Bays 2012: 160-166; Lian 198-201).

In sum, the relative scope and exclusivity of a church's internal discourse determined the size of the gap between a given Chinese church and the Maoist party-state, but in the majority of cases Christians eventually took the leap. Even many of the most stalwart Catholics and Protestants arrested by the security apparatus in the 1950s and 1960s eventually gave in to the physical and psychological pressures and produced submissive statements in the new political idiom (Mariani 2015; Harrison 2013: 152-171; Jones 1963: 117-121; Bays 2012: 160-177). The prominent Jesuit Jin Luxian, Bishop Gong Pinmei's trusted junior colleague in Shanghai, soon after being arrested in 1955 capitulated completely and even recorded an audiotape urging fellow Catholics to cooperate with the regime (Mariani 2015: 165, 189). Wang Mingdao, often seen as an international symbol of Christian resistance to communism, in September 1956 produced an abject self-confession in which he called himself a "counter-revolutionary offender" who was "deeply distressed and ashamed" about his initial resistance and vowed to "guide the believers in the Church and the people of the nation in tasks of socialist construction" (Jones 1963: 117-121). Wang's fame as a resister stems from the fact that a few months after making this confession, he retracted it and was promptly returned to prison, where he remained for the next twenty years (Harvey 2002; Wickeri 1988: 164-170).

Many of those who endured prison or gave their lives rather than verbally transfer their highest loyalty to the party-state are now rightfully admired (Mariani 2011; Harrison 2013; Harvey 2002). Since most Chinese Christians did adopt Maoist rhetoric at one point or another, however, it makes sense to closely examine its workings and liabilities within Chinese Christian communities.

Standing apart: the True Jesus Church

One of the largest independent churches in China, the True Jesus Church's exclusivist theology and native history set it apart (Bays 1995 and 1999; Lian 2004 and 2008; Kao 2009; Inouye 2010). It was a "sectarian tradition" to the extent that its doctrines and practices maintained high levels of tension vis-à-vis society and other churches (Bromley and Melton 2012: 4-7). Members believed that of all Christian churches, only the True Jesus Church had rituals leading to salvation, including immersion baptism in a face-down posture and the baptism of the Holy Spirit by speaking in tongues. Members also took pride in the church's native roots. Since its founding in Beijing in 1917, the True Jesus Church had been led by native Chinese. It thus ticked all three boxes of the "self-led, self-financed, and self-propagating" criteria that the Maoist state prescribed for Christian churches as a remedy for imperialism. In this sense church members considered themselves exempt from accusations of "imperialism" that had long been leveled at foreign-founded Christian churches (Yip 1980; Lutz 1988).

The visions of church founder Wei Enbo had yielded a set of revelations that shaped how True Jesus Church members drew on the spiritual authority, moral norms, and symbolic resources of the Biblical text. Biblical language dominated church activities, from Bible study

meetings to Sabbath sermons to the language of tongues, which church members believed was identical to utterances of the apostles on the Day of Pentecost. Even hands-on practices such as faith healing emulated the postures and ritual language of Biblical scenes. The church's shared Biblical discourse marked the boundaries between the divinely governed church community and the chaotic and corrupt outside world.

Yet despite its exclusivist, nativist, Bible-centered group culture that predisposed it to resist Maoist authority, within a matter of years, the top national leaders of the True Jesus Church changed their tune from "I Will Ask for the Holy Spirit" 我要求聖靈" to "The East is Red" 东方红.² Records of the TJC's central leadership, which during the 1950s moved from Nanjing to Beijing to Wuhan, reveal the uptake of Maoist rhetoric within the internal discourse of this Christian church.³ Why (and how) did church leaders whose personal identity and community authority was derived from consistent adherence to a certain Biblical rhetoric suddenly adopt the politicized labels, slogans, and programs of the Maoist state? Although we cannot fully discern the private motivations that lay behind church leaders' public statements, we can understand what was at stake as they chose their words: the authority to set the terms of moral discourse and to define the boundaries of their community.

This story about the church's top leadership is far from the whole story of the True Jesus Church as a Christian community in the 1950s. At the level of private practice, many members stubbornly resisted change (Chen n.d.). What is interesting about these accounts of the leadership is that the leaders had to respond to Maoism in public. Their prominent roles in articulating and advocating for the moral norms of the church community now made them subject to the scrutiny

of both state officials and rank-and-file. Rhetorical shifts would not go unnoticed by either audience and would be interpreted as signifying either defiance or capitulation.

1948-1950: New and “Troubled” Times

Shengling Bao 聖靈報 [Holy Spirit Times] gives a good benchmark for the kind of Biblical language that characterized True Jesus Church discourse nationwide. The main official publication of the True Jesus Church, *Shengling Bao*, was distributed nationally each month from 1926 until at least January 1951.⁴ The April 1948 issue reflects the uncertainty that prevailed across China as the communist armies advanced. The cover article, probably written by Wei Isaac 魏以撒 (circa 1900-?), the church’s national head, was titled “In A Troubled Time,” and called on members to renew their commitment to the True Jesus Church despite the perils of the age:

Right now in a time when the fires of war fill the sky, when weeping and lamentation fill the land, when the howling winds blow unabated—people of God! Are you discouraged? Workers of God! Will you also abandon your work? Are you willing to discard your calling as holy messengers? To go and become the slaves of Satan? . . . Do not forget: only those who do God’s work in times of great trouble can be counted as builders of the True Jesus Church. “When the family is poor, the dutiful son emerges; when the country is chaotic, the loyal official is revealed.”⁵ Only when there are troubles do we find the extremity that tests whether or not people’s love of the Lord is true. Therefore the True Jesus Church will be built anew, in a troubled time. (*Shengling Bao*, April 15, 1948)

The evocative language of Wei's admonition drew on the moral rhetoric of both the Christian and Chinese classical traditions. The headline, "In A Troubled Time," was a direct quote from Daniel 9:25, in which the prophet Daniel lamented Jerusalem's destruction and predicted that it would be rebuilt, albeit in a time of trouble. Wei's reference to the dutiful son and loyal official drew on stock virtuous roles from the Confucian tradition and linked them to the Christian relationship between God and God's people. The language of testing and loyalty was typical of the authoritative tone of church discourse, always rooted in reference to the Biblical text.

Church discourse deployed Biblical tropes to call for separation between the church and society at large. For example, the lead article in the March 1948 issue of *Shengling Bao* proclaimed "Save Yourself and Leave Behind This Perverse Generation." It acknowledged that while both good and wicked people were caught up in the troubles of the day, they were defined by their responses of either resisting or accommodating evil, respectively. Quoting a description of a sheep in 1 Peter 2:25 and a description of a pig in 2 Peter 2:22, the article explained:

But good people are like a sheep, who accidentally falls into a filthy pond, and incessantly calls out, and exhausts all its energy to clamber back to the bank. The wicked person is like a pig, who knows that it is in a putrid cesspool, but who finds that the new environment agreeable, and does its utmost to burrow in. (Shengling Bao, March 15, 1948)

Here the editors prescribed Biblical models of resistance, using analogies of a “cesspool” that did not reflect positively on Chinese society or those in power.

Of course, quotations from a sacred text occur frequently within the discourse of many religious groups, and all Christian churches quoted the Bible. What really draws attention is the contrast between the abundance of Biblical discourse in *Shengling Bao* in the years leading up to 1951 and the sparsity of Biblical references in public-facing church documents after 1952. Between August 1947 and January 1951 (when publication ceased), the lead articles of the 18 issues of *Shengling Bao* all included quotations from or references to the Biblical text.⁶ In over half of these lead articles, over 20% of the characters comprised Biblical quotations or references. Only three lead articles had fewer than 10% of “Biblical” characters, and another three lead articles had as many as 38-43% (*Shengling Bao*, August 15, 1947-January 20, 1951). Even aside from the contrast between 1951 and 1952, however, the proportion of Biblical references within pre-1952 church discourse gives a sense of the authoritative weight and familiar ring that this language conveyed.

The undisputed head of the TJC at the time of the communist takeover, Wei Isaac had played a major role in shaping church discourse. He was the only son of church founder Wei Enbo. After several years of power struggle following the death of his father in 1919, in 1930 Wei had reasserted himself as the church’s national head (Tang 2006). Another prominent national leader was Jiang John (蔣約翰), editor of *Shengling Bao*. Both had reason to be anxious because politically speaking, the True Jesus Church leaders were on the wrong side of the revolution. Strong ties between the Nationalist government and the True Jesus Church are evident in the first few pages of the church’s 1947 *Thirtieth Anniversary Publication*, which bear

congratulatory messages in handwritten calligraphy from numerous high-ranking government officials and generals, including Sun Fo (孫科), the son of Sun Yat-sen and the current president of the Legislative Yuan (Wei 1947). Perhaps to lower their profile, at a certain point late in 1950, Wei Isaac's and Jiang John's names and titles as publisher and editor, respectively, were removed from the masthead of *Holy Spirit Times* (Shengling Bao, September 15, 1950 and October 25, 1950).

In the first few months after coming to power, the communist government did not initiate any major campaigns against less-than-revolutionary groups, but instead sought to establish widespread legitimacy (Brown and Pickowicz 2007). In rural areas it did implement land reform, which had a destabilizing effect on many congregations that depended on the financial support and leadership of landowning members (Qu 2010). It was particularly disruptive for the Catholic church, which in many rural areas was the largest landowner (Myers 1991: 62-65; Bays 2012: 151). Party authorities also began to take control of Christian schools and colleges (Lutz 452-489; Myers 1991, 44-47; Mariani 2011, 60-62).

The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 provoked a sharp escalation in nationalist and anti-imperialist rhetoric (Myers 1991: 65-78). The Resist America and Aid Korea campaign targeted foreigners in China and Chinese organizations with foreign ties, including churches. By early 1951 nearly all foreigners, including businessmen, medical personnel, and missionaries, had been expelled; some foreigners, including Catholic bishops and priests, had been imprisoned or sent to labor camps (Wickeri 2007: 98; Bays 2012: 158-165; Myers 1991: 87). In May 1950, Wu Yaozong 吴耀宗, a high-ranking leader of the YMCA in China, led a group of nineteen Protestant leaders to meet with Premier Zhou Enlai 周恩来 (Bays 2012: 161-162; Myers 1991:

68; Wickeri 1988: 129-130). Following this meeting, these and other Christian leaders drafted a statement, called the “Chinese Christian Manifesto” 中国基督教宣言, which proclaimed Christians’ loyalty to the new government (Jones 1963: 19-20; Keating 2012: 91-94). The Christian Manifesto was issued on July 28, 1950, and published in the *People’s Daily* on September 23, 1950, along with a list of the first 1,527 signatories (Wickeri 1988: 127-133; Jones 1963: 19-20). This document became a political shibboleth as government officials and certain Christian leaders urged Christians all over China to sign. Eventually around 400,000 Christians reportedly signed, including Wei Isaac and his TJC colleague Liu Jun’an in April 1951 (Wickeri 2007: 97-103; Bays 2012: 160-162; Renmin Ribao, April 25, 1951).⁷

Government surveillance of churches intensified. On October 26, 1950, the government had announced that all social organizations, including religious groups, were to register anew with the local Bureau of Religious Affairs, which included submitting a membership roster of names, occupations, addresses, and other details. Similar registrations had been required by the Republican government, but updating of the information ensured that the new government would not lose track of religionists. The church republished this announcement, which had first appeared in the *People’s Daily*, in the November 1950 issue of the *Holy Spirit Times* (Shengling Bao, November 15, 1950).

In early 1951, the top leadership seemed to have survived the initial storm. The March 1951 minutes of a national meeting show that Wei Isaac presided as chairperson and as a member of an inner leadership circle consisting of himself, Jiang John, Li Zhengcheng 李正诚, Liu Jun’an, and Wang Chongguang 王重光. The document reads like a typical internal Republican-era church record, with bland administrative discussions containing numerous

Biblical phrases such as “the Lord’s grace,” “true God,” and “our God Jehovah” (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 98-5-350). However, as would prove to be the case in the lives of many during the Maoist era, the political winds could shift rapidly.

1951-1952: The Denunciation Movement and the Fall of Wei Isaac

In 1951, in the tense atmosphere of the Korean War, the state launched the first of a succession of mass campaigns to consolidate control, beginning with the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries 镇压反革命. This campaign was followed by the 1951-1952 “Three-Antis” 三反 Campaign, which targeted corruption and obstructionism within the party and government bureaucracy. Another mass campaign was the 1952 “Five-Antis” 五反 Campaign, which targeted urban capitalism and mirrored the land reform movements in the countryside. During these campaigns, millions of people across China were made to suffer public humiliation or pay hefty fines. Many were imprisoned or even killed (Strauss 2002).

Many religious groups became the targets of these campaigns. Especially vulnerable groups included those whose substantial resources in property, finance, organization, and membership gave them a strong, independent internal culture. Buddhist monasteries were among the largest landholders in China, making them vulnerable targets for land reform campaigns (Welch 1972: 42-50). The Yiguandao (一贯道 Way of Penetrating Unity) sect, which practiced spirit-writing and had an extensive multi-tiered organizational hierarchy, was suppressed as “counterrevolutionary” on account of its “superstitious” culture and its phenomenal popularity (DuBois 2005: 127-151). The True Jesus Church was targeted in 1951 because, like these other religious groups, it was well-resourced and well-organized, with a distinctive group culture.

Ambiguity lay at the heart of the “paternalist terror” of mass campaigns—clear definitions for who should be protected and who should be destroyed by the state were lacking (Strauss 2002: 99). In this atmosphere of nebulous vulnerability, many leaders of the True Jesus Church came under political condemnation. For instance, many church leaders in the city of Nanjing, a longtime national headquarters location, were businessmen by profession (Nanjing Municipal Archives Document 1002-1-848). Their status as religious functionaries and as members of the wealthier classes made them doubly vulnerable.

American involvement in the Korean War provoked a flare-up in anti-foreign rhetoric. Chinese Christian institutions including churches, hospitals, and schools were pressured to demonstrate their opposition to foreign imperialism. In April 1951, over one hundred Protestant leaders from across the nation gathered in Beijing to meet with the State Administrative Council. By this time, most foreign missionaries had already left the country. At the meeting in Beijing, officials announced that overseas funding for Christian churches would be cut off. A group of Chinese Christian leaders thereafter worked with government officials to organize the “Chinese Christian Three-Self Patriotic Movement” (Wickeri 2007: 98).

One of the first tasks of the Protestant leaders of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement was launching the Denunciation Movement (控诉运动 *kongsu yundong*) in the spring of 1951. A helpful editorial in the *People’s Daily* on May 21, 1951 laid out instructions for “How to Hold a Denunciation Meeting.” The Denunciation Movement aimed to use the model of struggle sessions developed in land reform and Suppression of Counterrevolutionaries campaigns to realign Christians’ discourse with that of the party-state. Philip Wickeri notes that the movement began before the communist victory had been firmly consolidated, in “a period of open trials,

mass arrests, and public executions” (Wickeri 1988: 134). The violence and fear of this era as a powerful influence on people’s behavior cannot be ignored (Lieberthal, 1980).

The Denunciation Movement was conducted by Christians, though often directed by state officials. Within the Christian community, denunciations introduced a new rhetorical pattern. A speaker identified the individual being criticized as an agent of American imperialism, substantiated the charge with evidence, and provided a self-criticism for complicity in the relationship. These speeches were made before a large meeting, followed by study and discussion in small groups “designed to deepen the analysis of imperialism, foster individual change and force a break with the past.” At one such meeting in Shanghai on June 10, 1951, an estimated twelve thousand people attended (Wickeri 1988: 134). Those targeted were expected to ultimately produce a self-criticism or confession in the new political idiom.

The choice to participate in the activities and adopt the rhetoric of the state-sponsored Three-Self Patriotic Movement did not come naturally to groups like the True Jesus Church whose community ethos emphasized God’s universal dominion. The critique of Wang Mingdao (a prominent native Chinese church leader) succinctly framed the high moral and theological stakes involved:

It is lamentable that many Christian leaders use the principle of obedience to man’s rules and submission to man’s authority to cover up their cowardice and failure. . . . This results in the faith of the Church and the ministry being subordinated to the rule of men and men’s authority. The truth then becomes obscured, the Bible misinterpreted, the foundations of the Church undermined and the flock scattered. (Harvey 2002: 72)

Philip Wickeri has discussed at length the complexity of Chinese Protestants' responses to these denunciations. Some agonized over their participation, some refused to participate, and some participated only with great reluctance, perhaps fearing that if they did not they themselves would be criticized. Others may have seen political compliance as their Christian duty to "render unto Caesar what was Caesar's," as stated in Matthew 22, or to "be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established," as laid out in Romans 13 (Wickeri 159). Wickeri also suggests that some individuals sincerely changed their political views and saw this change as a process of struggle followed by joy and new life (Wickeri 1988: 136). If such ideological changes occurred, the first step lay in the adoption of new terms and rhetorical conventions to articulate them.

This description of Chinese Christian "conversion" to Maoism can help us understand how some Chinese Protestants may have responded to what David Apter calls "the mythic dimensions of Maoism," which, like religion, made cosmological and exclusivist truth-claims (Apter 2005; ter Haar 2002; Zuo 1991; Dutton 2004; Feuchtwang 2000). Some young people from True Jesus Church families also may have naturally gravitated toward Maoism because it was now the dominant ideological influence within Chinese society. Some younger members of the True Jesus Church took government jobs as cadres and all church members likely participated in mass political activities (Ou, 2009; Qu 2010).

Taken together, the Denunciation Movement and the other mass movements of 1951-1952 introduced a new format for defining in-group and out-group through public speech. Preexisting ties of community solidarity were severed. As Kenneth Lieberthal notes, during the mass movements of the early 1950s the CCP used denunciation meetings to make close social

relationships “a source of vulnerability instead of a bastion of trust.” (Lieberthal 1980: 181-183). This contagion of vulnerability was traumatic within Christian communities whose minority status had prompted them to form extensive, close-knit personal networks and loyalties over the course of many years.

The most prominent leader in the True Jesus Church affected by the mass campaigns of 1951-1952 was Wei Isaac himself. As the head of one of the largest Protestant churches in the country, Wei was a prime target. In 1951 he was accused of being a counterrevolutionary, ostensibly because he had religious pamphlets in his house. He was also accused of secretly owning a gun (a common counterrevolutionary charge) (Ji, 2010). On February 23, 1952, Wei Isaac’s confession appeared in *Tianfeng*, the magazine of the recently formed Three-Self Reform Movement. In his “Self-Examination,” he wrote,

the eyes of my heart have been enlightened so that I have now honestly and deeply realized that I myself have been pro-American and against Soviet Russia, the Party, and the People The Communist Party has educated me, enlightened me, and brought me to a painful mental struggle (Jones 1963: 60-61).

In a striking rhetorical departure from his usual scripture-quoting style, Wei’s self-examination listed the church’s political errors. For instance, he said, he had taught that true Christians should be above “worldly” concerns such as politics or nationalism, but he now realized that this teaching was “imperialist poisonous thinking” and that the church had a “feudalistic” and “counterrevolutionary” leadership structure.

Wei called upon church members to “follow the call of Chairman Mao” and to inform on each other: “If you know of any [church leader], preacher or spiritual brother who is anti-people,

you should in the spirit of Jesus' teaching to let your yea be yea and your nay nay, frankly report it to the proper government authority, lest the holy church be corrupted." He repudiated charismatic practices that had been the center of church life: "We should not lay so much stress on miracles, nor tell people that taking medicine and consulting a doctor are sins, but rather should train our preachers in the elements of public hygiene and midwifery" He also abandoned the church's exclusivist stance, urging, "Our church and other churches should come together in denominational union" (Jones 1963: 65). This public rhetoric, conspicuously omitting the language of religious authority and laden with political slogans, must have been both humiliating and delegitimizing for Wei in his position at the head of the church.

Wei Isaac's arrest and confession sent a strong message to members of the General Assembly, the church's national leadership body. The March 30, 1952 minutes from the meeting of the General Assembly, held in Beijing, have a completely different tone from those of the meeting a year before. They lack the extensive Biblical references of the 1951 meeting and the issues of *Shengling Bao* in the years leading up to 1951. This time the meeting was supervised by Liu Shuzheng 劉淑正, an official from the city's Religious Affairs Bureau. Zhang Hanzhong 張漢中, a leader in the church's General Assembly and the meeting's chair, delivered a speech on imperialist, feudalistic, and counterrevolutionary elements within the church. At this meeting Wei Isaac was excoriated in absentia by Zhang Hanzhong and other former colleagues as someone whose leadership smacked of "feudalistic governance" and who had used the excuse of "being above the world" to pursue a dream of "bringing a huge following to serve Chiang Kai-shek" (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 112-1-335).

It was clear that many within the church had misgivings about these denunciations of Wei Isaac, who had led the church for over thirty years. Their expressed concerns, summarized by Zhang Hanzhong in his speech to the assembly of leaders in 1952, are telling:

There are a few individuals who sympathize with Wei Isaac because of their own private feelings, who have written publicly to slander the people who criticized him, saying: “They were all people who criticized him because they wanted to get ahead themselves, because they were fighting to enhance their own position, or because they were under great pressure. This ‘reform’ is all a farce.” Or others have written and distributed letters saying “They oppose and impugn Elder Wei, but each of them will reap what they sow. It will be proven that those who strive with Elder Wei will certainly meet with failure or destruction in the end. If these people do not repent, then they are just asking for trouble and courting disaster.” (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 112-1-335)

The nature of church culture was such that Zhang’s acknowledgement of dissent by “a few individuals” revealed significant opposition. First, the exclusivist identity of True Jesus Church meant that unity was paramount. Because church leaders were not elected but were supposed to be chosen through divine revelation, church members were not supposed to have cause to criticize the leadership. Hence Zhang would not have publicly acknowledged dissent if he could have possibly gotten away with ignoring it or privately tamping it down. The fact that he addressed it in such a frank manner and provided detailed accounts of the criticisms shows that they were widespread, on a scale that eluded control.

Second, it is clear from Zhang’s reference to those who had “written publicly” and “distributed letters” that criticisms were not simply idle grumblings overhead in the back of the chapel, but circulating in print. Zhang’s extensive quotations from at least two kinds of sources suggest that these sources and their content were being widely discussed. Like other Republican-era religious organizations, the True Jesus Church had a robust print culture (Katz 2014: chap. 2; Clark and Scott 2015; Inouye forthcoming 2017). National publications like *Shengling Bao*, pamphlets, Biblical commentaries, histories, and devotional texts circulated throughout the church in regional and national distribution networks. Even ad hoc, informally printed material could travel easily throughout intra-church networks and reach a large audience.

Despite these indications that many throughout the True Jesus Church sympathized with Wei Isaac, under the scrutiny of the government observer Liu many leaders spoke up to distance themselves from Wei. Following Zhang Hanzhong’s speech, Wang Chongguang, a member of a core of the top five leaders including Wei, tearfully declared, “I never knew of these sins of Wei Isaac, because I had very little interaction with him” (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 112-1-335).

Certainly this document highlights the possibility that some church leaders could have given lip service to Maoism in order to further their own interests. A current faction of the TJC led by Wei Isaac’s son Wei Jacob 魏雅各 (also known as 魏迎新) alleges that church leaders’ denunciation of Wei Isaac was a self-serving betrayal. According to this account, representing Wei Jacob’s perspective, Wei was “ousted” by a small clique of leaders led by Li Zhengcheng 李正誠 (circa 1920-1990), a protégé of Wei’s. Li was an Wuhan native and the youngest member of the General Assembly leadership (website of the northern True Jesus Church). This account

makes a particularly weighty moral judgment, since Wei had mentored Li for many years. They had first become acquainted when Li was a young man in the TJC in Chongqing during World War II. Wei had taken Li into his house, ordained Li an elder while Li was still a young man in his twenties, and promoted him to the General Assembly leadership (Ji, 2010).

After Wei's arrest, Wei was succeeded in church leadership by Jiang John as the national chairman and Li Zhengcheng as the national vice-chairman. One source claims that Li Zhengcheng enjoyed favored treatment by government officials: "Since Elder Li had been a representative in Beijing, and also because he was younger, the Communist Party had high expectations for him" (Ji, 2010). In the few years following Wei Isaac's arrest, during which the True Jesus Church's General Assembly headquarters moved from Beijing to Wuhan (Li's hometown), Li continued to play a major role. He signed his name to official communications with the government and represented the church at official functions. In these settings he made frequent use of Maoist political slogans and praised the government for its enlightened protection of religious freedoms (Wuhan Municipal Archives 98-1-582, 96-1-582).

Certainly Li's public acclaim for the state's legitimacy does not necessarily translate to his own private feelings. Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz have acknowledged this potential gap between public and private expression and the pragmatism that underlay much seeming endorsement of communist ideology:

[P]rofound concerns about personal careers and family trajectories played a major role in the "thought transformation" process of individual citizens. These personal concerns were (and are) rarely acknowledged. Many people were faking it. Many others were opportunistic. The party knew this and did not care much in the early years. What

people said in public was more important than what they really thought or what they said at home (Brown and Pickowicz 2007: 10).

Was Li Zhengcheng an eager “true believer” in the promise of Maoism? Was he a back-stabbing opportunist? What is clear from the documents is the value of adaptability during this time—the ability to acquire a new moral language.

The problem with mastering the new moral language of Maoism, however, is that it had an established lexicon but no fixed grammatical rules. One’s moral status to a large extent depended on labels, such as one’s class status, and not necessarily on one’s track record of adherence to a fixed framework of moral standards. Throughout the Maoist era, political accusations often did not have to be substantiated with rigorous evidence. One was only as safe as one’s appellations, and these could be externally assigned. Li Zhengcheng was to learn this lesson the hard way.

1953-1954: With the Program

On the national scene, throughout 1952 and 1953, the True Jesus Church continued to appear alongside other churches as a signatory to public statements printed in the *People’s Daily* to “resolutely expel imperialist influence” and to take other positions related to the Korean War.⁸ On March 3, 1953, the TJC General Assembly leadership joined with other Christian and citizens’ groups to express solidarity with the people of the Soviet Union after the death of “Chairman Stalin, the dear friend of the Chinese people” (Renmin Ribao, March 8, 1953).

In Wuhan, use of Maoist moral language at church was intensive. The August 30, 1953 “Work Plan of the Three-Self Reform Movement of the True Jesus Church in Wuhan” outlined a

political study program for church members, to be held from 7-9 pm each evening: “Getting to Know Our Great Fatherland” (1 week), “Understanding How Imperialism Used Christianity to Invade China and the Meaning of the Three-Self Reform Movement” (2 weeks), and “Thought-Examination” (2 weeks or more as necessary) (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 96-1-582).

A copy of one of the major texts used in these political study sessions is titled “Report to Participants in the Three-Self Reform of the True Jesus Church in Wuhan.” The document reveals the complexity of overlapping worldviews and idioms within the TJC laity. Maoist discourse had been successfully introduced, but older paradigms had not been cleared away. “The Three-Self Reform Movement has already had definite results,” read the report, “but we are still very far from our goal In the True Jesus Church, the movement has been initiated but has not yet deeply penetrated into the masses of members.” The report addressed the problem of getting anti-imperialist self-criticisms to resonate in a proudly native church: “Most people in our church feel that we have nothing to do with imperialism, but this is wrong.” The report criticized “poisonous elements within Christian theology such as unconditional love, forbearance, forgiveness, and an otherworldly outlook” which “teach people to not be concerned with their country or their people, to not make revolution, to not be concerned with physical suffering under counterrevolutionary rule, oppression, and provocation, but instead to only plan for the welfare of the soul after death” (Wuhan Municipal Archives, 96-1-582). The moral and soteriological impulses at the heart of the Christian project were thus subordinated to the this-worldly Maoist agenda of national and class struggle.

Although this document was ostensibly intended only for church members, it was also submitted to local government officials as a demonstration of political compliance. The often

defensive tone of this report suggests that there was in fact significant discomfort within the church with this politicized rhetoric. At another point in this document, the report acknowledged complaints:

Some people who imagine themselves to be spiritual think that this reform means being friendly with that which is worldly, that this is not a spiritual work, that “reform” is controlling “faith,” but this sort of thought is precisely the poisonous thought of imperialism . . .

As for those who say that reform means being friendly with that which is worldly, the Bible says that being friendly with that which is worldly is being friendly with wickedness and darkness. And today’s reform is precisely about opposing wickedness and darkness. In the new China of Liberation, society has gotten better and better. Days of wickedness and darkness are gradually becoming extinct . . .

We must oppose imperialism and feudalism, must oppose bureaucratism and capitalism—this, and only this, is true spirituality . . . (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 96-1-582)

As in the case of the “few individuals” discussed earlier, the report’s acknowledgment of “some people” revealed the tip of the iceberg of reluctance to embrace the new politicized discourse at among the rank-and-file. The report’s repeated emphasis on the “true spirituality” of Maoist ideology suggests that for many church members, this doctrinal alchemy was a bit of a hard sell. Indeed, the report later acknowledged the existence of “some” [i.e. numerous] church leaders who secretly wished for the return of the “reactionaries,” or who were annoyed with the endless

committee meetings, study sessions, and criticism meetings, who “appear to serve the revolution by day but oppose it by night” (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 96-1-582).

The report suggests that younger people were faring better in their adaptation to the new society. It warned that some people who were “stuck in the old ways” were jealous of the younger, more talented members of the church with “progressive thoughts, who work actively” (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 92-1-582). Senior leaders were vulnerable to accusations of backwardness, while younger leaders found numerous opportunities to demonstrate their progressiveness and to assume higher levels of ecclesiastical and political responsibility.

The True Jesus Church’s cooperation with the policies of the party-state compelled it to unite with other Protestant churches that it had previously denounced as false. This was an uncomfortable theological position, since as recently as February 1949, the lead article in *Shengling Bao* had stated that believing in “false religions and false churches” (i.e. churches other than the True Jesus Church) would destroy the soul, a fate even worse than physical death by bombs, poison, drowning, and being devoured by animals (Shengling Bao, February 15, 1949). Yet in 1951, a roster of the Wuhan City Three-Self Reform Movement listed True Jesus Church leaders Jiang John and Li Zhengcheng as committee members, along with leaders from a diverse group of denominations including the Anglican Church, the Church of Christ in China, the YWCA, the Seventh-Day Adventists, and the Assemblies of God (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 112-1-480). At a National Christian Conference in 1954, Jiang John was elected a permanent member of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement’s standing committee (Renmin Ribao, August 13, 1954).

As an affiliate of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the True Jesus Church's relationship with the government was now structured along the party-state's "united front" strategy of integrating representatives from China's many diverse cultural, scientific, and overseas constituencies into one intermediary government body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress 中国人民政治协商会议. A party-run United Front Work Department 中共中央统战部 also worked to promote policy among independent community organizations such as Christian churches (Wickeri 1988: 65-70). As a member of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement's standing committee, Jiang John interfaced directly with both the United Front Work Department and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress in Wuhan.

No baptism for counterrevolutionaries; no problem for Stalin's soul

Some documents show that the integration of Maoist language into the church's everyday functioning could be very thorough. The question of whether leaders sincerely believed what they said or were simply engaged in a strategic performance in order to promote their own welfare or the survival of the church is complex. Surely the fact that they submitted these reports to government bureaus shows at least that they did not reject the state entirely in a spirit of martyrdom. However, if the leaders had simply been trying to put on a good show for the eyes of the Religious Affairs Bureau, they would not have acknowledged dissent within the community. Leaders employed Maoist ideology not only in church political education classes, but also rites and activities that originally had had no clear political dimension: baptismal rules and internal discussions about salvation.

In Wuhan, a roster of eighty newly baptized persons from local congregations of Huangwuli (荒五里), Yongningxiang (永寧巷), and Hanzhonglu (漢中路) listed several rules governing baptism in the church, including the regulation that “Nationalist agents, corrupt persons, local tyrants, and counterrevolutionaries cannot be baptized, or else the person introducing them to the church will bear responsibility” (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 92-1-101). This was clearly an attempt to demonstrate the church’s high standards of Maoist morality, but was also a practical stratagem for avoiding the induction of political pariahs.

Another record shows how political concerns colored even soteriological discussions. In an April 1953 meeting of the Wuhan True Jesus Church, local leaders discussed whether Stalin’s soul was saved (Stalin had died a month before, and premier Zhou Enlai had attended his funeral in Moscow). According to the record, He Hosea 何西阿, said “Those who believe and are baptized will be saved, but whether or not Stalin’s soul will be saved is not clear.” To this, another leader surnamed Ma 馬 responded, “Stalin can be saved because of the righteousness that he did.” A leader surnamed Huang 黃 said, “Comrade Stalin has saved many tens of thousands of people more than Jesus. Also, Chairman Mao has turned China into a powerful country, and all China has been liberated. The devil is imperialist America.” Another leader surnamed Hua 華 pointed out that just as being a Christian did not guarantee salvation, being a non-Christian did not necessarily exclude one from salvation: “I say that Comrade Stalin’s soul can be saved . . . People who believe in Jesus can heal sickness and cast out devils and Jesus may still say, ‘I never knew you’” (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 112-1-360). As in the case of the church’s radical separation from other “Christian” churches on the grounds of fundamental difference, this assessment that a nonbeliever might receive salvation while other non-True Jesus

Church Christians might not, drew on the True Jesus Church's exclusivist ethos: Christianity outside the church was so flawed that non-Christians might fare no worse than these "Gentile" Christians on the day of judgment.

1955-1957: The sudden counterrevolutionary

In 1955 and again in 1957, despite his many years of cooperation with the government and leadership in the church, Li Zhengcheng was denounced as a counterrevolutionary by his fellow leaders. After Li's first arrest in September 1955 on charges of being a counterrevolutionary, he was jailed for a year and then released. Then in a March 17, 1957 meeting, local True Jesus Church leaders in Nanjing reevaluated Li's situation. Wang Baolin 王寶林, the chair of the meeting, explained that "since being released [Li] has not expressed acknowledgment of his sins" (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 112-1-335). According to one source who had been personally acquainted with Li, Li always maintained that he was not guilty of the crimes with which he had been charged. "He always said that he had done nothing wrong," said the source. "He had worked with the government for all those years. He said, 'You people know me—how could I suddenly be a counterrevolutionary?'" (Ji, 2010). Given Li's recalcitrance, said Wang Baolin, a criticism meeting of over one hundred people had been called a month before: "Everyone had the attitude of curing the sickness to save the person, not exaggerating and not minimizing anything. It was completely about seeking the facts in order to give him help" (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 112-1-335). Now, said Wang, they were meeting for a similar but smaller discussion in Nanjing. He then listed a variety of criticisms, which he noted were similar to those first aired in 1955: Li "steps on others' heads to satisfy his

own ambitions,” “grabs for church power and authority,” “pulls on personal relationships indiscriminately,” and “affects church unity.” Other Nanjing church leaders, Li Zimin (李子民) and Wang Xuanmin (王選民), agreed that Li needed to be changed into a new person. Therefore, they said, “we need the government to come and reform him.” Another leader said, “When I hear this report, I deeply feel the love that the Party and the government have for the people Let’s invite the government to once again educate and take care of him” (Wuhan Municipal Archives Document 112-1-335).

That Li’s fellow TJC leaders really believed what they said about the state’s “love” for the likes of Li is doubtful. The language was a code for establishing their own position within the in-group of loyal citizens and Li’s position outside that group—an object to be educated and reformed. To find a person guilty of heinous political crimes was often simply a matter of enough people applying the appropriate political labels and accusatory phrases. In many of these cases, following a recurring pattern rooted in the imperial past and perpetuated up to the present, individuals used the power of the state’s political campaigns to settle private scores (Kuhn 1990; MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2008). Yet their words were more than flattering, empty language. They were clearly aware that they were using stock accusatory phrases to discredit their former colleague and return him to a labor camp. Choosing politicized language amounted to a weighty act that was in effect a form of violence.

Shortly thereafter, Li Zhengcheng was re-arrested and sentenced to a labor camp. He was not released for twenty-seven years. During the latter part of his sentence, he worked in a glass factory in Dajunshan (大軍山) near Wuhan. When his children went to visit him, they did not recognize him. During his incarceration, his wife divorced him and remarried. Upon being

reclassified as “innocent” and released in 1985, Li took up residence in a room adjacent to World Salvation Church 救世堂 (not a True Jesus Church) in Wuhan (Ji 2010).

The Wuhan TJC’s active cooperation with the Maoist state continued into the first half of 1958. On April 13, 1956, national TJC leader Jiang John gave a speech to a diverse audience at the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference in Wuhan, contrasting the “complete lack of freedom” of the Nationalist era with the era after Liberation “under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party,” in which he now enjoyed “complete religious freedom.” He credited the Party with unifying the competing Christian denominations and bringing about the “miracle” of an enlightened, unified Christian community. Jiang stressed the need to identify counterrevolutionaries still hiding within the church, the “wolves in sheep’s clothing” that must be exposed and purged one by one (Changjiang Ribao, April 13, 1956). On June 9, 1957, Jiang delivered a speech at an event celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the True Jesus Church that was attended by church members, government officials, and representatives from the Protestant and Catholic patriotic associations. A news report noted that the ceremonies of the day included a salutation to Chairman Mao and “revealed that [church members’] freedom of belief is thoroughly respected and protected by the People’s Government” (*Changjiang Ribao* 长江日报, June 9, 1957).

1958: The suppression of the True Jesus Church

In 1958, the ongoing Anti-Rightist Campaign and the mobilizations of the Great Leap Forward launched a new era which continued into the Socialist Education Movement and Cultural Revolution. This Maoist high tide eventually led to the complete cessation of formal Christian

activity and indeed all public religious activity in China (Yue and Wakeman 1985; Welch 1972; Bays 2012; Myers 1991; Harrison 2013). In 1958, campaigns against religious groups intensified around the country (MacInnis 1972, 105-109).

The political climate changed abruptly for the True Jesus Church leaders who had mastered the tone of Maoist moral discourse but who suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the revolutionary lexicon—or at least the wrong side of the stock political crimes. In August, Nanjing leaders Fang Dan 方舟 and Wang Xuanmin 王选民 (quoted above recommending that Li Zhengcheng be returned to the loving care of the government) were arrested (*Xinhua Ribao* 新华日报, August 11, 1958). They were accused of “deceiving and harming people” through the illegal activities of “[pretending to] heal sickness and exorcise devils,” of defrauding people of their money, and of coercing women—all stock crimes also leveled against Yiguandao practitioners, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians in anti-religious campaigns in 1958 (MacInnis 1972: 225, 234; Dubois 2005). Large meetings of Nanjing Christians were assembled to criticize “the illegal activities of the True Jesus Church” (*Xinhua Ribao* 新华日报, August 11, 1958). On November 2, 1,800 people from the Wuhan religious community (doubtless including many of those who had gathered for the fortieth anniversary event in the previous year) gathered to criticize Jiang John and twenty-five other “key leaders” within the church who had “used spreading the gospel as a cover for counterrevolutionary activity,” along with the usual “creating rumors, breaking policies, cheating people of their money, coercing women, harming life, and all manner of evils” (*Hubei Ribao* 湖北日报, November 6, 1958). Jiang, the article said, had frequently sent sycophantic reports to the

Japanese occupation government during the War of Resistance and had told people to “endure” instead of resist the Japanese.

Other criticisms were leveled at the True Jesus Church leadership in general. During land reform, one article claimed, Li Zhengcheng and other leaders (including those who were landlords) had refused to hand a church building over to be housing for the masses. They had sabotaged it by bashing a hole in the roof. Church leaders were accused of relying on “sorcery” and other illegal activities such as healing and exorcism to deceive people. The article raised the case of a person named Liu Songshan 刘松山 who came to be healed of mental illness. The article alleged that church leaders tied him up and had his wife kneel and pray for many days until Liu died. One of the leaders’ exclamation, “He’s ascended to heaven,” was seen as a pious cover for malicious deception (*Hubei Ribao* 湖北日报, November 6, 1958).

Hence the True Jesus Church’s formal institutions were finally suppressed on a nationwide level by 1958, as the Great Leap Forward was getting underway. The catalog of the Wuhan Municipal Archives lists a number of personal files used to assemble materials to criticize and prosecute leaders of the True Jesus Church General Assembly that all culminate in 1958. In 1953, files were opened for Wei Isaac, Li Zhengcheng, and Li Houan; in 1955, a file was opened for Jiang John; in 1958, files were opened for Han Xingjian, Cai Mark, Wang Chongguang, and Zhang Yuci.⁹ In Wuhan, a general file was opened in 1958 to track the “illegal activities of the True Jesus Church.”¹⁰ This file was not closed until 1964, by which time all formal and informal church activities had been driven underground. From the latter half of 1958 to the new policy of party-state toleration for religious organizations in 1982, the True Jesus Church as a formal ecclesiastical institution shut down all over China.¹¹

Conclusion

In the realm of public discourse, the True Jesus Church was completely transformed by Maoism in the 1950s, although—as in the case of religious activity everywhere—more private aspects of church life resisted this change (Smith 2006; Inouye 2010). Other native Chinese Christian churches had more localized identities, making it a simple matter for church members to dissolve into informal underground networks. However, the True Jesus Church's exclusivist identity made it necessary for church leaders to preserve its organizational integrity as long as possible. This is why they moved to align the church with the party-state. Tragically, by adopting its rhetoric, these leaders lost both their moral authority and the church organization.

In their exposed position, the leaders of the True Jesus Church faced an agonizing set of choices. Should they resist state incursions, facing imprisonment and possibly the breakdown of the entire institutional church? Or should they compromise and relinquish their community's authority over morality and meaning? Within the Chinese Christian community, leaders' power came from their moral legitimacy: the community's acceptance of leaders' authority to shape moral discourse. Under intense pressure to adopt Maoist rhetoric, these leaders had to weigh conflicting moral priorities. Those who were not ideologically converted to communism but who chose to cooperate with the state could have done so for selfish or selfless reasons. Perhaps some felt that self-preservation was more important than principled resistance. It is also likely that some decided to accommodate Maoism in order to shield fellow believers and protect church institutions, at the expense of their personal reputation or self-image. It is impossible to discern which of these motivations prompted leaders to sing the praises of Comrade Stalin, who had

“saved many tens of thousands of people more than Jesus,” but in either case the leaders lost.

The hyperbolic, politicized rhetoric in a Christian church eloquently expressed the thoroughness with which Maoist ideology penetrated even those spheres of life held to be most private and sacred.

The True Jesus Church’s loss of its distinctive religious discourse and adoption of party-state discourse between 1948 and 1958 shows both the extent of the party-state’s coercive power during this period of time as well as the broader significance of religious communities’ maintenance of separate spheres of moral and interpretive authority, which made them such obvious targets for this power. Understanding Christian leaders’ new bilingualism in the 1950s provides important context for understanding the situation in the PRC today, as church leaders are “asked to tea” by security officials or arrested for criticizing government actions. Crosses atop church buildings have become potent symbols of the independence and distinctiveness of Christian communities. Local governments have sought to remove them, and local congregations have fought back. As in the past, Chinese Christians have formed communities marked by a strong internal culture whose autonomous, Biblically oriented moral discourse presents a potential challenge to the state’s ideological control. Once again, the boundary line demarcating political orthodoxy and heterodoxy has become alarmingly unstable. Chinese Christian leaders are turning to their own history for examples of resilience and resistance as well as accommodation and collaboration.

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BIO

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NOTES

¹ Discussions about the relationship between “religion” and “the state” often mark them not only as separate actors but as expressions of separate spheres of human endeavor. A body of sociological literature exists on the organizational aspects of religious movements, but one useful recent overview is C.R. Hinings and Mia Raynard, “Organizational form, structure, and religious organizations,” *Religion and Organization Theory*, special issue of *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 41 (Oct 2014): 159-186. Accessed November 11, 2015, doi: [10/1108/S0733-558X20140000041013](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X20140000041013)

² #45, 要求聖灵 (“I Will Seek the Holy Spirit”), 200 首赞美诗, True Jesus Church (the traditional form of the character is used for 聖 but the simplified character is used for 灵) (digital scanned copy kept by church leaders in Fujian, exact date of publication perhaps during the 1950s and certainly before 1965); Chinese lyrics for “The East is Red” at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/64150/64154/4482098.html>; English lyrics and tune history for “The East is Red” at <http://www.morningsun.org/east/index.html>. Both accessed December 27, 2016.

³ This paper is based on archival sources in Nanjing and Wuhan and on oral history interviews with TJC members conducted in China in 2009 and 2010. Because the TJC was such a large national church it is difficult to depict its history in a comprehensive way, especially during the 1950s when the church’s national administrative structures collapsed. The place where I was able to access a few post-1949 documents, the Wuhan Municipal Archives (武汉市档案馆), was for a time the location of the church’s national headquarters and hence a place where political pressure was intense. These documents therefore may represent only an extreme and not a norm. Another methodological problem with these archival documents, including the minutes of meetings of the national church leadership in the 1950s, is that they are preserved by government bureaus and were recorded with the knowledge that they might be viewed by government officials. Hence they were produced for a Maoist audience and as such may be regarded as having elements of a public performance. A final problem is that the Maoist era, though by now decades in the past, was traumatic for many who lived through it. People are often reluctant to remember, or to recall in full detail, the things that they did and experienced during this time. Major sources for this article include several 1950s documents from the Wuhan Municipal Archives in Hubei (湖北) province, 1940s documents from the Nanjing Municipal Archives (南京市档案局) in Jiangsu (江苏), news articles from various national and regional newspapers, and church publications and oral history interviews with church members from around China.

⁴ The January 1951 issue is the last issue held by the True Jesus Church archives in Taiwan; the December 1950 issue is the last issue held by the Shanghai Municipal Archives.

⁵ A proverb dating back to *Ming Xian Ji* (名賢集 Collected Famous and Worthy Sayings), a popular didactic text from the Song dynasty (author unknown).

⁶ These eighteen issues appear to represent all extant issues of *Shengling Bao* from this time. There appears to have been a hiatus in publication from March 1949-August 1950. In September 1950, publication resumed until what appears to be a final issue in January 1951.

⁷ Numerous articles mentioning the TJC's support for the state appear in the newspapers of the early People's Republic of China. For instance, see *People's Daily* 人民日报 *Renmin Ribao*, hereafter *RMRB*, October 3, 1950, "Harbin Christian Groups Send Telegraph to Angrily Oppose America's Criminal Invasion and Support the Chinese Christian Manifesto" 哈市基督教团体通电 愤怒抗议美侵略罪行拥护中国基督教宣言; *RMRB*, September 10, 1950, "Each Christian Group in Lanzhou Opposes America Invading Our Airspace" 兰州各基督教团体 抗议美机侵我领空; *RMRB*, April 25, 1951, "The United Manifesto of Representatives from Every Church and Group of Chinese Christianity" 中国基督教各教会各团体代表联合宣言. In this document Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声, the leader of the Little Flock, is also listed as a signatory.

⁸ See, for example, *RMRB*, March 7, 1952, "Beijing Protestants and Christians Angrily Oppose America's Invading Armies Using Germ Warfare; Resolutely Expel Imperialist Influence and Redouble Efforts to Oppose America and Aid Korea" 北京市基督徒和天主教徒 愤怒抗议美国侵略军撒布细菌 决心肃清帝国主义影响、加强抗美援朝工作.

⁹ I was able to see catalog entries showing when these files were opened but was not able to access the individual dossiers.

¹⁰ In 2010 these files could all be found in the Wuhan Archives online catalog, under the category numbers B546 and B54. Written and oral history sources from Fujian confirm that aboveground church activities almost entirely ceased beginning in the second half of 1958 and did not resume until the 1980s. Chen Guangzao 陈光澡, *Zhen yesu jiaohui zonghui ji bufen shengxian jiaohui jianshi* (真耶稣教会总会及部分省县教会简史 *A Brief History of the True Jesus Church General Assembly and the Church in Some Provinces and Counties*), 50.

¹¹ One exception were a few churches in Putian, which met for Sabbath services until 1966, and a church in the village of Nandian, which met throughout the Cultural Revolution. Chen, *Zhen yesu jiaohui*, 50.