The Recovery of Genuineness:
The Local Church's Expansion from China to the World and Back, 1922-1997

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the origins, development, and global expansion of the "Local Church" from 1922 to 1997. The Local Church is a group of churches that began in China under the leadership of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. It examines the church's foundational period in China, its survival through wars and political upheavals, and its global propagation, particularly its migration to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, and its reverse mission to the United States. The study highlights the church's distinctive ecclesiology of "one locality, one church" and its expanding efforts amidst the anti-imperialist atmosphere of early 20th-century China. Despite facing severe suppression during China's Cultural Revolution and subsequent decades, these churches continued to expand globally, becoming a significant example of cross-cultural religious propagation. Key events such as the church's encounters with the Chinese state, its labeling as a "cult" in the US, and its struggles for legitimacy are analyzed to understand the complex socio-political and cultural dynamics at play. This dissertation argues that the Local Church's pursuit of restorationist ideals and its interactions with different cultural settings contributed to its unique identity and resilience.

Through a comprehensive study of primary sources, this work sheds light on the significant role of this church group in the history of World Christianity and its impact on religion and state relationships in China and beyond. This dissertation contributes to the fields of the history of Christianity in China, the relationship between globalization and religion, and the evolution of Chinese religious policy, providing a nuanced understanding of the Local Church's journey from a group of local congregations to a global phenomenon.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Shu-chen Hsu Hsiung. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation could not have been accomplished without the help of many people. I sincerely thank the whole faculty of the History, Classics, and Religious Studies Department and especially my adviser, Dr. Ryan Dunch. Ryan's instruction along the way is why my simple desire to document this piece of history can become a scholarly pursuit. The outstanding members of my advisory committee, Jennifer Jay, Jean DeBernardi, and Stephen Kent, have provided valuable suggestions and lent their curiosity to continue making me feel that this topic is worth pursuing. Throughout my PhD years, I have made many friends in the fields of Chinese and World Christianity through academic conferences and other venues. I would like to thank Chloë Starr, Alexander Chow, Joseph Tse-hei Li, Christie Chow, Eric Hung, Zhixi Wang, and Daryl Ireland for all kinds of suggestions they have given me on different occasions. I'd also like to thank Ashley Esarey for his kindness and support while I was working for the Taiwan Studies Program at the University of Alberta.

The study would not be possible if it had not been supported by the generosity of many funding sources. I was honored to receive the Alberta Graduate Excellence Scholarship and Frank Peers Graduate Research Scholarship. I would also like to express my gratefulness to those who have supported me in this fashion but would like to remain anonymous.

I began this journey through the inspiration of some respected Local Church leaders who were eager to make the history more accessible, and I continue to receive useful helps and warm encourages from many Local Church members. Out of respect to their wishes I am keeping their names anonymous here. I am fully aware, however, that my personal connection with these people do not constitute any sort of official endorsement for my

interpretation. This study is the result of my individual academic research and I alone should be held accountable for any judgment I made in this dissertation.

In the end, I receive the most support from my dear family. My parents, Builder Hsu and Lydia Kao, are my role models. Their selfless giving was the reason for any success I ever had. My aunt, Zhaorong Hsu, supported my study in the most generous way in different stages. My two boys, Vincent and Jeremy, are the joy in my life. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge the hard work, patience, and caring of my lovely wife, Angela Yeh. I cannot do this, or anything, without you.

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Glossary of Terms

Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign	清除精神污染運動
Beulah Chapel	守真堂
Bible Teachers' Training School for Women	金陵女子神學院
Campaign to Eradicate Hidden Counter-Revolutionaries	肅清反革命運動
Chao, Calvin (Zhao Junying)	趙君影, 1906-1996
Chao, T. C. (Zhao Zichen)	趙紫宸, 1888-1979
Chao, Jonathan (Zhao Tian'en)	趙天恩, 1938-2004
Chen, Chuan-Guang	陳傳光
Chen, James (Chen Zexin)	陳則信, 1908-1986
Cheng, Chi-Kuei	成寄歸, 1882-1940
Cheng, Tien-fu	鄭天福, 1926-2002
Cheng, You	程有
Chiang Soong, Mei-ling	蔣宋美齡
China Anti-Cult Association	中國反邪教協會
China Biological and Chemical Laboratory Limited	中國生化製藥廠股份有限公司
Chinese Christian Church	中華基督徒會
Chinese Christian Independent Church	中華基督教自立會
Chinese Foreign Missionary Union	中華海外佈道團
Chinese Independent Protestant Church	中國耶穌教自立會
Chinese Native Evangelical Crusade	中國佈道十字軍
Christian Assembly Hall	基督徒聚會處
Christian Union	基督徒會
Concerning Our Mission, or *Rethinking the Work*, or *The Normal Christian Church Life*	工作的再思
Deng, Liqun	鄧力群, 1915-2015

Ding, Guangxun, (K. H. Ting)	丁光訓, 1915-2012
Dzao, Timothy (Zhao Shiguang)	趙世光, 1908-1973
Evangelism	佈道雜誌
Faith Orphanage	信心孤貧院
Falun Gong	法輪功
Gao, Shi-zhu	高師竹, 1861-1929
Gih, Andrew (Ji Zhiwen)	計志文, 1901-1985
He, Guangming	何廣明
Hong, San-qi (Elijah Hong)	洪三期 洪以利亞
Hou, Hsiu-ying	侯秀英, ?-1972
Hsu, Herald (Hsu Erjian)	徐爾建, 1922-
Hsu, Pao-chien	徐寶謙, 1892-1944
Hu, Qiaomu	胡喬木, 1912-1992
Hu, Yiming	胡逸民
Huang, Gui-sen	黃桂森
Hung, William (Hong Ye)	洪業, 1893-1980
Jia, Yuming	賈玉銘, 1880-1964
Ji, Jianhong	季劍虹, 1932-2019
Ji, Zhiwen (Andrew Gih)	計志文, 1901-1985
Jiang, Duan-yi	江端儀, 1923-1966
Jiang, Ping	江平, 1920-2022
Kuang, Stephen	江守道, 1915-2022
Kuang, C. C.	江長川, 1884-1958
Lai, Kwong Keung	黎廣強, 1964-
Lan, Zhiyi	藍志一, 1908-1988
Lee, Charles (Li Jisheng)	李繼聖, 1902-1961
Lee, Ruth	李淵如, 1894-1969

Lee, Tenghui	李登輝, 1923-2020
Lee, Witness (Li Changshou)	李常受, 1905-1997
Lin, Bellman (Lin Sangang)	林三綱, 1925-
Lin, He-ping	林和平, 1880-1950
Lin, Zilong	林子隆, 1917-2016
Liu, Timothy Ting-fang	劉庭芳, 1892-1947
Lord Changshou Sect	常受主派
Luan, Philip (Luan Feili)	欒非力, 1902-1944
Luke, Faithful	陸忠信
Meek, Simon	繆紹訓
Nanjing Theological Seminary	金陵神學院
Nee, Watchman (Ni Tuosheng)	倪柝聲, 1903-1972
Nee, Paul (Ni Hongzu)	倪洪祖
Nee, George (Ni Huaizu)	倪懷祖, 1905-1991
Nee, John (Ni Hsingzu)	倪興祖
Newsletters	教會通問
Open Doors	敞開的門
Pan, Shaorong	潘少容
Ren, Zhongxiang	任鍾祥, 1918-1997
Shandong Chinese Independent Christian Church	山東基督教自立會
Shi, Mei-yu	石美玉, 1873-1954
Sine Pharmaceutical	信誼藥廠
Socialist Education Movement	社會主義教育運動
Soong, Qing-ling	宋慶齡, 1893-1981
Spiritual Food	靈食季刊
Spiritual Lights	靈光報
Sung, John (Song Shangjie)	宋尚節, 1901-1944

Sze, Newman	史伯誠, 1927-2022
Tang, Shoulin	唐守臨, 1906-1993
Ting, K. H. (Ding Guangxun)	丁光訓, 1915-2012
The Crime of Inciting Subversion of State Power	顛覆國家政權罪
The Present Testimony	復興報
Wang, K. S. (Wang Kaisen)	王開森
Wang, Leland (Wang Zai)	王載, 1898-1975
Wang, Peace (Wang Peizhen)	汪佩真, 1899-1969
Wang, Wilson (Wang Zhi)	王峙, 1903-1998
Wang, Zhicheng	王志正, 1910-1987
Wang, Zhengting	王正廷, 1882-1961
Wang, Zhixin	王治心, 1881-1968
Wei, K. H. (Wei Guangxi)	魏光禧, 1902-1989
Wei, C. C. (Wei Jiangzhang)	魏建章, ?-2013
Wu, Leichuan	吳雷川, 1870-1944
Wu, Lukas (Wu Renjie)	吳仁杰
Wu, Yaozong	吳耀宗, 1893-1979
Wu, Yong	吳勇, 1920-2005
Yang, David (Yang Shaotang)	楊紹唐, 1898-1969
Yan, Jiale	閻迦勒
Yu, C. H. (Yu Chenghua)	俞成華, 1901-1955
Yu, Dora (Yu Cidu)	余慈度, 1873-1931
Yu, Guozhen	俞國楨, 1852-1932
Yu, Moses (Yu Ligong)	于力工, 1920-2010
Yui, David Z. T.	余日章, 1882-1936
Zhang, Boling	張伯苓, 1876-1951
Zhang, Gui-fu	張貴富, 1924-2001

Zhang, Ruli	張汝勵
Zhang, Ruzhou	張汝舟
Zhang, Wu-chen	張晤晨, 1915-1995
Zhang, Yu-lan	張郁嵐, 1901-1990
Zhao, Shiguang (Timothy Dzao)	趙世光
Zhao, Tian’en (Jonathan Chao)	趙天恩, 1938-2004
Zhao, Junying (Calvin Chao)	趙君影, 1906-1996
Zuo, Furu	左弗如, 1902-1979

On Sources and Terms

Throughout this dissertation, I use the term “Local Church” to refer to the group of Christians who are the subject of this research. It should be noted that the teachings of the leaders of this group forbids any extra designation, including the "Local Church". According to this teaching, the church should be referred to only as “the church in a specific locality” and nothing else. It is, however, not possible for academic research like this one to follow this usage without creating some confusion. My choice of “Local Church” is a convenient one for the following three reasons: 1) the lower-case “local church” is theologically acceptable to the members of these churches in the sense that the “universal church” only exists in a spiritual realm and the local church is what one can participate in the tangible world; 2) the term “Local Church” is frequently used in academic discussion and colloquial conversations, including sometimes by church members; 3) the name highlights one of the key doctrines to this group, the local ground of oneness, and echoes with the research theme of the global developments of Chinese Christianity.

The primary sources of the Local Church have not been properly archived yet. In this dissertation, I used rare sources and unpublished manuscripts that are stored (but not yet catalogued) in the archives of Taiwan Gospel Book Room and Living Stream Ministry office in Anaheim. Access to these sources remain restricted. Therefore, it may be hard for other researchers to find them and utilize them.

For Chinese names, a lot of Chinese people who appeared in this study have alternate spelling of their names given the different era or region in which they lived. It is also common for Chinese Christians to be known by their English name in English sources, e. g. Watchman Nee. In the glossary of terms, I list the more widely-used names in English

literature and try to include the lesser used names for identification. If a person's name has never appeared in English before, I use pinyin to spell.

Introduction

This study is a global history of the "Local Church" as a Christian trend originating in China. In the early 19th century, missionaries introduced Protestant Christianity to China, and their mission work became closely intertwined with China's modernization. At the turn of the 20th century, China witnessed the first generation of indigenous Christian leaders emerging on the national scene. One of these leaders was Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972). Starting with a single congregation in Fuzhou in 1922, Nee and his coworkers established about 500 churches nationwide by 1949 (about 7% of the total Chinese Protestant population). After the Chinese Civil War, however, the communist government cracked down on these churches and arrested Nee and several of his coworkers on the accusation of "counter-revolutionary" crimes. Many members fled mainland China and established congregations in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other overseas Chinese communities. Nee's distinctive ecclesiology of "one locality, one church" (or local ground of oneness) earned the an unofficial name, the "Local Church."

When senior leader Lee Changshou (Witness Lee, 1905-1997) brought the vision of local ground of oneness to the United States in 1962, his ministry became an early example of the phenomenon later called "reverse mission," a phenomenon of Christians from the global south migrating to the West and proselytizing residents in historically Christian societies. In the early 1980s, the Local Church in America had about 80 locations and 7,000 members. However, because of Lee's Chinese identity and the Local Church's unusual spiritual practices, a few countercult publications listed the Local Church as one of the "cults." The controversy found its way into US courts and never went away, even though a

court in the State of California ruled in favor of the Local Church in 1985 and determined the accusations as defamatory.

After China's reform and opening, the Chinese authorities detected large quantities of Bibles and Christian booklets sent by Local Church members. In 1982, the Local Church members in Dongyang County, Zhejiang, held an outdoor prayer gathering, protesting religious suppression in the area. The public security forces took the participants into custody and accused them of resisting with violence. Subsequently, the Chinese government referenced the countercult controversies sparked in the United States and labelled some Local Church members as *huhanpai* or the "Shouters." The Chinese authorities adopted the discourse of *xiejiao* or "evil cults" to their religious policies, creating a new conceptual tool to restrict various religious practices in the country.

The title, "The Recovery of Genuineness," attempts to capture both the fundamental ideal of the Local Church as a restorationist group and its contemporary efforts of defending itself against the accusation of being a cult. The churches started in the general atmosphere of anti-imperialism and indigenization. To respond to this atmosphere, the church leaders compounded various Western influences according to their own theological reflection on the genuine form of Christianity. One example was the teaching of the local ground of oneness. Because of the Chinese Civil War and other historical factors, Local Church members have brought this ideal and other "recoveries" to all corners of the world.

In pursuing the ideal of recovering to a genuine form of Christianity, the Local Church also met much opposition. The mixed reactions were intertwined with local responses to the cultural identities and transnational trajectories of the group. In both the contexts of 1970s

US and 1980s China, the label of "cult" was applied to some members of the Local Church, and the churches embarked on a long process of recovering its own reputation as a normal, authentic Christian church. This study traces the Local Church's interaction with different cultural settings and explores the significance of these fascinating encounters in different academic fields. It argues that the pursuit of restorationist ideals and arguments against cult accusations were more than religious procedures, but both "recoveries" were involved in complex socio-economic and cultural-political processes, and the unique combination of cross-cultural experiences of the Local Church was the key to its significance.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study draws upon and speaks to three distinct academic fields. The first notable one is the history of Christianity in China. One of the most prominent topics in this field has been the indigenization of Chinese Christianity. Western missionaries initiated the process of training native leaders and delegation of power in the prospect of building more independent churches. Influenced by anti-imperialism, Chinese believers eagerly pursued this process of replacing foreign sources with domestic supply in key areas, including funding, administrating, teaching, and theologizing. The process accelerated during the Republican period and was mandated by the newly established People's Republic of China in the early 1950s when the state expelled all foreign missionaries and began the struggle against any imperial infiltration. For decades, historians endeavoured to overcome the biases in missionary sources and highlight the subjectivity of Chinese Christians. Recent research represented the course of how Christians in China have battled cultural differences, colonialism, and xenophobia and strived for an independent church by and for native believers. Despite the hostile suppression during the mass mobilization era, the resurgence of

Christianity in the 1980s witnessed the fruits of indigenization. Interestingly, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the world has witnessed the PRC state gradually embracing the agenda of sinicizing Christianity and other world religions as the country's self-identity transforms.

Scholars in this field have recognized that the first half of the twentieth century was a transitional period for the indigenization of Christianity in China.[1] During this period, notable leaders and popular initiatives emerged within Chinese Protestant circles. In various ways, they sought more autonomy for Chinese Protestants from missionary influence and a more thorough contextualization of Christian teachings. Several individual revivalists, fundamentalist teachers, and independent movements from this period have received considerable scholarly attention due to their influence.[2] The Local Church was one of the earliest and most populous independent churches and contributed many lasting legacies to

[1] Alan Hunter and Kim-Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Daniel H. Bays, *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996); Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Xi Lian, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010) Rodney Stark and Xiuhua Wang. *A Star in the East: The Rise of Christianity in China* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2015); Fenggang Yang and J. E. E. Pettit, *Atlas of Religion in China: Social and Geographical Contexts* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018). This is the case also for academic works in Chinese and Japanese. Jonathan Chao and Rosanna Chong, *Dangdai zhongguo jidu jiao fazhan shi, 1949-1997* [*A History of Christianity in Socialist China, 1949-1997* (Taipei: CMI Publishing, 2011); Weihong Luo, *Zhongguo jidu jiao (xinjiao) shi* [History of Chinese Christianity (Protestantism)] (Shanghai: Renmin, 2014); Sumiko Yamamoto, *Chūgoku Kirisutokyō shi kenkyū* [History of Protestantism in China: The Indigenization of Christianity] (Tokyo: Tōhō Gakkai Institute of Eastern Culture, 2000.)

[2] For example, Christopher Payk, *Following Christ and Confucius: Wang Mingdao and Chinese Christianity*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024); Daryl Ireland, *John Song: Modern Chinese Christianity and the Making of a New Man (*Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020); Connie Anne Shemo, *The Chinese Medical Ministries of Kang Cheng and Shi Meiyu, 1872-1937: On a Cross-Cultural Frontier of Gender, Race, and Nation* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2011); Silas Wu, *Yu Cidu: er shi shiji zhongguo jiaohui fuxing de xianfeng* [Yu Cidu: The Pioneer of the Revival in Chinese Churches in the Twentieth century] (Boston, Pishon River Ministry, 2000); Silas Wu, *Li shuqing yisheng: zhongguo jiaohui fuxing de xiansheng* [Dr. Shuqing Li: A Vanguard of the Chinese church revival] (Boston Pishon River Ministry, 2010); Feiya Tao, *Zhonguo de jidu jiao wutuobang: yesu jiating, 1921-1952* [Christian Utopia in China: the Jesus family, 1921-1952] (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2004) Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *China and the True Jesus: Charisma and Organization in a Chinese Christian Church* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Chinese Christianity. Most scholarship to date, however, has been about the life and theology of the founder, Watchman Nee, but not more broadly about these churches or their development after Nee's arrest in 1952 or his death in prison in 1972.[3] These existing studies also mostly belong to the discipline of Christian theology where history only served as a background. This current study will try to do the reverse. The theological teachings will only be considered when they become an influential factor in the historical developments.

The second related field is the relationship between globalization and religion. In the second half of the twentieth century, anti-imperialist ideology and restrictive diplomatic policy dominated Chinese politics. Chinese Christians' communication with the outside world was very limited, making it easy to imagine indigenization as a closed process. In fact, the cultural interaction not only made Christianity more Chinese but also made Chinese Christians part of a global religion. While Chinese people gradually embrace Christianity in their cultural lives, Christianity continues to connect China to the world. Likewise, religious

[3] Some exceptions are journal articles noticing the Local Church's resurfacing in mainland China, especially after the accusation of "*xiejiao*." See Kristin Kupfer, "Christian-Inspired Groups in the People's Republic of China After 1978: Reaction of State and Party Authorities." *Social Compass* 51, no. 2 (2004): 273-286; Edmond Tang, "'Yeller' and Healers: Pentecostalism and the Study of Grassroots Christianity in China," in Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang ed., *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2011), 379-394; Yi Liu, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's Ministry," *Asia Journal of Theology* 30, no. 1 (2016): 96-114; Zimmerman-Liu, Teresa and Teresa Wright. "What is in a Name? A Comparison of being branded a Religious Cult in the United States and the People's Republic of China: Witness Lee and the Local Churches." *Journal of Church and State* 60, no. 2 (May 1, 2018): 187-207. Because of their prominence in Taiwan, some surveys of Protestantism in Taiwan covered the movement in passing. See Hollington Tong, *Christianity in Taiwan: a history* (Taipei: China Post, 1961); Allen Swanson, *Taiwan: Mainline versus Independent Church Growth* (South Pasadena, Calif. William Carey Libr. 1970); Dorothy Raber, *Protestantism in Changing Taiwan: A Call to Creative Response* (Pasadena Calif: William Carrey, 1978); Murray Rubinstein, *The Protestant Community on Modern Taiwan: Mission, Seminary, and Church* (Armonk, N. Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1991); Kuo, Cheng-tian. *Religion and Democracy in Taiwan*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008).

trends in China are not phenomena isolated from global influence. The Pentecostal movement, which is as vibrant in China as in other places, is a good example.[4]

As one of a few Christian churches that originated in China and flourished overseas since 1949, the Local Church has been full of cultural hybridization. It is, therefore, a valuable case study through which to understand how religious groups propagate and situate themselves in different cultural settings and how they interact with other global flows. The study of globalization is now a highly diversified field that focuses on regional case studies rather than general patterns. While the flow of capital and labor are usually accounted as the driving factors of globalization, religious pilgrimage, propagation, and persecution should not be ignored as one of the forces behind immigration, financial streams, and cultural exchange.[5] Among the many academic works on the relationship between globalization and religious groups, some have focused on Chinese Christians overseas in America and Southeast Asia and have provided valuable references to the current study.[6]

Roland Robertson famously argued that two strategic steps– generalization in exporting and customization in importing– are crucial in the dual process of "glocalization."[7]

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4 Fenggang Yang, *Global Chinese Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity* (Boston: Brill, 2017); Amos Yang, *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Ada, MI: Baker: 2005).

5 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997); C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004); Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994); Peter Beyer. *Religions in Global Society* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

6 Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Yuqin Huang and I-hsin Hsiao, "Chinese Evangelists on the Move: Space, Authority, and Ethnicisation among Overseas Chinese Protestant Christians." *Social Compass* 62, no. 3 (2015): 379-395; Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation and Adhesive identities* (University Park, PA.: Penn State University Press, 1998); Wesley Stephen Woo, "Protestant Work among the Chinese in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1850-1920 (California)." (Ph. D. Diss. Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1984); Jean Elizabeth DeBernardi, *Christian Circulations: Global Christianity and the Local Church in Penang and Singapore, 1819-2000* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020); Jean Uy Uayan, *A Study of the Emergence and Early Development of Selected Protestant Chinese Churches in the Philippines* (Carlisle, UK: Langham, 2017).

7 Roland Robertson, *Globalization* (London: Sage, 1992).

According to this theory, the idea of "one locality, one church" was initially a local customization for China, a rejection of the division among Christian denominations and the imperial interests behind them. During the propagation of this ideal, the church's generalized claims of biblical authority and institutional simplicity appealed to Christians around the world. This dual quality was one of the reasons for the Local Church's success. In addition to its obvious cultural hybridity, the Local Church has demonstrated a strong tendency to use print materials to establish a shared identity among the churches in different countries.[8] This characteristic of transnationalism has not always benefitted the Local Church. In both the United States and the People's Republic of China, local resistance to the Local Church has attached arbitrary labels such as "Eastern" or "foreign" due to its transnational characteristics. The Local Church case shows that localization does not always transfer to globality, and being globalized or transnational is not a quality to be welcomed everywhere. This study will look at both the positive and negative effects of the globalization of religion and how they influenced the history of the Local Church.

The third field is the evolution of Chinese religious policy. The "Shouters" incident in 1982 coincided with the proclamation of "The Basic Viewpoint on the Religious Questions during our Country's Socialist Period" or the so-called Document 19 as the foundational articulation of China's religious policy in the Reform and Opening period.[9] Document 19 acknowledged the fact that religions existed in Chinese society and would not disappear in a short amount of time. It reasserted the constitutional freedom of religious belief with some conditions and provided a set of ground rules as the country stepped out of the shadow of the

[8] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).
[9] Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 8-25.

Cultural Revolution. The Reform and Opening period was a time when the country was exploring new ways to interact with religious practitioners and their activities while maintaining control. This current study argues that the encounter between the PRC state and the Local Church contributed to a new paradigm of religious policy. During this encounter, Chinese officials adopted the "*xiejiao*" category from international countercult discourse and applied it to not just the Local Church members but also to other underground Christians, Buddhist sectarians, qigong practitioners, and followers of various new religious movements.

The argument puts this study in dialogue with the school of "anthropology of secularism" inspired by the research of Talal Asad (1932-). This school argues that modern states have used different ways to nurture a secular public sphere and subordinate religious activities when needed. In some cases, the political and legal establishment developed for tolerance and religious freedom can be appropriated for this purpose.[10] In Chinese studies, historians have pointed out that there was a shift in the terminology used to categorize and regulate religious activities during the transition from late imperial to Republican China. During this change from the binary of "orthodox/heterodox" to "religion/superstition,"[11] the state maintained its supremacy over religion through this transformation of political discourse. This study proposes that another transition occurred in the 1980s and 90s, where a

[10] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). Some examples of applying Asad's argument in the national contexts of China, Egypt, and Turkey can be found in Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2009); Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
[11] Prasenjit Duara. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009); Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

new binary of "normal religious activity/*xiejiao*" replaced the language of revolution in the high-socialism period.

General analyses indicate that the political turning points in 1911, 1949, and 1979 were decisive for all religious practitioners, including followers of major, minor, and popular religions.[12] Studies on contemporary issues often focus more on the dilemma between the imported idea of religious freedom and a tradition of state dominance.[13] The case studies on other underground Christian groups, Qigong practitioners, the Church of Almighty God, and Falun Gong provided immediate references to the present study.[14] One central question is about the continuity and discontinuity in the current paradigm. A significant interpretation is to argue that the current paradigm is inherited much from the imperial tradition of how to define and regulate orthodox/heterodox religions. My study argues that, in parallel with that interpretation, the current paradigm also borrowed Western terminology and discourse to reinforce state secularism and limit religious participation in civil society.

Sources and Methodology

Watchman Nee and his followers criticized denominationalism, which means that the group never recognized any designation beyond "the church in (name of the locality)."

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[12] Donald E. McInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989); Paul R. Katz and Meir Shahar, *Religion in China & its Modern Fate* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2014).

[13] Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin. *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004); Daniel Overmyer, *Religion in China Today*. The China Quarterly Special Issues (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[14] Ronald C. Keith and Zhiqiu Lin, "The "Falun Gong Problem": Politics and the Struggle for the Rule of Law in China" *The China Quarterly* 175 (2003): 623-642; David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); David A Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Yalin Xin, *Inside China's House Church Network: The Word of Life Movement and its Renewing Dynamic* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2009); Emily Dunn, *Lightning from the East: Heterodoxy and Christianity in Contermporary China* (Boston: Brill, 2015).

Throughout history, outsiders have used many names for the Local Church, like the "Assembly Hall," "Little Flock," "Local Church," and "Shouters." These names demonstrate that, until now, the public images of these churches were determined by outsiders and based on secondary (if not unsubstantiated) sources. Although these bynames have their discursive value, they are fragmented and one-sided at best. Therefore, it is vital for this study to go to primary sources and to disclose who this group of Christians were according to their own words.

The largest repositories of manuscripts, tape recordings, and other materials related to the history of this group are in the editorial office of the Gospel Book Room in Taipei and the Living Stream Ministry in Anaheim, CA. Watchman Nee and Witness Lee personally founded these two publishers to disseminate their writings, and they participated in the regular job of editing, printing, and publishing. The Living Stream Ministry compiled The *Collected Works of Watchman Nee* (62 volumes, 1992; hereafter CWWN) and the *Collected Works of Witness Lee* (138 volumes, 2019; hereafter CWWL), the most complete collections of their writings. The contents are primarily Christian messages and teachings addressed to a faith community. Still, one can find critical historical materials in them, including the overarching narrative of these churches according to the leading figures. In addition to these compilations, in chapters 1 to 4, I have relied heavily on members' memoirs, correspondences, and church newsletters published in China, Taiwan and America. Some of these materials are already in CWWN, CWWL, and the publisher's archives; others appeared in personal collections or in publication through Christian publishers.

The modern countercult movement in the US was where one might find the roots of the harshest criticisms against the Local Church. Chapter 5 is a study of the Local Church's

involvement in this movement. The study is based on the record of the early discovery process and depositions stored in the Living Stream Ministry archive. To balance the evidence, I also consulted resources from the countercult camp, including research manuscripts, tracts, and publisher communications. Chapter 6 studies the resurgence and suppression of the Local Church in mainland China according to government papers and oral history. Documents published by the United Front Work Department, Religious Affairs Bureau, and Public Security Department, when available, reflect the official standpoint. These governmental offices worked closely with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) of the Protestant churches in China and the China Christian Council (CCC). These two organizations served (then and now) as mediators of official policy to Christian audiences. Their publications often include comments critical of the Local Church. Another question is how much these propagandistic circulations represent Chinese Christians' opinions. Beyond China proper, the Chinese Church Research Center in Hong Kong reported the suppression of the shouters from its initial stages. International Human Rights Watch also approached and interviewed many Chinese Christians, including the Local Church, allegedly persecuted by the government.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter 1. "Assembly Hall": Watchman Nee and the Indigenization of Chinese Christianity, 1922-1937

This chapter explores the foundational years of the Local Church in China. In 1922, Watchman Nee established the first meeting point in Fuzhou. He later relocated to Shanghai and developed the Local Church into a national phenomenon before the start of the Sino-

Japanese War. The Local Church began not only in the context of indigenization and anti-imperialism but also reacted to other global Christian trends, including revivalism, ecumenism, fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism. During the process of expansion and seeking support, Local Church leaders had frequent interactions with Western Christians. Amidst these communications, their insistence upon the "one locality, one church" teaching was based on confident theological reflection on the reality as seen in the Chinese mission field. This case provides an exploration of the relationship between the Local Church and the indigenization of Chinese Christianity. In addition to tracing Nee's journey in establishing these churches, this chapter also draws from contemporary biographies, Christian newspapers and magazines, and correspondence published by the Local Church to reconstruct the scale and key characteristics of the Local Church in the 1930s.

Chapter 2. "Little Flock": Surviving the WWII and Cold War, 1937-1958

This chapter explores how the Local Church members strived to survive the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Civil War and how they adapted to the early stage of the People's Republic of China. During this period, Watchman Nee's leadership was noticeably absent for various reasons. The extensive warfare and complicated political situation created many challenges for Chinese Christians as well as the Local Church; however, these challenges did not hinder the overall growth of the Local Church and the emergence of local leadership. This chapter tries to bring in a new perspective by highlighting the lives of other representative coworkers. I utilized biographical materials and oral histories to discuss these Chinese Christians and their experiences of dealing with the challenges of internal conflicts, war desolation, and political cooptation. This chapter emphasizes the dilemma between Nee

and his capable companions, the prospect of a national phenomenon, and the promise of local administration, religious ideals and social and political reality.

Chapter 3. “Local Church”: Propagation to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, 1949-1962

At the end of the Chinese Civil War, many Local Church members fled China and found refuge in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asian cities. From 1949 to 1954, the churches in these localities saw a significant increase in membership. As the most prominent coworker who left China, Witness Lee emerged as the leader of the overseas branch. However, some coworkers in Taiwan, Manila, and Singapore disagreed with Lee’s leadership and his strict application of the local ground of oneness doctrine. These people looked up to T. Austin-Sparks, Nee’s previous associate in the West, as an alternative. This chapter argues that the search for new leadership in Nee’s absence is also a search for the church’s identity in the diaspora. To reconstruct this history and to find deeper reasons for the expansion and schism, this chapter utilizes *The Ministry of The Word, Church News,* and other Local Church publications.

Chapter 4. “Living Stream”: the Reverse Mission to the United States, 1962-1974

Amidst the schism, Witness Lee migrated to the United States in 1962. Instead of working among immigrant Chinese, he turned to American Christians who were familiar with Watchman Nee’s English writings. Over the next five years, the Local Church in the United States added about 5,000 American members. Starting in 1968, Witness Lee encouraged churches in East and Southeast Asia and the US to visit each other and build a strong cross-Pacific relationship. This relationship and Witness Lee’s original teachings help

nurture a new church culture composed of fresh spiritual practices. In this chapter, I argue that the Local Church in the US is a form of "reverse mission" and discuss Witness Lee's strategy of entering the American religious market. He skillfully represented the Local Church as a fresh alternative to mainline Christianity as the declining "old religion." However, this discourse invited hostility from fellow Christians. The churches lost their growing momentum in the early 1970s due to hostility from the environment, a lack of qualified personnel to sustain expansion, and the general decline of the Christian population in America.

Chapter 5. The "God-Men": Struggling against the Label of "Cult" in the US, 1975-1985

The Local Church struggled against the charges from the modern countercult movement between 1977 and 1985. The countercult movement emerged against the backdrop of the 1960s counterculture and religious pluralism. From 1975 to 1978, several books appeared listing Witness Lee and the Local Church in the US as one of the "cults," accusing them of heterodox teaching and forceful control of members. In response, Lee and the church in Los Angeles filed libel lawsuits against the authors and publishers of two of the books. The court ruling favoring the Local Church did not eradicate these accusations; quite the reverse, the countercultists reached out to the renascent Three-Self Patriotic Movement in China, and the two parties cooperated in their attempt to suppress the Local Church. This chapter uses court documents, news clips, and countercult publications to analyze the encounter between the Local Church and the countercult movement and how the countercult discourse spread globally. Among other reasons, I especially argue that racism was a factor that led to the Local Church being labelled as cultic.

Chapter 6. “Shouters”: Negotiation with the Chinese state in the Reform and Opening period, 1978-2001

Like many other Christians, the Local Church in China primarily operated underground during the Cultural Revolution years. When Deng Xiaoping kickstarted the Reform and Opening period in 1978, the transition created long-awaited breathing space for religious practitioners while creating many challenges for government control. This chapter describes the renewed conflict and negotiation between the PRC state and the Local Church as the overseas members tried to reconnect with China. It argues that the encounter not only initiated new rounds of suppression but also provided a new discourse and paradigm for the regulation of religion. This chapter highlights the Local Church’s role as a medium of this discourse and argues that this imported influence is no less important than the domestic imperial tradition in terms of inspiring the current paradigm of “*xiejiao* v. normal religious activities.”

From the original goal of finding the genuine form of Christianity to the recent defence that this form is genuine Christianity, the Local Church faced many challenges and responded creatively in different cultural settings and historical contexts. During the global expansion, the churches accumulated both capital and liabilities by carrying transnational experiences and hybridized identities. This study of the Local Church provided a distinct example of twentieth-century history and contributed to our understanding of World Christianity, the globalization of religion, and contemporary Chinese policy.

Chapter 1 "Assembly Hall": Watchman Nee and the Indigenization of Chinese Christianity, 1922-1937

This chapter explores the foundational period (1922-1937) of the "Local Church," a group of new Christian churches in China.[1] It commences with the establishment of the inaugural congregation in Fuzhou and concludes with the churches gaining national momentum before the outbreak of the Second World War. During this time, Chinese people underwent turbulent political and economic situations caused by frequent military conflicts. The challenge of modernization and the accompanying social transformation stimulated many to navigate different ideological trends. Within this context, the Chinese Protestants intensely pursued the goal of indigenization while grappling with evolving global Christian trends. This chapter argues that the birth of the Local Church reflected these directions.

Numerous studies have examined the life and theology of the founder of the Local Church, Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972).[2] Some of these studies also

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[1] About the usage of "Local Church" as a designator for this movement, please refer to "On Sources and Terms" on page vii.

[2] Nee's life was well documented in the many Chinese and English biographies written by his relatives, Local Church members, and missionary friends since the 1970s. See Zhongdao Chen, *Wo de jiufu Ni Tuosheng* [My Uncle Watchman Nee] (Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 1970); James Chen, *Ni Tuosheng dixiong jian shi* [A brief history of brother Watchman Nee] (Hong Kong: Gospel Book Room, 1973); Leslie T. Lyall, *Three of China's Mighty Men* (London: Overseas Missionary Fellowship Books, 1973); Angus I. Kinnear *Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee* (Victory Press, 1974); Witness Lee, *Jin shidai shensheng qishi de xianjian* [Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation] Taipei: Taiwan Gospel Book Room, 1991). A renewed debate about Nee's late years and his relationship with the Chinese government appeared in 2004-2005. See Kalun Leung, *Ni Tuosheng de rong ru sheng chu* [The Rise and Fall of Watchman Nee] (Hong Kong: Qiaoxin, 2004); Zhongmin Yu et al. *Dui zai pidou Ni Tuosheng de ping yi* [A fair discussion of the renewed struggle against Watchman Nee] (Hong Kong: Golden Lampstand, 2004); Silas Wu, *Puo ke fei teng: Ni Tuosheng de beiqiu yu shuibian* [Ascend from cocoon: Watchman Nee's imprisonment and metamorphosis] (Taiwan, Pishon River, 2004); Fuk-Tsang Ying, *Fandi Aiguo Shu ling ren: Ni Tuosheng yu jidutu juhuichu yianjiu* [Anti-imperialism, Patriotism, and the Spiritual Man: A Study on Watchman Nee and the "Little Flock"] (Hong Kong: Christian Study Center on Chinese Religion and Culture, 2005). In recent years, more miscellaneous accounts were revealed in *Ni Tuosheng Huainian Teji* [Special collection in memorial of Watchman Nee] (Hong Kong: Found Treasure, 2010) and Jennifer Lin, *Shanghai Faithful: Betrayal and Forgiveness in a Chinese Christian Family* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

encompassed aspects of the history of the Local Church.[3] A central inquiry today revolves around the Chinese identity of Watchman Nee as a theologian and of the Local Church as a Christian movement.[4] To what extent can Watchman Nee and the Local Church be characterized as "indigenous" or "contextual"? This chapter discusses how the Local Church evolved into a national phenomenon based on internal and external archival sources. Furthermore, it incorporates recent research to position the Local Church within the broader context of global Christianity, including the development of revivalism, fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism. The argument advanced is that, in response to challenges encountered in the Chinese mission field, Watchman Nee and the Local Church developed distinctive practices and teachings that resonated with contemporary trends and were able to reach a broader audience within China and beyond.

About Nee's theology, preliminary research efforts began with Dana Roberts, *Understanding Watchman Nee* (Plainfield: Haven Books, 1980) and Ken Ang Lee, "Watchman Nee: A Study of His Major Theological Themes" (Ph.D. Diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1989). Since the early 1990, more works situated Nee in the context of Twentieth-century China. See Luke Pei-Yuan Lu, "Watchman Nee's Doctrine of the Church with Special Reference to its Contribution to the Local Church Movement" (Ph.D. Diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992); Yuan-wei Liao, "Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from a Lutheran Perspective" (Ph.D. Diss., Luther Seminary, 1997); Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces that Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Ph.D. Diss., Boston University, 2000). Dongsheng John Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee: Spirituality, Knowledge, and Formation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012). For a review of the English scholarship on Watchman Nee until the early 2000s, see Ronggang Guo, "Xifang Ni Tuosheng zhi yianjiu, 1972-2006" [Academic Study of Watchman Nee in the West, 1972-2006] (Ph. D. Diss. Fujian Normal University, 2006).

[3] Several studies on Watchman Nee also devoted significant attention to the Local Church movement in China. See Norman Cliff, "The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee, including a Study of the Little Flock Movement which He Founded (China, Sects)" (Master's Thesis, Open University, 1983); Jiafu Li, "Ni Tuosheng yu zhongguo difang jiaohui yundong [Watchman Nee and the Chinese "Local Church" Movement" (Master's Thesis, National Taiwan Normal University, 2001).

[4] Some scholarship connected Watchman Nee and the indigenization theme by arguing for the hidden Chinese element in his spiritual theology. This was especially through the compatibility of the Taoist idea of *wuwei* (無為) and Nee's emphasis on "effortless" victory over sin, a central theme of the Keswick Conventions. For example, see Chin Ken Pa, "The Theological anthropology of Watchman Nee: in the context of Taoist tradition," *Sino-Christian Studies,* no. 12 (Dec 2011), 159-187; Paul H. B. Chang, "The Spiritual human is discerned by no one: An intellectual biography of Watchman Nee" (Ph. D. Diss. University of Chicago, 2019).

The Context of Protestantism in China and the Paths to Indigenization in the Early Twentieth Century

The first quarter of the twentieth century is often considered the "golden age" of Protestant missions in the Chinese field.[5] Between 1905 and 1920, the number of missionaries jumped from 3500 to the highest record of 8000, and Chinese Protestants grew five times from 100,000 to about 500,000.[6] The Boxer Uprising (1899-1900) was widely covered in the Western world, and the dramatic martyrdom stories during this tumult led to an influx of new missionaries. To sustain the empire, the struggling Qing court adopted a final series of reforms, many originally advocated by Christian missionaries, including representative democracy and modern education. The Republic of China's establishment in 1911 further encouraged optimism about the future of Christianity in China.

The escalated impact of the Protestant missions manifested in many social organizations they built.[7] To preach Christian civilization, the missionaries established medical schools and hospitals, schools and universities, news services and publishing houses, and social service agencies to help people with disabilities and addictions. Throughout the Republican period, these institutions were the best in the country and constituted an enormous enterprise that one historian called the "Sino-Foreign Protestant establishment."[8] Besides transmitting Western culture, this missionary enterprise created an alternative route

[5] Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 92-120
[6] Ibid, 94
[7] Ibid, 94.
[8] Ibid. 92-120. For the missionary enterprise in China see John K. Fairbank ed., *The Missionary Enterprise in China and America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); Daniel Bays and Ellen Widmer ed. *China's Christian Colleges: Cross-Cultural Connections, 1900-1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Jessie G. Lutz, *China and the Christian Colleges: 1850-1950* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971); Jun Xing, *Baptized in the Fire of Revolution: the American Social Gospel and the YMCA in China* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1996).

of social mobility. In these new institutions, many Chinese people found an education system and career path to prepare themselves for the fast-modernizing society; some also found enduring faith and a feeling of belonging. The missionary enterprise was a go-to source for Chinese people who wanted to gain experiences and perspectives of the West.[9] These experiences for Chinese Christians were not entirely pleasant. The missionaries often paternalized the native believers and downplayed their contribution to the church. The bamboo ceiling was real.

These factors pushed for the indigenization of Christianity in China. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the missionaries in China started to share the vision of indigenization and adopted the "three-self" ideals of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation.[10] The new Republic of China's constitution protected religious freedom, through which the Chinese Protestants were promised to gain more autonomy and possible ownership of church properties. Improving education, theological equipment, social status, and political awareness also encouraged them to pursue more participation and share of leadership. To find the best way to indigenize Christianity, a group of Chinese Protestant elites, using Yenching University as a base, debated passionately in two monthly magazines, *Life* and *Wenshe.*[11] Church leaders in the field also experimented with different routes to

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[9] One specimen was the graduates of *Wenhuiguan* or Tengchow College in Shandong. Most of this Presbyterian college's students came from rural settings; yet they moved to cities and earned teaching positions after graduation. Some of them became devout Christians and started their Shandong Chinese Independent Christian Church. See Daniel H. Bays, "A Chinese Christian 'Public Sphere'? Socioeconomic Mobility and the Formation of Urban Middle-Class Protestant Communities in the Early Twentieth Century," in Kenneth Lieberthal, Shuen-fu Lin, and Ernest P. Young, eds, *Constructing China: The Interaction of Culture and Economics* (Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies, the University of Michigan, 1997), 101–117.
[10] Originally articulated by two senior missionaries and missiologists Henry Venn (Church Missionary Society, 1796-1872) and Rufus Anderson (American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1796-1880).
[11] See Shijie Zha, "Min chu jidujiao Shengming she chu tan (1919-1937)" [A Preliminary Investigation of the Protestant "Life Fellowship" in the Early Republic Period (1919-1937,] *Taida lishixue bao* 16, no. 8 (1991): 181-204; Peter Chen-Main Wang, "Contextualizing Protestant Publishing in China: The Wenshe, 1924-1928" in

independence and optimized their social distance from the missions considering the emerging critique of their imperial correlations.[12]

Another way for Chinese Protestants to play a larger and more independent role was to become travelling evangelists or revivalists. Religious revivals are difficult to locate and define. They often occur as a concentrated increase of spiritual interest and piety, sometimes expressed in emotional repentance and lifestyle renewal. Most revivals grew out of a context of dissatisfaction with spiritual superficiality and formalism.[13] For Protestantism in the early twentieth century, the Welsh revival in 1904-05 was one explosive and abrupt example, involving the conversion of more than 100,000 residents in less than a year.[14] According to Jonathan Goforth (1859-1936) and other missionaries, the Asian current of revival passed from Korea to Manchuria to northern China late in the first decade of the 1900s. More recent scholarship suggests that quasi-revivals were already widespread after the Boxer Uprising.[15] Over the next twenty years, revival meetings became a popular tool across different sectors

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Daniel Bays ed. *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 292-306. Notable individuals include Yu Rizhang (David Z. T. Yui, 1882-1936), Wang Zhengting (1882-1961), Liu Ting-fang (Timothy Liu, 1892-1947), Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao, 1888-1979), Hung Ye (William Hung, 1893-1980), Wu Leichuan (1870-1944), Xu Baoqian (1892-1944), and Wang Zhixin (1881-1968).

[12] Some movements in central and northern China alleged that indigenization required independence from foreign missions. Yu Guozhen's (1852-1932) Chinese Independent Protestant Church, based in Shanghai, was the biggest. Its founding document demanded strongly to eliminate "foreign coloring" of Christianity. The CIPC expanded quickly after splitting from its milder predecessor, Christian Union. In the north, Zhang Boling (1876-1951), an educator and founder of Nankai University, represented the Chinese Christian Church in Beijing and Tianjin and inspired the Shandong Chinese Independent Christian Church in Qingdao. Through candid negotiations these independent churches maintained a cordial relationship with and, sometime, received generous offers from their mother missions. These independent churches often formed leagues with each other and across denominational backgrounds, echoing the ecumenical hope of the age.

[13] See Michael J. McClymond, "Evangelicals, Revival and Revivalism" in Andrew Atherstone ed., *The Routledge Research Companion to the History of Evangelicalism Routledge* (New York: Routledge, 2018) https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315613604-5. Accessed on 16 Dec 2020.

[14] Edward J. Gitre, "The 1904-05 Welsh Revival: Modernization, Technologies, and Techniques of the Self" *Church History* 73 no. 4 (Dec. 2004): 792-827.

[15] Silas Wu, *Yu Cidu: Ershi shiji zhongguo jiaohui fuxing de xian feng* [Dora Yu: Harbinger of Christian Church Revival in 20th century China] (Taipei: Pishon River Publications, 2000), 120-123.

of Chinese Christianity. The typical revival session often lasted for ten or more days, and one could expect to witness public confession and reconciliation, audible spontaneous prayers mixed with sobs and groans, falling on one's knees and face, exhaustive weeping and ecstasy. Some early representative revivalists included Li Shuqing (1875-1908), Shi Meiyu (1873-1954), Yu Cidu (Dora Yu, 1873-1931,) and Wang Zhizheng (1910-1987).[16] Together with like-minded missionaries, they formed a constellation of gifted speakers and revivalists that became influential nationally and inspired the founders of the Local Church.

Revivalism, Anti-Denominationalism, and the Birth of the Local Church in Fuzhou, 1922-1924

The traits of the indigenization of Chinese Protestantism can be easily found in Fuzhou city, one of the country's most prosperous Christian communities and the birthplace of the Local Church. Christianity arrived long before the city's opening as one of the five treaty ports following the Opium War. The Nestorians were the first to set foot in the Yuan dynasty, followed by the Franciscans, Jesuits, and Dominicans in the Ming, and the Protestant missions in the mid-nineteenth century. In the next one hundred years, three Protestant mission societies cultivated this field the most: the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM, Congregationalist), the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), and the Church Mission Society (CMS, Anglican). In 1925, after decades of violent conflict and laborious negotiations, the number of Christian

[16] Silas Wu, *Li Shuqing Yisheng: Ershi shiji zhongguo jiaohui fuxing de xiansheng* [Dr. Li Shu-qing: Pioneer of Chinese Church revivals in the twentieth century] (Taipei: Pishon River Publications, 2010); Connie Ann Shemo, *The Chinese medical ministries of Kang Cheng and Shi Meiyu, 1872-1937* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2011); Moses Yu, *Xifang xuanjiao yundong yu zhongguo jiaohui zhi xingqi* [Western Mission movement and the rise of Chinese Church](Taipei: Olive, 2006); Moses Yu, *Yejin Tianmin* [From night to dawn] (Taipei: Olive, 2001).

communicants surpassed 40,000.[17] At the beginning of the Republic of China, the Protestant community essentially reached a peaceful relationship with the local society. The political liberalism and urban civility they proposed were popular, manifested in the success of the YMCA as a leading social association and several active Chinese believers prospered in provincial politics. A Chinese Methodist preacher brought the trending revivalism to Fujian province as early as 1907 and gathered about 6,000 people in Hsinghua prefecture (today's Putian). One young boy in the crowd later became China's most famous evangelist, Song Shangjie (John Sung, 1901-1944).

Right at this Protestantism enclave, Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee, 1903-1972), Wang Zai (Leland Wang, 1898-1975) and a group of students from the Anglican St. Mark College started the Local Church in the summer of 1922. Watchman Nee was from a Christian family, and his grandfather was a preacher. His mother, Lin He-ping (1880-1950), was a model of the new womanhood characterized by social agency, higher education, and patriotism.[18] She attended a mission school in Shanghai and studied alongside the later Madame Sun Yat-sen, Soong Qing-ling (1893-1981). At a young age, Lin devoted herself to YWCA activities and patriotic movements. However, she had a radical conversion after listening to Dora Yu's message. Her transformation influenced Watchman Nee's conversion in 1920.

Before converting to Christianity, Nee was a fashionable college student; he was gifted and charismatic yet indolent. After experiencing a radical conversion himself, Nee gathered

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[17] Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of A Modern China, 1857-1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 18, 20, 23.
[18] For Lin Heping's life, see her autobiography *En ai biaoben* [A Specimen of Grace and Love] (Shanghai: Unknown publisher, 1943) and Jennifer Lin, *Shanghai Faithful: Betrayal and Forgiveness in a Chinese Christian Family* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 81-88.

several schoolmates in his passionate evangelism on campus.[19] Leland Wang was the older brother of one of these students; he gave up his career as a navy officer and returned to Fuzhou as a full-time preacher through the influence of his pious fiancé.[20] Nee and Wang bonded through a Bible class held in Nee's house. Before becoming serious Christians, they both shared nationalist sentiments to despise the status quo of Chinese Christianity. Nee used to participate in patriotic parades on campus and considered Chinese preachers to be "trifling and base" concerning money matters, and Wang determined not to become a "running dog of the foreigners."[21] It is not known how this sentiment shaped their subsequent establishment of an independent church.

The study partners decided to drop some common church practices they deemed unscriptural and harmful. Their first targets were baptism and the Lord's Supper. According to their study, they agreed that it was more biblical to practice baptism by consent and immersion (as opposed to both infant baptism and baptism by sprinkling) and to hold a weekly Lord's table service (as opposed to seasonal or occasional eucharist). Both sacraments should be accessible to all genuine believers and serviced by genuine believers only (as opposed to the distinction made in denominational churches between lay membership and ordained clergy).[22] Nee and the Wang couple secretly arranged to "break the

[19] These school mates include Wei Guangxi (K. H. Weigh, 1902-1989), Miao Shaoxun (Simon Meek, ?-?), Lu Zhongxin (Faithful Luke, ?-?), and Wang Zhi (Wilson Wang, 1903-1998).
[20] Leland Wang's wife became a devout Christian after attending a revival meeting held by Dora Yu's close coworker, Ruth Paxson (1889-1949), of YWCA. See Silas Wu, *Dora Yu,* 159-162, 198.
[21] Watchman Nee, "The First Testimony: Salvation and Calling" in the *Collected Works of Watchman Nee* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1992, from now on CWWN) 26:453; Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: the Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 160.
[22] Nee and other Local Church members agree that the "born-again" experience proposed by evangelical Christians is necessary for one to qualify as a Christian. In the Local Church's use of terms, "genuine believer" means the opposite of nominal Christians and modernists.

bread" in Wang's residence on one Sunday evening in March 1922. This event is often considered the beginning of the Local Church.[23]

Nee and Wang next considered about anti-denominationalism.[24] The social significance of the two sacraments was for the believer to break away from past cultural and societal ties and join the church as a new community. By opposing how others performed the sacraments, they were practically suggesting an immigration of membership. Facing pushback, the two further contended against the propriety of holding denominational membership in the first place. As the world's largest mission field in the twentieth century, China had numerous mission societies working in proximity. Their doctrinal differences, national affiliation, and funding patronage necessitated these mission societies to function independently and sometimes in competition with each other. This situation frustrated some Chinese Protestants, who did not appreciate the lack of unity among the denominations. Individually speaking, Wang had little to no denominational connection, but Nee's family was well-connected with all three denominations in Fuzhou: his grandfather was one of the earliest Chinese preachers in ABCFM, his immediate family were active members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and Nee himself studied at an Anglican college.[25] According to Nee's self-description, his decision to withdraw from his church membership was based on Biblical inspiration. His mother was concerned about family friendship with the congregation but eventually got on board, and the whole family followed.

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[23] The exact date of this event is never released.
[24] The Local Church teaching turned to the Moravian church and Plymouth Brethren as previous examples in church history of meeting without denominational grounds. See Watchman Nee, "What are we?" CWWN 11:843-860.
[25] Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* 55-66.

The input of an independent missionary, Margaret E. Barber, was crucial to this process. Miss Barber was the person who baptized Watchman Nee and his mother in 1921. She came to China in 1895 as a missionary with the Church Missionary Society in the Fuzhou region but resigned due to personal strife and disillusionment. Returning to England, she became involved with an independent church, the Surrey Chapel in Norwich, pastored by Robert Govett (1803-1901) and David Panton (1870-1955), who also preached baptism by immersion and anti-denominationalism. Barber returned to China in 1909 as a faith missionary and started a solitary ministry outside of Fuzhou city.[26] A few young Christians, including Nee and Wang, went to her regularly for Bible study and spiritual guidance. By introducing Nee to much Christian literature in the West, she helped shape the theological outlook of the Local Church and joined Dora Yu and Lin He-ping as the third mother figure in Watchman Nee's spiritual formation. When Nee asked her about the practice of denominational membership, she confirmed his doubts by saying that she was afraid, although enlisted in the "book of life" (the cover title of many church registers), "many are dead, and not a few are perishing."[27]

Nee and Wang's shared passion for evangelism soon yielded fruit. Before they came together, Wang used to address crowds by ringing bells and giving soapbox speeches, and Nee would paste posters and spread handouts in the marketplace. After gathering with their

[26] The faith mission principle is a mission carried out without promised funding. Those who practice the faith principle believes that provision will come through if their work is recognized by providence. For more on the development of faith mission principle see Klaus Fiedler, *The Story of Faith Missions* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1994); for faith missions in Republican China, especially among independent missionaries and Pentecostals, see R. G. Tiedemann, *Handbook of Christianity in China. vol. 2, 1800 to the Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 536-543. For the process of how M. E. Barber and Watchman Nee got in touch with this brethren idea, see Robert Bernard Dann, *Father of Faith Missions: The Life and Times of Anthony Norris Groves* (Authentic Media, 2004).

[27] Witness Lee, *A Seer*, 42.

schoolmates, they started to launch "gospel marches" in the marketplace, singing hymns while wearing white vests with red slogans. The method was fresh and effective, and they immediately attracted enough audience to invite a guest speaker from out of town. Li Yuanru's (Ruth Lee, 1894-1969) visit in January 1923 triggered an unprecedented "Fuzhou revival" in Nee's account. [28] Without a revivalist resume, she nonetheless attracted hundreds of people to carry their stools to listen to her speaking on "the assurance of salvation" in a pavilion in the Cangshan district,

The enthusiasm did not stop when Lee departed. While other revivalists seldom claimed followers of their own because that would exacerbate their relationship with existing churches, Wang and Nee started a new congregation. Having already cut their denominational links, they moved the bread-breaking meeting from Wang's residence to a veranda building to accommodate hundreds of new converts. Outside the three units they rented was a modest banner, "Christian Assembly Hall" (*Jidutu juhui chu*).

A pressing matter for this new church was how to identify itself and establish a polity. Different responses to these matters led to a schism between Nee and Wang. The key points of difference between them concerned ordination and collaboration with other Christians. The churches successfully rode the tide of revivalism, and the core members were ready to expand their evangelistic activities to the suburban villages.[29] But Nee had a different vision. In addition to converting more Chinese people, he was more interested in building a new

[28] Ruth Lee became a Christian when she was a warden in a Nanjing women's school. She used to confiscate and burn her students' Bibles, but through the testimony of a colleague, Ruth Lee came to passionately pursuing the question of faith. See Yading Li, "Ruth Lee," in Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity Online. URL: https://bdcconline.net/zh-hant/stories/li-yuanru Accessed April 15, 2024.
[29] Leland Wang went to the nearby Yangqi village, Simon Meek to Lianjiang, Faithful Luke to Pandun, John Wang and Wilson Wang focused on Fuzhou city. See Wilson Wang, *Wang Zai jianzheng lu* [The Testimony of Leland Wang] (Taipei: Chinese Christian Mission Publisher, 1980), 32.

kind of church as home to these new converts.[30] Through the introduction of M. E. Barber, Nee was exposed to criticism from Robert Govett, John Nelson Darby, and other Brethren teachers against Christianity's status quo.[31] He determined many Christian practices to be redundant, distracting, and divisive, especially denominationalism and the emerging ecumenical movement.[32] As he saw it, comity agreements never led to genuine unity; collaboration was futile when each side maintained its differences and worked toward selfish gain.[33] He also believed that genuine church union could only be local; any inter-local associations like synods inevitably resulted in hierarchical oppression.

His evangelism-oriented friends pushed back against Nee's ideas. As they saw it, Christianity was a minority in Chinese society, and social conflicts between Christians and people who held other beliefs would never disappear. A significant increase in the Christian population was necessary to reverse this situation, and that required all helping hands. To reject like-minded people merely because of their denominational ties seemed unrealistic to

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[30] Nee, "The Second Testimony," CWWN 26:468-469; also, *The Testimony of Church History concerning the ground of the Church* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2001). http://www.local-church-ground-testimony.org/local-church-1846/ Accessed June 27, 2023.

[31] On this point, Nee followed the Brethren teaching closely. Beyond the insistence on nominal purity, they also attacked the excessive institutions, paid clergy, and programmed worship. Nee translated and published a Brethren text (with Ruth Lee's reiteration) on these matters in two special issues of *The Christian*. The text was reissued in the *Found Treasure Quarterly* 20 (1992). http://www.found-treasure.org/cht/Quarterly/0020/page20.htm. Accessed June 10, 2024.

[32] A significant start of coordinating mission resources in China was the China Centenary Missionary Conference at Shanghai, 1907. Three years later, the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference became the initial platform for the modern ecumenical movement. The mission boards in China created councils and agencies and published the *China Mission Yearbook* to exchange ideas and facilitate cooperation. After the Edinburgh conference, the National Missionary Conference (later the National Christian Council) set up the China Continuation Committee with the goal to generate a united church of China. The founding of the Church of Christ in China in 1927 half-achieved this goal by gathering a quarter of the total Protestants under its roof. The Lutherans, Anglicans, and Methodists pursued their own denominational mergers. The Bible Union of China, China Inland Mission, and other conservative Protestants decided not to join CCC because its administrative level embraced modernist and liberal theology. See Kevin Xiyi Yao, *The Fundamentalist Movement among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920– 1937* (Lanham, Maryland, US, University Press of America 2003), and Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

[33] David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 95-96, 107-110.

this goal. At this point, a Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) missionary suggested to Leland Wang that he receive ordination so that more churches could invite him.[34] It appeared to be an optimal suggestion because the C&MA had a generous record of supporting independent churches with no strings attached. But Nee vehemently protested this idea. He regarded ordination as a practice of empty ritualistic Christianity, which he likened to Jewish history when "the Tabernacle was without the Ark."[35] The relationship between Nee and others deteriorated after this incident in 1924. As a result, Leland Wang and his companions asked Nee to stop attending the Fuzhou church.[36]

Less than one year after parting with Nee, Leland Wang welcomed the turning moment of his career as a revivalist and evangelist. The opportunity occurred when A. Paget Wilkes (1871-1934), an English missionary of the Japan Evangelistic band, hosted a large revival meeting in Shanghai in 1925. Initially serving as Wilkes's interpreter, Leland Wang took the pulpit when Wilkes had an acute health issue. This meeting inspired many next-generation revivalists, including Ji Zhiwen (Andrew Gih, 1901-1985) and Zhao Shiguang (Timothy Dzao, 1908-1973).[37] Leland Wang's revivalist career took off from this point. In 1929, Wang and a Canadian C&MA missionary, Robert A. Jaffrey (1873-1945), established the Chinese Foreign Missionary Union, the first Chinese mission society directed overseas.

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[34] This missionary was John Woodberry (1855-?). He came to Tianjin in 1895 and relocated to Shanghai after the Boxer Uprising. In 1917, he established an independent church, the Beulah Chapel and converted a group of medical doctors, including Watchman Nee's future father-in-law, Zhang Ruzhou.

[35] 1 Samuel 4:3-11, 6:8, 7:1-2.

[36] There are conflicting records on whether Nee was excommunicated. See Witness Lee, *A Seer,* 74; Wilson Wang, *The Testimony of Leland Wang,* 32.

[37] Lian, *Redeemed by Fire,* 133; Silas Wu*, Yu Cidu,* 210-211. Ji and Zhao both became central figures among overseas Chinese Christians. Ji was a cofounder of the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band and the Evangelize China Fellowship; Zhao was a preacher of Beulah Chapel and founder of the Bread of Life Church. For more about their lives and importance, see their biographical articles in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity.*

On the other side, Nee quietly accepted his removal and moved out of the city to concentrate on publishing his ideas. He maintained a cordial relationship with people in the Cangshan Christian assembly hall, where his family continued to be active members. Leland Wang was mostly away, but the other coworkers provided strong leadership and maintained the congregation's independence. They retained the teachings on baptism, and the Lord's table meeting; the only change was that a more straightforward signboard of "the Church in Fuzhou" was now displayed, against Nee's wish. The local church in Fuzhou exemplified the dual origin of revivalism and anti-denominationalism. In the years to come, the church would identify itself with other local churches as the first branch but remained outside of Nee's direct leadership.

Fundamentalism, the Brethren Experiment, and the New Base in Shanghai, 1925-1934

After the schism, Watchman Nee moved outside of Fuzhou city to Mawei, where he concentrated on his publication. He was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1924. After visiting southern Fujian and Malaysia and establishing churches in Amoy and Setiawan that year, his activity became restricted to literary works due to his health condition. Nee had always been a frequent contributor to Christian periodicals, and he started his own in 1923. *The Present Testimony* (*Fuxing Bao*, 1923-1925, 1928-1934, 1951) focused on substantial spiritual teachings according to Nee or the "deep things of God." Unfortunately, not one of the 1,400 copies of the first issue is extant today.[38] After the Fuzhou revival, Nee replaced *The Present Testimony* with a monthly magazine called *The Christians* (1925-1927). The content of *The Christians* was more basic and wide-ranging; it enjoyed a steadier market with 1,300

[38] Nee, "The Third Testimony," CWWN 26:490.

subscriptions after the first year.[39] For these two periodicals and his translation work, Watchman Nee opened his personal publishing ministry called the Gospel Book Room.

Most of Nee's early publications treated topics of personal spirituality, studies of end-time prophecy, and criticism of denominationalism and modernism. These topics aligned with the emerging fundamentalism. At this time, the debate between fundamentalism and modernism divided Protestants everywhere. The introduction of Higher Criticism– applying historical criticism to the Biblical text and comparing it with other Ancient Near Eastern literature– kindled a new round of schism among churches. The Protestant missionaries in China joined the theological disagreements on the Bible's infallibility, the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus, miracles, and the atoning significance of the cross. The mission boards and the churches in China split over these issues, and each side formed coalitions.[40] In a decade, the modernist and fundamentalist camps moved on to pursue their separate goals: the liberal Protestant establishment and Church of Christ in China continued to promote social gospel, charity, and education.[41] The more conservative and fundamentalist churches and missionaries busied themselves with expanding personal evangelism and revivalist campaigns.

Through the introduction of Ruth Lee, Nee participated in an elite fundamentalist circle in Nanjing. At that time, Lee was an editor of the bi-monthly *Spiritual Lights* (*Lingguang bao*); she had initially disagreed with Nee's criticism of denominationalism but then changed

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[39] A complete table of contents of *The Christian* can be found in CWWN 7:1273-1279. *The Christian* would be resumed between 1934-1940, but Nee only contributed 14 articles in them. See CWWN vol. 21.
[40] See Kevin Xiyi Yao, *The Fundamentalist Movement* and Wallace Merwin, *Adventure in Unity: The Church of Christ in China* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).
[41] Jun Xing, *Baptized in the Fire of Revolution: The American Social Gospel and the YMCA in China, 1919–1937* (Bethlehem, Penn.: Lehigh University Press, 1996); Peter Chen-Main Wang, "Chinese Christians in Republican China" in Tiedemann ed. *Handbook of Christianity in China,* 605.

her mind and introduced Nee to Cheng Jigui (1882-1940), the director of *Spiritual Lights*. Cheng, Jia Yuming (1880-1964), and Gao Shizhu (1861-1929) were among the leaders of this fundamentalist circle who contributed to the management of Nanjing Theological Seminary and the Bible Teachers' Training School for Women. Cheng offered to let Nee recuperate in his own house while Nee assisted with the Scofield Bible Correspondence Course translation.

Notwithstanding Cheng's appreciation of his talents, Nee's relationship with this fundamentalist circle did not last long because of the Nanjing incident in 1927. On March 23, 1927, the Nationalist Revolutionary Army was ready to conquer Nanjing as a decisive victory in their northern expedition. A group of soldiers and mobs suddenly turned against the city's foreign settlement, killed six foreigners, and destroyed dozens of Christian buildings, including *Spiritual Lights* publishing house. The British and American fleet retaliated by bombarding the city for an hour. Ruth Lee joined hundreds of missionaries to flee the city at once; Watchman Nee avoided the calamity because he had already become too sick and had moved to a county near Wuxi. Concerned about the possibility that he might die before concluding his reflection on spirituality, he struggled to complete his book *The Spiritual Man*. The Nanjing incident was the acme of an anti-imperialist and anti-Christian sentiment that had been brewing for over a decade. Following the May 4 Movement (1919), there was a wave of activism targeting the Christian community: The Anti-Christian Movement (1920–1922), the Recovery of Educational Sovereignty Movement (1924–1928) and the May 30 Incident (1925). Compared to previous "missionary cases" (*jiaoan*) and the

Boxer uprising in the late Qing period, the anti-Christian movement in the 1920s was less driven by general xenophobia but instigated by the communist version of nationalism.[42]

It is in the international settlement of Shanghai where Watchman Nee and Ruth Lee reunited and formed their new independent church. Wang Peizhen (Peace Wang, 1899-1969), a former student of Lee's in the Bible Teachers' Training School,[43] offered her residence for this small gathering to break the bread together. A British missionary of China Inland Mission, Frederick Hudson Judd (1871-?), also joined them.[44] Judd's brief appearance was the precursor of a series of foreign participants in the Local Church in Shanghai. It is important to note that Nee's anti-denominationalism and anti-institutionalism approach never amounted to anti-foreignism. Instead, among all the "independent churches" in the Republican period, the Local Church might be the only one that continued to cultivate its relationship with like-minded foreign Christians.[45] On the other hand, it was quite natural for the Local Church to draw the attention of foreign Christians to this treaty port and emerging international cosmopolis. The city's importance in trade and diplomacy guaranteed security. Most mission boards chose Shanghai as the site for their national headquarters, making it a center of gravity for Chinese, if not World Christianity. In 1928, Watchman Nee, Ruth Lee,

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[42] Tao Feiya, "Gongchan guoji daibiao yu Zhongguo fei jidujiao yundong" [Comintern representatives and Chinese anti-Christian movement], *Jindaishiyanjiu* (Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) no. 5 (2003) 114-136.

[43] Raised in a traditional noble family, Peace Wang converted when the female revivalist doctor Shi Mei-yu visited her school. She escaped from an arranged marriage and devoted herself as an independent evangelist following Dora Yu's pattern. For Wang's life, see James Chen, *Wang Peizhen jian shi* [A brief history of Peace Wang] (Hong Kong: Christian publishing, 1982); Witness Lee, *A Seer,* 108-114.

[44] How Mr. Judd came to know these Chinese Christians was a mystery; but he and Nee often shared Biblical insights and practice street evangelism together. See Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* 124. Note that Kinnear confuses Frederick H. Judd in this source with his more famous father, Charles H. Judd, who passed away in 1919.

[45] Daniel H. Bays, "The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900-1937" in Bays ed. *Christianity in China*, 307-316.

and Peace Wang decided to rent a two-story li-long house for the use of the church and the Gospel Book Room.

From this base, Watchman Nee's vision of church started to proliferate along the Chinese coast. At the beginning of 1928, Nee somewhat miraculously recovered from tuberculosis, and he decided to pick up the "central message" again and resume the *Present Testimony*.[46] He also started a new kind of conference, which was calmer and more orderly than most revivalist events. The first "Overcomer Conference" took place in February 1928 and attracted about 50 people in attendance. The participants included native pastors and elders from churches of the China Inland Mission, the American Presbyterian Mission, and the Chinese Independent Protestant Church in nearby provinces. These faithful readers of Nee's publications came to seek his guidance, perhaps due to the leadership vacuum created by the withdrawal of missionaries after the Nanjing incident. Returning to their localities, these native leaders persuaded their congregation to give up mission affiliations and transfer to Nee's vision of a Local Church. Some of these congregations snowballed fivefold in five years, making Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces the most popular region for the Local Church.

After two Overcomer Conferences, the local church in Shanghai welcomed some unusual guests from Britain. Nee began to correspond with an exclusive Brethren group in London in 1926.[47] After some initial contacts, the London group sent a delegation of eight to examine the faith of these Chinese Christians. Nee and the Local Church in Shanghai

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[46] The "central messages" according to Nee is a Christo-centric overview of God's plan for human beings. The focus is to help believers become "overcomers" through the subjective experience of Christ's death and resurrection. See the preface of CWWN vol. 36.

[47] According to their policies in accepting Christians into their fellowship, the Brethren has two major branches, the open brethren and the exclusive brethren. For a history of the Brethren movement, see Tim Grass, *Gathering to His Name: The Story of the Open Brethren in Britain and Ireland* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006)

convened a special conference featuring these guests in 1931.[48] The British visitors were satisfied with what they saw and suggested annexing the Local Church as the Brethren's branch in China.[49] However, when Nee accepted their invitation to visit England, their relationship went sour. After spending extensive time with Nee on their cross-Atlantic trip, the preeminent teacher of this group, James Taylor Jr. (1899-1970), scornfully disagreed with Nee's eschatological view.[50] Other members stumbled upon the fact that Nee broke bread with other Christian contacts during his time in London, violating the exclusive Brethren's core principle. They confronted Nee about these matters, and he promised to discuss them with his Chinese coworkers before making any decision.[51]

The difference between the London group and Watchman Nee's Local Church proved to be too big, and the two sides eventually parted ways. Before travelling to London, Nee expressed his careful attitude toward the Brethren in a private talk. He repeated M. E. Barber's concern that in Christian living, the objective truth, represented by the Biblical scholarship of the Brethren, must be balanced by subjective experience.[52] In London, he openly dared his erudite audiences to "cast out a demon," supposing they were requested to do so in China.[53] After his return, Nee and his followers continued to receive the London group's condescending directives on their teaching and practice while ignoring the insight in their opinion. The leaders of the London group, on the one hand, secretly urged Nee's

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[48] Witness Lee, *A Seer,* 210.
[49] William E. Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China" in *Brethren Historical Review* no. 15 (2019): 48.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* 166.
[52] Watchman Nee, "The Two Sides of the Truth–Subjective and Objective," CWWN 10:556.
[53] Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* 164.

coworkers to "stand firmly..., refusing what is not of God,"[54] and on the other, offered to build a meeting hall for the financially struggling church in Shanghai if the latter agreed with annexation.[55] These interfering and paternalizing measures caused confusion among the church members. Eventually, people sided with Watchman Nee's stance. In July 1935, Nee and nine other leading members endorsed a letter to explain their insistence upon accepting other Christians.[56] Upon receiving this letter, the London group ceased contact.

The decisive point of difference between Watchman Nee and his Brethren friends, as laid out in the secession letter, was the Local Church's practice of accepting all self-confessed Christians into their fellowship.[57] Nee's earlier ideal of the church closely followed the Brethren, but he has made developments according to recent experiences in China and England that prompted him to restudy the New Testament pattern for the practice of the church. The greater Shanghai area was crowded with different missions and churches. When considering how to plant new churches in this region, he came up with this insight called "The Boundary of Local Assembly" in 1934.[58] Instead of declaring independence for each meeting point (as was the case in the Brethren model,) Nee taught that there should be only one church and one church administration in each locality;[59] it was necessary for people who cast away their denominational label to still unite on a local basis. He shared this insight with the London Group, but they disregarded his opinion.

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[54] "James Taylor to Faithful Luke," 27 Jan. 1934, in *Letters of James Taylor, 3 vols.* (Hounslow, 1990*),* 1:428-429.
[55] "The Kuling Training and the Changing Political Situation," CWWL 1981 2:168.
[56] "A Reply to a Meeting in London," CWWN 26:419:431.
[57] Ibid. They claimed that only Holy Spirit has the last say on the discretion of the worthiness of a believer.
[58] Nee, "The Boundary of Local Assembly," CWWN 22:109-134.
[59] Ibid. A locality is defined as a collective settlement, e.g., village, town, city, or any basic unit of civil administration.

Many years later, James Taylor Jr. concluded that the decision to turn to China was a mistake: "[What] appeared to be an extensive work...has gone to nothing... there is not much to be had in heathen countries now."[60] By "extensive work," Taylor referred to the ninety-plus local churches in China according to Nee's list.[61] This number fits well with the records in the *Newsletters* (*jiao hui tong wen*) published by the Gospel Book Room from December 1933 to August 1935. This internal circulation of correspondence involved about one hundred localities in China, three in Malaysia, and one in Singapore, and often included details of the founding story and attendance number. According to the *Newsletters*, the Local Church had a national membership of approximately between 3,000 and 3,500 in 1934.[62] The clusters in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu provinces comprised about two-thirds of the meetings and over 2,500 members. The Local Church emerged in major coastal cities and along the Yangzi River, including Guangzhou, Swatow, Ningbo, Wenzhou, Kuling, Changsha, Jinan, Yantai, Qingdao, Beijing, Tianjin, and the Manchukuo-ruled Dalian (Port Arthur/Dairen) and Shenyang (Mukden). The congregations were disparate and small, under ten people in some places, but a national landscape was emerging. In January 1934, the third Overcomer Conference in Shanghai was joined by over 300 participants, including 160 out-of-town visitors from 10 different provinces.

During the third Overcomer Conference, Watchman Nee used a session to respond to a question about the identity of these new churches. He opened with this statement:

> Others have often asked us, "What are you?" Some have even said that we are the Revival Church, or the Little Flock Church, or The Christian [periodical] Church…First, we must clarify that we are not something. We are not a new denomination. Neither are we a new sect, a new movement, or a new organization. We are not here to join a certain sect or form our own sect. Other than having a special

[60] James Taylor Jr., "Man (22)," *Ministry by J. Taylor* (Kingston-on-Thames, [n.d.]), 71: 378-379.
[61] "Taylor to Charles A. Coates," 18 Aug. 1933, in *Letters of James Taylor,* 3:184–5.
[62] Angus Kinnear's estimate was "more than thirty churches." He could be grouping those in nearby counties as one church. See Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* 197.

> calling and commission from God, there would be no need for us to exist independently. The reason we are here is that God has given us a special calling.[63]

Nee went on to identify with a selected group of Christian authors and leaders since the sixteenth century, headed by figures in the Reformation, Quietism, German Pietism, the Brethren, Wesleyan-Holiness, and Pentecostal movements.[64]

The Local Church's national emergence invited mixed reactions from other Christians. Some of them were from churches that lost their members to the Local Church. In missionary reports, a common understanding was that churches like the Local Church,[65] Spiritual Gift Society, and True Jesus Church were disruptive and divisive in nature, but they were popular because they met certain spiritual needs that the organized churches disregarded.[66] Chinese believers' comments in the op-ed pages of Christian periodicals were surprisingly harsher. Their two main targets were Watchman Nee's criticism of denominationalism and local proselytizing efforts. An argument frequently made was that by attacking sectarianism, the "Little Flock," as the name started to circulate, turned itself into a formless sect. Local Church members also published rebuttals and clarifications, but there was no sign of pacifying the controversy.[67]

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[63] Nee, "What Are We?" CWWN 11:843.
[64] He made a similar remark in April 1948. See "God's work of Recovery," CWWN 57:49-68.
[65] The missionary sources often referred to the Local Church as the "Little Flock." No one knows who came up with this name, but it is believed to be according to the title of a hymn book the Local Church borrowed from the Exclusive Brethren, most likely *Hymns and Spiritual Songs for the Little Flock* (1856, 1881). The Local Church does not recognize this name, but it is commonly used in missionary sources and by outsiders.
[66] For example, see "Future of Organized Church," *The Chinese Recorder*, vol. 66, no. 2, 1935, 74-75; Paul R. Abbott, "Chapter XIV Revival Movements," *The China Mission Year Book*, 1932-1933, 175-192; C. Stanley Smith, "Part II Religious Life," *The China Mission Year Book*, 1934-1935, 97-110. China and the World database. Accessed 13 Aug. 2020.
[67] The argument was most fierce on a Presbyterian publication *Tung wen bao* (The Chinese Christian Intelligencer). In 1935, many issues contained the private correspondences between Local Church members and their concerned Christian friends or curious opposers.

A private family matter attracted the culmination of a published attack at the end of 1934. The fourth Overcomer Conference in October hosted more than four hundred guests from different corners of the country. Watchman Nee's wedding was held after the conference. His bride, Charity Chang, was a childhood acquaintance and a graduate of Yenching University, but she had only recently become serious about her Christian faith. There were discomforts in both the church community and the affluent Chang family about this romantic relationship between a fashionable college grad who recently converted and a frugal preacher. One close relative went so far as to publish an accusation of Nee "stealing" Charity in *Shen Pao* (1872-1949), the most influential newspaper in Republican China. This family quarrel supplied material for a new round of bitter mockery in Christian publications, and the accumulated gossip now intruded on the churches.[68]

In addition to the outside attacks, Nee also met frustration inside the Local Church. His "central message" was less appreciated than the more concrete proposals on anti-denominationalism and teachings on baptism, eucharist, and head-covering.[69] He discontinued the *Present Testimony* and resumed *The Christians* in the middle of 1934, hoping the latter would prepare the followers for the messages he considered more central. He expressed his frustration in the *Newsletters* and eventually decided to discontinue this publication as well because his enemies sampled it as sectarian propaganda.

The Pentecostal Stint, *Concerning Our Mission,* and the Plan to Evangelize China, 1935-1937

[68] Lee, "The Testimony in the Early Stage of the Recovery," CWWL 1981 2:67-68.
[69] Nee, "An Open Letter from those responsible for this publication," CWWN 26:417-419.

At the beginning of his publishing career, Watchman Nee had translated many of Jessie Penn-Lewis's writings (1861-1927) and borrowed much from her when writing *The Spiritual Man.*[70] After her death, Nee found one of her younger colleagues, Theodore W. Austin-Sparks (1888-1971), to be a valuable source and introduced his work as part of the "central messages." Austin-Sparks was an ordained Baptist pastor; he led his congregation in the southeast London suburb to leave the denomination and formed the Honor Oak Christian Fellowship Center in 1926. Besides their shared indebtedness to Mrs. Penn-Lewis' teaching, Nee and Austin-Sparks also shared similar ideas on church building. During his first trip to London, Nee visited the Honor Oak but missed Austin-Sparks in person. At this point, he was planning to pay a second visit.

Before setting sail, Watchman Nee and his newly-wed wife travelled to Shandong to visit another foreign contact, Dr. Thornton Stearns (1886-1967).[71] Shandong province has been a hotbed of revivalism since the trend arrived in China.[72] In the mid-1930s, the Norwegian missionary Marie Monsen (1878-1962) and the Spiritual Gift Society were responsible for spreading the Pentecostal practices of tongue-speaking, spirit singing, and faith healing all over the peninsula. When Yang Shaotang (David Yang, 1898-1969) and John Sung arrived with their evangelic teams, they reported that the local gatherings were

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[70] Mrs. Penn-Lewis was an author and frequent speaker at the Keswick Convention. She reported the Welsh revival (1904-05). For her life and theology, see M. R. Haddad, "The Mystical Theology of Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861-1927)" (Ph. D. Thesis, Durham University, 2005)

[71] Stearns was an American Presbyterian medical missionary who taught at the medical school of Cheeloo University in Jinan. He used to invite Nee as a guest speaker, leading to Stearns' own conversion to the Local Church. Like Austin-Sparks, Stearns was one of the contacts Nee visited during his trip to the West. Stearns consulted Austin-Sparks on the matter of leaving the Presbyterian denomination, and the two later became in-laws through the marriage of their children.

[72] For Shandong's role in the spread of revivalism and Pentecostalism in China, see R. G. Tiedemann, "Protestant Revivals in China with Particular Reference to Shandong Province," *Studies in World Christianity* 18 no. 3 (Nov. 2012): 213-236; Gustav Carlberg, *China in Revival* (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1936).

full of "works of the Spirit."[73] After attending a revival meeting held by a former China Inland Missionary, Elizabeth Fischbacher (1897-1967), Nee had a spirit-releasing prayer on Stearns' tennis court where he "met the Lord." This experience convinced him to postpone his overseas trip and to convene the fifth Overcomer Conference in Quanzhou on the topic of "the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit."[74] This conference essentially opened the door for Pentecostalism.[75]

Watchman Nee and other Local Church members' attitudes toward Pentecostalism have always been reserved. During this difficult time in his ministry, Nee carefully opened himself and the Local Church for new inspirations.[76] The churches in southern Fujian, Shandong, and Shanghai enthusiastically adopted tongue-speaking and spirit-singing;[77] however, some of these meetings turned chaotic and out of control.[78] These reports forced Watchman Nee to suggest the cessation of meetings centred on Pentecostal practices. His coworkers also frequently warned against the obsession with spiritual gifts and the danger of confusing evil spirits with the Holy One. Doctrinally speaking, the Local Church never ruled out the possibility of instant spiritual gifts during church meetings but speaking in tongues and other signs of spiritual gifts have rarely been reported since 1938.

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[73] Lian, *Redeemed by Fire,* 85-108.
[74] With many Pentecostal groups in mind, much of this conference was on discerning "true" from "false" spirit and emphasizing the overcoming life as a balance to the outward gifts. See CWWN 41:60-226.
[75] For Pentecostalism in China, see Fenggang Yang, Joy K.C. Tong, and Allan H. Anderson, eds. *Global Chinese Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017); Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *China and the True Jesus: Charisma and Organization in a Chinese Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Allan H. Anderson, "Spreading Fires: The Globalization of Pentecostalism in the Twentieth Century," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 31 no. 1 (Jan. 2007): 8-14.
[76] Pan Zhao, "Is the Spiritual Man Pentecostal? Watchman Nee's Perspective on the Charismatic Experiences," *Religions* 14, no. 7 (July 2023): 1-15.
[77] See Lian, *Redeemed by Fire,* 172-173; Lee, *A Seer,* 311; Lin, *Shanghai Faithful*, 135.
[78] Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* 189-191.

Returning to Shanghai in July 1939, Nee was ready to shift his ministry's focus to expansion through evangelism. He understood the root cause of the 1934 controversy was not his family drama but the accusation about recruiting from other churches. The stigma of "sheep-stealer" just would not disappear, even though new converts constituted 80% of the church members in the most disputed area of northern Jiangsu in 1934.[79] During the fifth Overcomer Conference, Nee announced his national plan for six promising regions: (1) Beiping and Tianjin; (2) Yantai, Qingdao, and Jinan; (3) Nanjing and northern Jiangsu; (4) Shanghai and the nearby cities of Wuxi, Zhenjiang and Soochow; (5) Zhejiang province with Hangzhou as its center; (6) Manchuria with the focus on Shenyang and Changchun.[80]

In this plan, Watchman Nee emphasized the function of literary work to complement in-person evangelism. The Shanghai Gospel Book Room expanded its editorial team; the print copies of periodicals increased from 6,500 to 10,000 between 1934 and 1935 and peaked at 21,000 copies on the eve of the war.[81] Compared to other notable Chinese Christian publications, Marcus Cheng's *Evangelism* grew from 4,000 to 10,000 copies, and Wang Mingdao's *Spiritual Food* sat at 2000 in this period.[82] Although the Gospel Book Room was in deficit, the increasing sales number encouraged Nee to send coworkers to the Chinese inland, hoping to avoid future sheep-stealing accusations.[83]

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[79] "Recent News from Northern Kiang-su, Kiang-su province," CWWN 25:34-36.
[80] "A Report on the various regions of work in China," CWWN 41:203-205. Note that the plan did not include Fujian because his former coworkers (separate during the 1924 conflict) already covered the province.
[81] "An Open Letter," CWWN 11:669; "A Report on the Various Regions of Work in China," CWWN 41:204; "Report on the work," CWWN 57:285.
[82] Nee and Cheng both considered their publications among the bestsellers at the time. See Pan Zhao and Jiangming Chen, "The Research on the Christian Magazine Evangelism in the Republican Era," *Sino-Christians Studies,* no. 22 (2016), 95-118.
[83] The assignment also included urban ministries to the lower class in big cities. See "A Report on the Various Regions of Work in China," CWWN 41:203-205; "A Talk with Brother Nee at his Farewell Dinner Prior to His Trip Overseas," CWWN 43:579-581.

At this time, the number of full-time coworkers in the Local Church was around fifty.[84] To provide working guidelines to these coworkers, Watchman Nee presented a more extensive version of his church doctrine in January and November 1937. He later published these talks as a book called *Concerning Our Mission.*[85] As a response to the growing national landscape of the Local Church, Nee introduced a dual framework: the "local church" and "regional work." According to a close study of the examples as presented in the New Testament,[86] Nee teaches that the church should be local and administratively independent, overseen by the elders; however, there can be itinerant "apostles" and their coworkers who carry out "regional work" to help these local churches.[87] The church and the "work" are in parallel instead of in a hierarchical relationship. The elders are responsible for overseeing local church administrations and everyday affairs, while apostles and their coworkers do the evangelizing, teaching, and church planting.

This teaching helped to establish boundaries between the full-time coworkers and the local churches. The coworkers were instructed to view themselves as helpers and never to usurp the administration of a local church; meanwhile, the local church and eldership should take the spiritual and administrative responsibilities upon themselves instead of relying on

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[84] "The First Testimony: Salvation and Calling," CWWN 26:461.

[85] The original Chinese version was first published in 1938, and the title was best rendered "Rethinking the Work." Watchman Nee translated it into English during his second trip to Europe in 1938-39, with the assistance of Elizabeth Fischbacher and others. The translation was published under the title of *Concerning Our Mission* by the Honor Oak Christian Fellowship Center in London, 1939. Today, the book can also be found under the titles of *Rethinking the Work* (Stephen Kaung ed., Christian Fellowship Publisher) and *Normal Christian Church Life* (Living Stream Ministry).

[86] David Woodbridge uses "primitivist" to characterize Nee's approach. See Woodbridge, "Watchman Nee, Chinese Christianity and the Global Search for the Primitive Church," *Studies in World Christianity* 22, no. 2 (2016): 125-147.

[87] Because of its pivotal role in the New Testament history, Brethren hesitated to identify anyone with the "apostleship"; some claiming that there's no apostles after the first century. Watchman Nee used to follow this opinion. However, in this new interpretation of the Book of Acts, he follows the Greek syntax and defined apostles as "whoever was sent" and those vindicated by their fruit. See "The Apostles," CWWN 30:1-18

the gifted coworkers. Nee even considered that the "three-self" indigenization goals would be achieved if the local church and regional work could each stay in its lane.[88]

Concerning Our Mission was, on the one hand, a further development of the Brethren's teachings and, on the other, accommodating to the reality of Chinese Christianity. For example, in the late chapters of this book, Watchman Nee rejected the necessity of paid clergy and a special church building for worship.[89] He insisted there was no special clerical class to replace each believer's spiritual function, and that a chapel was no more sacred than an ordinary home. This bold recovery was compatible with the "priesthood of all believers," an ideal based on 1 Peter 2:5 and 9 and can be traced back to the Reformation.[90] This perennial agenda shared by church reformers has become more feasible with political democratization and popular education. Meanwhile, the teaching lent legitimacy to many Chinese Christians who were leaving denominations but struggling to find funds and theological training to meet the needs of their newfound independence. The teaching persuasively encouraged them to pursue more church autonomy.

To provide more training for his coworkers, Nee bought land in a Shanghai suburb and built a facility. Nee's training method borrowed much from his mentors, Dora Yu and M. E. Barber; both preferred one-on-one discipleship to classroom instruction. Before 1935, he used to set up a "brother's apartment" upstairs from the Shanghai meeting hall to offer

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[88] Nee's quote: "The need to deal with [self-government, self-support, and self-propagation] has arisen because of the confusion between the church and the work. In a mission, when people are saved, then the missionaries prepare a hall for them, arrange for prayer meetings and Bible classes, and some of them go as far as to manage the business and spiritual affairs of the church as well. The mission does the work of the local church! Therefore, it is not surprising that in the process of time, problems arise in connection with self-government, self-support, and self-propagation." See "The Work and the Churches," CWWN 30:109.
[89] "The Organization of Local Churches," CWWN, 30:163-188
[90] Martin Luther, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* (1520).

hospitality and short-term training. His training emphases included Bible studies and church history, with no less attention paid to character and spirituality. This apartment served for two years until the controversy in 1934.[91] While the construction of the new facility was being finalized, war broke out near Beijing on July 7, 1937, and the first significant engagement between the Japanese Imperial Army and the National Revolutionary Army in Shanghai erupted in August. The battle of Shanghai razed the new building to the ground and simultaneously destroyed Nee's plan to expand along the coast.[92] The church members in the Shanghai region became one of the first flocks of refugees in this war, and then the whole country was on the move. The wartime mobilization compelled the Local Church to enter the Chinese inland.

Conclusion: The Glocal Church in the Making

From 1922 to 1937, the Local Church grew from a single congregation in Fuzhou to a national phenomenon. This chapter took a closer look at the many contexts of the birth of these churches. For many Chinese Christians, the priority in this decade was indigenization. Influenced by the emerging Chinese nationalism and anti-imperialism, many Local Church members were sympathetic to this goal and eager to cut ties with mission societies. Driven to discover what the church should be beyond foreign control, Nee and his associates navigated revivalism, anti-denominationalism, fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, and other trends in the Christian world to find the answer. The first episode in Fuzhou from 1922 to 1924 ended with Watchman Nee leaving the original congregation; however, it also determined that anti-denominationalism would be the norm in the future. From its new base in Shanghai, the

[91] "An Announcement From the Responsible Brothers in Shanghai," CWWN 26:431-432.
[92] Witness Lee, "The Kuling Training and the Changing Political Situation," CWWL 1981 2:165.

Local Church began its expansion among coastal cities while receiving mixed reactions from the wider Protestant Christian community.

During the failed communication with the London Group of Exclusive Brethren (1931-1935), Watchman Nee came to his first creative theological contribution. The "one locality, one church" principle, together with the complementing idea of regional works carried out by apostleship, was an outstanding doctrinal contribution to world Christianity. It was developed to answer specific questions and was born through a Chinese Christian's independent theological construction. Although he was indebted to the Brethren's theological methods, Nee demonstrated significant confidence in defending his findings in front of his British counterparts. Later, he and his fellow coworkers exhibited similar agency by filtering Pentecostalism into the Local Church, limiting the spread of the pursuit of spiritual gifts. Moreover, under his leadership and vision, the Local Church grew to have more than one hundred locations while struggling with contending voices and limited resources. It was an example of how, after decades of learning from their Western mentors, Chinese Christians were ready to stand on their own feet and fulfill the indigenization objective.

This chapter argues that Watchman Nee and his companions in the Local Church, like other Chinese Christians, worked hard to negotiate their Chinese and Christian identities. It does not, however, define "Chinese" from a culturalist perspective and connect the beliefs of the Local Church with an arbitrary milieu of intellectual/philosophical/religious traditions; instead, it defines China from a historical perspective and emphasizes the context in the early twentieth century, when the country was experiencing a drastic transformation. I argue that at this time: 1) China was a land of *missions*: it was the largest mission field in the world and a merging point of global Christian trends. Nee and the church leaders dialogued with

revivalism, fundamentalism, and Pentecostalism as interlocutors. Part of their motivation in this conversation was that 2) China was a land of *modernization*: Twentieth-century China was at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. To salvage China from its political, economic, and cultural crisis, most people chose to look outwardly rather than inwardly for solutions; they eagerly focused on learning from international society in the now instead of from the country's own historical past. Chinese Christians were required to earn the approval of both audiences—a wider Chinese society and Western Christianity. Instead of trying to synthesize Christianity and "Chinese culture," Nee and the Local Church's claim of legitimacy and authenticity lies in introducing the newest trends in the (mostly English-speaking) West. Translation and adaptation of the teachings of contemporary Western Christians occupied most of Nee's early publications. It was not the only way to negotiate the two identities, but it was the way that Nee and the Local Church chose, as presented in this chapter.

In his later expression, Nee considered China as "virgin soil," a blank canvas for God's new move on earth.[93] The original practices of the Local Church came with fresh promises and huge costs. With no paid clergy and mother institutions, the Local Church members in each locality must be self-supporting spiritually and financially. Most coworkers lived in financial instability and often suffered from malnutrition and sickness. They pursued independence, and now they were on their own. The coming Sino-Japanese War and Civil

[93] Witness Lee's reiteration of Watchman Nee's words. See CWWL 1973-1974 1:27. Jonathan Edwards had a similar expression about America. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (Penguin, 2011), 759.

War further separated these young churches and brought more challenges, as the next chapter will explore.

Chapter 2 "Little Flock": Surviving the WWII and Cold War, 1937-1958

This chapter navigates how the Local Church responded to the wartime conditions and subsequent political upheaval in China between 1937 and 1958. The outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 profoundly impacted Chinese history. Throughout the conflict, numerous Chinese Christians, including a significant portion of the Local Church's members, followed the Nationalist government to relocate to the Chinese hinterland. Meanwhile, those who remained in the coastal regions had to negotiate with Japanese authorities. After the war concluded in 1945, Local Church members found themselves with only a brief respite before grappling with the clash of two opposing political ideologies. The Chinese Communist Party emerged victorious in the Civil War and established the People's Republic of China in 1949. The political situation triggered widespread anxiety among Chinese Christians regarding the future of their faith. By 1952, following the onset of the Korean War in 1950, the PRC government expelled missionaries and initiated the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) to eliminate all vestiges of imperialism within Christian churches. Subsequently, amid the rise of mass mobilization, the Local Church faced mounting pressure on their religious freedom and eventually transitioned underground in the late 1950s.

The central argument of this chapter is that the Local Church became more locally independent during this tumultuous period. Watchman Nee was absent for a substantial part of this era; he was on an extensive trip to Europe at the onset of the war, became deeply involved in the family pharmaceutical business starting in 1940, was detained by the government in 1952, and put on trial and sentenced in 1956. Some local churches flourished during his absence as numerous coworkers strived to actualize Nee's church model. Examining church newsletters, members' correspondence and miscellaneous biographical

records underscores that the "Little Flock" was far more than an anonymous crowd and allows us to differentiate and understand the importance of individual agency in religion. While these coworkers held Nee's teachings in high regard, they also exhibited independent leadership during the challenging wartime isolation and in the face of political coercion. On multiple occasions, they disagreed with Nee's leadership and made independent decisions on crucial matters. This chapter highlights this individual agency in the Local Church and argues that it paved the way for the period following Nee's imprisonment in 1956.

The Mobilization in the Early War Years and the Keswick Convention, 1937-1939

Scholars have noted that the wartime experience of Chinese Protestants differs by time and space.[1] On the one hand, within the Japanese occupation, the Nationalist-led "Free China," and the Communist base areas, the authorities held different policies toward Christianity according to their political ideology; on the other hand, the Pacific War's eruption in December 1941 transformed the resident status of many missionaries from protected foreigners to enemy aliens. One scholar has argued that the war promoted Chinese Christians' independence by permitting them to take up more responsibilities while the foreign missionaries were retracted or interned.[2]

Japan's aggression in China dates back to the Mukden incident in 1931, which led to the declaration of Manchukuo in March 1932. At least four Local Church congregations within this puppet regime were anxious about the registration requirement made by colonial

[1] Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 141-142; R. G. Tiedemann, *Handbook,* 664.
[2] Timothy Brook, "Toward Independence: Christianity in China under the Japanese occupation, 1937-1945" in Bays ed. *Christianity in China*, 317-337.

authorities.[3] When the Marco Polo Bridge Incident war outside of Beijing city officially ignited the full-scale war on July 7, 1937, the impact on the Local Church was relatively small because of the lack of presence in this region.

On the contrary, the Battle of Shanghai from August to November 1937 hit the Local Church's heartland. When Chiang Kai-shek ordered an attack on Japanese forces outside Shanghai city to deflect their attention from the north, hundreds of church members had to flee. At that time, Watchman Nee was visiting the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia. He cancelled his plan to travel further to Europe and returned to China to respond. During an emergency coworker conference in Hankou, Nee reiterated his vision in *Concerning Our Mission* about separating the "work" and the "church." He also started a new periodical, the *Open Door*, to report coworkers' whereabouts and church news. As the title implies, the publication encouraged evangelism in the Chinese hinterland. In the first issue, Nee wrote,

> "I believe that God allows the present war to go on for our benefit. I believe His strategy today is the same as in the early days of the church. …Now is the time for the apostles to spend more time labouring in the inland regions. We should realize that we are not running away from the tribulation; instead, we are going forth to preach the word."[4]

Although Watchman Nee intended the *Open Door* to be "a personal ministry and not the instrument of any organization,"[5] the publication functioned as a semi-official venue of internal communication. It provided valuable records of the members' travel routes, wartime experiences, and church activities. The Local Church members used Hankou and Changsha as communicating hubs between the interior and the coastal regions. Kunming, Chongqing, and Hong Kong soon became destinations for relocation. Hundreds of members continued to worship in loaned facilities. In coastal provinces, the evangelical activities in Shandong and

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[3] Two in Dalian and two in Shenyang. For their questions posted in the *Newsletters*, see CWWN 26: 293-294.
[4] CWWN 31:3.
[5] This statement appears on the cover page of most issues of the *Open Door*.

Manchuria were less interrupted, and the coworkers in Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong continued to expand in the countryside despite the twin threats of bombardment and banditry. Despite their hardship, many members paid attention and offered financial support to a mission carried out by two coworkers who ventured into the border of Yunnan and Xikang provinces.[6]

Despite the mobilization and calamity caused by the war, Watchman Nee felt the need to reinvigorate himself by seeking help overseas. After M. E. Barber passed away in 1931, Nee experienced loneliness in leadership and a lack of spiritual inspiration.[7] He embarked again for Europe in March 1938, putting his hope on T. Austin-Sparks, whom he had missed in person during his previous trip. After months of travel, the two finally met in July, and they attended the 1938 Keswick Convention together.

The Keswick Convention and its theology profoundly influenced Watchman Nee and the Local Church. An annual event since 1875, the original message of the Keswick Convention was to emphasize the importance of pursuing a second decisive experience beyond one's conversion. This experience, called the "sanctification by faith," promised enjoyment of "the higher life" and victory over sins when one grasped the mystery of scriptural holiness. The event gradually gathered many prominent figures in Anglophone evangelicalism, including Dwight L. Moody, James Hudson Taylor, and, later, Billy

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[6] One of these two coworkers, Hu Yiming, was a local resident and worked as an evangelist among the Nuzi minority before the war began. They entered the region just before the renowned China Inland Missionary, James O. Fraser (1886-1938) passed away, who worked among the Lisu minorities since the beginning of the twentieth century. Mainly because of Fraser and his successors' work, 70% of the Lisu people today are Christians. The Local Church mission in this region seemingly continued after the *Open Door* was canceled in 1939.

[7] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 211.

Graham.[8] According to one scholar, the Keswick Convention "shaped the prevailing pattern of Evangelical piety for much of the twentieth century."[9] Among the crucial influences of Nee's spirituality, Jessie Penn-Lewis and Dora Yu were both participants at Keswick.[10]

During his trip to Keswick in 1938, Watchman Nee impressed the attendance with an impartial prayer for the ongoing war between China and Japan.[11] He also held meaningful conversations with W. H. Aldis, the chairman on duty and the home director of the China Inland Mission, about the disputes between frontline workers. Despite internal complaints, Aldis expressed sympathy with the Local Church and proposed future collaborations between the two church bodies.[12] After the Keswick Convention, Watchman Nee visited Denmark and gave a series of talks. These talks reflected Nee's indebtedness to the Keswick tradition and later was published as one of his best-sellers, *The Normal Christian Life*.[13]

Returning to London, he translated *Concerning Our Mission* into English and had extensive discussions with T. Austin-Sparks. The point that stood between these two like-minded people was the "one locality, one church" principle. Sympathizing with Nee's anti-denominationalism, Austin-Sparks and his followers doubted if the New Testament pattern

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[8] The Keswick Convention is still being held to this day. https://keswickministries.org/

[9] D. W. Bebbington*, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 151.

[10] Jessie Penn Lewis was a prominent speaker in Keswick until her provocative statement on demon possession (and maybe her female leadership) caused concerns. See Sharon Baker-Johnson, "The Life and Influence of Jessie Penn-Lewis: Jesus Christ and Him crucified," *Priscilla Papers* 26, no. 2 (Spring: 2012): 23-28. Dora Yu attended the event in 1927.

[11] *Keswick Convention 1938*, 26; Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 202.

[12] Kinnear*, Against the Tide*, 219.

[13] The Keswick Convention began with the slogan of pursuing a "higher" or "deeper" Christian life. This slogan was replaced when the movement tried to expand its target audience by emphasizing such an experience was destined for any "normal Christians." See Bebbington, *Evangelism,* 172-173. According to his numerous quotes and translations of the works of Andrew Murray, F. B. Meyer, and R. A. Torrey, who were feature speakers at the Keswick Convention, Watchman Nee's indebtedness to this tradition was extensive. He also strongly identified with less central characters in this movement, such as Evan Robert, Mrs. Jessie Penn-Lewis, and T. A. Sparks.

was a mandate and if replicating the first-century practice in the twentieth-century social reality was possible.[14] While Nee insisted on maintaining oneness on a local basis, Austin-Sparks preferred to recognize doctrinal unity and urged no merger of different Christian "testimonies." Later, Nee incorporated many of Austin-Sparks' teachings regarded spirituality, but he never conceded on this point.[15]

When Nee was abroad, Ruth Lee served as the *Open Door's* chief editor. During her tenure, published letters from female correspondents rose from almost none in the *Newsletters* to nearly one-third of the 600 letters collected in the *Open Door*. Many of these letters addressed a growing hub of female coworkers led by Ruth Lee and Peace Wang. Lee had always been well-connected in the fundamentalist circle. The *Open Door* reflected her inclusiveness by publishing reports by or about other leading Chinese Protestants like Wang Mingdao, Jia Yuming, David Yang (Yang Shaotang, 1898-1969), and Marcus Cheng (Chen Chongqui, 1884-1963).[16] It is reasonable that Chinese Protestants set aside their differences and collaborated more during this difficult time. In Shanghai, Amoy, Hankou, and Changsha, Local Church members offered their meeting halls as refuges and orphanages and participated in humanitarian efforts.[17] The *Open Door* also helped members locate their

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[14] Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* 208-210.
[15] This is especially seen in vol. 44-46 of CWWN as the record of Watchman Nee's speaking immediately after his trip to Britain. Nee mentioned Austin-Sparks' name dozens of times and developed the latter's Christological (especially on resurrection and ascension) and ecclesiological (especially on church being the body of Christ) themes in those records.
[16] For the brief mentions about them, see CWWN, 31:12, 100, 211, 32:361.
[17] Also see Wei Li, "Jidutu juhuichu dui kangri zhanzheng de huiying ji qi yingxiang" [Christian Assemly's Response to the Resistance War and its Impact], paper presented at Duo xueke shiye xia de zhongguo jidu jiao bentuhua yanjiu [Multi-disciplinary study of the indigenization of Chinese Christianity], Fujian Normal University Seminar, Nov. 2-5, 2012.

missing family and share emergency funds; 89 letters mentioned wiring money for evangelical activities, publishing jobs, and individual members in need.

The broadening scope of the Local Church's communication during wartime had its problems. In her editorial, Ruth Lee repeatedly raised her concerns about the quality of reports and the qualification of some self-alleged coworkers. Writing from England, Nee also expressed his discomfort about new coworkers being spiritually immature.[18] After arriving in China in July 1939, Watchman Nee discontinued the publication of *Open Door,* just as he had done with the *Newsletters* four years earlier. Practical difficulties included the disrupted postal route and rising fees. Still, Nee's main concern was that the publication had lost its spiritual purpose. The cancellation was disappointing because the war became a stalemate, and the Local Church's fruitful missions into the interior and border regions like Shaanxi, Jiangxi, Guizhou, and Heilongjiang went off-record.

China Biological Chemical Laboratory (CBCL) and its Controversy, 1940-1942

Following the discontinuation of *Open Door,* the main objective for Watchman Nee was to provide proper training for the coworkers, who numbered 128 in 1938.[19] Two years after bombardment destroyed the last facility, Nee found another location in the French Concession in Shanghai for training. In addition to spiritual guidance, Watchman Nee also wanted to supply his coworkers financially. About half of the Local Church coworkers were full-time and practiced the "faith principle," who often found themselves out of funds in the

[18] See Watchman Nee's letters in *Open Door,* no. 13 and 14. It was not clear who he was referring to, but chances are the coworkers in Southeast Asia and Chongqing, where they were invited to preach extensively in inter-denominational evangelical events.
[19] Kinnear*, Against the Tide*, 196.

middle of work.[20] A few coworkers suffered from tuberculosis and malnutrition, just like Nee in 1925, yet they died without a miracle.[21] This high cost came with the idea of self-supporting in an economy torn by endless wars. In 1938, the Japanese troops closed the Yangzi River trade, and Chiang Kai-shek ordered his forces to destroy Yellow River dikes to stall his enemy. These incidents caused financial catastrophes for Local Church members in Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Henan provinces.

The situation pressured Watchman Nee to venture into his family's pharmaceutical business.[22] His younger brother, George Nee (1905-1991), was a chemist from St. John's University in Shanghai and set up his pharmaceutical laboratory in 1936. Watchman Nee assisted George with procuring chemical material and business licenses during his trip to Europe. He officially joined the management when the laboratory registered as China Biological and Chemical Laboratory Limited (CBCL) in 1940.[23] George recruited graduates from his alma mater for the R&D department, and Watchman hired church members as managers, sales representatives and packing workers. Their first main products were Merbromin and Sulfonamide, targeting battlefield wounds and tuberculosis.

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[20] CWWN 26: 481-490.
[21] CWWN 57: 300.
[22] The best available source on Nee's pharmaceutical ventures was Zhang Xikang, who was a Shanghai church member and an accountant of CBCL. See Zhang, *Zhang Xikang huiyi lu: Shanghai difang jiaohui liu shi nian lai de huigu* [The memoir of Zhang Xikang: A Retrospect of the Local Church in Shanghai over Sixty Years] (Taipei: Rongguang, 2012) The last chapter of Guo Ronggang's dissertation included original research of the CBCL and provided creative interpretation of it as Nee's effort to "save the country through entrepreneurship."
[23] The Nee family had many connections in the pharmaceutical business. One of Watchman Nee's brother-in-law was on the board of another representative pharmaceutical companies in Republican China, Sine Pharmaceutical. The CBCL later developed similar products to those of the Sine Pharmaceutical. See Luo Yuanxu, *Dong cheng xi jiu: qi ge huaren jidujiao jiazu yu zhong xi jiaoliu bainian* [Merging East and West: Seven Chinese Christian families and A Hundred Years of Sino-Western Exchange] (Hong Kong: Joing Publishing, 2012).

However, the intermingling of church and business attracted hostile attention. Some church members and employees doubted Nee's ability to manage the business, accused him of betraying the faith principle, and expressed concerns about his "worldly" business partnership with unbelievers.[24] Eventually, the rumours led to widespread feelings that Watchman Nee was no longer suitable to minister in the church in Shanghai. Watchman Nee requested ex-communication under this pressure, and the elders in Shanghai and Ruth Lee agreed.[25] After this incident, Watchman Nee moved to Chongqing and opened a new branch of CBCL as a contractor for the Nationalist Army.[26]

It was the second setback for Watchman Nee's leadership in the Local Church. (The first one was in Fuzhou in 1924). The incident undoubtedly affected many members. Some insider narratives referred to a six-year dark period of the Local Church history (1942-1948) following this incident. However, this periodization did not do justice in highlighting the determination and capabilities of individual members in carrying the Local Church forward. The following shutdown of the churches in Shanghai and other coastal cities was not due to this incident but a turn of the Japanese Army's policy to co-opt religious institutions. When the Pacific War broke out in December 1941 and heralded the next stage of the war, the Japanese military detained many English and American missionaries and forced a Christian

[24] Chen, *My Uncle Watchman Nee*, 53-58.
[25] The formal decision was to remove him from ministering because the Local Church does not have a church register. There was a debate on if there was a further reason for this shocking removal. See Lily M. Hsu, *My Unforgettable Memories: Watchman Nee and Shanghai Local* Church (Xulon Press, 2013); Leung Kalun, *Ni Tuosheng de rong ru sheng chu* [The Rise and Fall of Watchman Nee] (Alliance Bible Seminary, 2003); Zhongmin Yu et al., *Dui zai pidou Ni Tuosheng de ping yi* [The appraisal of renewed struggling against Watchman Nee] (Golden Lampstand, 2004).
[26] He transferred the CBCL in Shanghai to his two younger brothers, Paul Nee and John Nee, who were not Local Church members.

allegiance within its occupation.[27] The local churches in Shandong, Shanghai, and Hong Kong recorded this pressure. These members continued to thrive in many places despite the turmoil surrounding Watchman Nee's business venture and the tightening grip of the occupation authorities.

Local Endeavours to Sustain the Church and Survive the War, 1942-1945

1. Searching for Deeper Spirituality: C. H. Yu in Shanghai

Soon after the church in Shanghai removed Nee from ministering, Japanese authorities forced it to choose between joining the local Christian union or shutting things down entirely. Those former missionaries who attended the church in Shanghai, including Thornton Stearns and Elizabeth Fischbacher, were detained in the Longhua Civilian Assembly Centre and faced health hazards.[28] In his last remark toward the church, Nee told a parable: "You can break a glass, but you can't break the debris."[29] He implied that if members met in smaller units, the pressure from colonial authorities could never reach them. The Local Church was well-posed for such a turn. Because of the lack of suitable properties, many churches had already held meetings, including Sunday services, in believers' residences. Before the war, such meetings occurred in up to eight private homes in Shanghai. It was a practical expansion strategy when the churches were constantly short financially. In *Concerning Our Mission,*

[27] For Japanese religious policy in the occupation region and Christian response to it, see Timothy Brook, "Toward Independence," and Ying Fuk-tsang, "Wang Mingdao yu hua bei zhonghua jidujiao tuan: lunxian qu jiaohui renshi dikang yu hezuo de ge an yanjiu" [Wang Mingdao and North China Christian Union: A Case Study of Church Resistance and Collaboration under Japanese Occupation], *Jiandao* no. 17(2002): 1-56.
[28] This internment camp became famous as the setting of J. G. Ballard's semi-autobiographical 1984 novel and Steven Spielberg's 1987 adapted film, *Empire of the Sun.*
[29] Chongjia Yu, *Zhishengsuo nei shenghuo: Yu Chenghua yishi* [Living in the Holy of Holies: Anecdotes of Dr. C. H. Yu] (Norco CA: Chinese Christians Testimony Ministry, 2003). URL: http://www.cctmweb.net/Holy/holy01.htm. Accessed June 10, 2024

Watchman Nee normalized this practice by teaching that meeting in private homes, rather than in a church building, was closer to Biblical patterns.[30]

The person who oversaw these underground church activities in Shanghai was Dr. C. H. Yu (1901-1955). Yu was born in a Christian family in Zhejiang, and his father was a survivor of the Boxer uprising. He graduated from St. John's University in Shanghai and was a trained ophthalmologist. At age 28, he had a "born-again" experience and met Watchman Nee. After practicing ophthalmology for many years, Yu opened an eye clinic in Shanghai and became a church elder in 1936. He was responsible for giving the messages when Nee was absent.

In 1937 and 1938, C. H. Yu translated Brother Lawrence's (1605-1691) *The Practice of God's Presence* and Madam Jeanne Guyon's (1648-1717) autobiography into Chinese. Both books were Nee's recommendations about achieving a mystical union with Christ in believers' daily lives. Yu admiringly practiced Guyon's quietist spirituality, and many Local Church members started admiring him as a spiritual pattern. During the CBCL turmoil, Yu was the only elder in Shanghai who did not put his finger on Nee. Yu continued teaching and applying this spirituality brand in private home meetings in Shanghai until the war ended.[31]

2. Dealing with Japanese Occupation Authorities: Witness Lee in Yantai

Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905-1997) was pivotal in establishing the Local Church in Yantai. Lee was born into a Baptist family and graduated from a Christian college. He became serious with his Christian faith in his youth through Peace Wang's revival meeting

[30] "The Organization of Local Churches," CWWN 30:167-171.
[31] Yu, *Living in the Holy of Holies*.

and joined the Chinese Christian Independent Church. He was a faithful reader of Watchman Nee's publications and recommended him as a guest speaker to his hometown. After Nee's visit, Lee started a meeting in his house in 1931, one of the earliest in northern China. The congregation grew to over a hundred people in two years, and Lee gave up his job at a trading company and became a full-time preacher. Next year, he moved to Shanghai to receive Nee's training and joined the editorial office in the Gospel Book Room.[32]

Because of his capability and local connections, the 1936 national plan assigned Witness Lee with Peace Wang to the Beijing and Tianjin region. After further training in 1940-41, Lee returned to Yantai to experiment with Nee's new ecclesiological innovation. This so-called "blueprint of church building" standardized the functions of elders and deacons and asked all believers to share responsibilities like cleaning, ushering, and visiting new contacts.[33] This practice and Lee's leadership caused rapid growth in the church in Yantai. The attendance doubled in one year and exceeded eight hundred at the beginning of 1943.[34]

To provide an outlet for spiritual passion, Lee encouraged the first "evangelism migration." Receiving a modest bursary, seventy members relocated to Inner Mongolia and thirty to Manchuria in April 1943. They successfully established more than forty meeting

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[32] For Lee's life, see CWWL 1981 2:85-146 and *Watchman Nee: A Seer of Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), 283-336.

[33] The practice was short-lived and only appeared in Shanghai, Yantai, and Qingdao. However, the figurative "blueprint" would impact the actual floor plan of the church buildings in the future. The Local Church followed the Brethren to have a plain meeting space. There was no artistic decoration and only minimal furnishing with a platform, lectern, and seating. However, to emphasize the function of elders and deacons, Nee designed a separate "elder room" and "deacon room" in the meeting hall. Elders and deacons must be in the office on schedule to provide counselling and administrative services. After the success in Yantai, Witness Lee propagated the "blueprint" and the respective church building designs to Taiwan, Malaysia, and other churches after 1949.

[34] Norma Cliff, "The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee," 94; CWWL 1981 2:85-104.

points in one year. However, the military police noticed the strange move and arrested Witness Lee. Lee was detained and interrogated for a month between May and June, during which he was tortured and starved.[35] This treatment was unusual because even the most stubborn non-conformist Chinese Protestants, like Wang Mingdao, rarely spent a day in jail for their opposition to Japanese religious policy.[36] According to the content of the interrogation, the suspicion was that Lee mobilized his church members for political purposes. After clearing his case, the military police continued to monitor the church in Yantai and harassed Lee for information on Communist activities. They only eased the measure when Witness Lee suffered acute tuberculosis, possibly due to long-term malnutrition and hardship during his internment. Lee later escaped Japanese surveillance and moved to Qingdao for proper treatment, but he did not recuperate until a year after the war ended.[37]

3. Battling Financial and Physical Hardship: Philip Luan and K. H. Weigh in Hong Kong

The establishment of the church in Hong Kong relied upon the efforts of K. H. Weigh (Wei Guangxi, 1901-1989) and Philip Luan (Luan Feili, 1902-1944).[38] Weigh was born into an Anglican family in Fuzhou and was Watchman Nee's high school classmate. He came into the Local Church through Nee's direct influence and became a full-time Christian worker in 1936. He went to Hong Kong to help establish the church there in 1937 but was reassigned to Kunming as the war began. Philip Luan was from Manchuria and was an

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[35] CWWL 1986 2:529-536.
[36] Fuk-Tsang Ying, "Wang Mingdao and North China Christian Union," 1-56.
[37] CWWL 1981 2:98-103.
[38] For the Life of K. H. Weigh, see K. H. Weigh, *Ni Tuosheng yan zhong ganjing de ren: Wei Guangxi jilu xuan ji* [A Pure Person according to Watchman Nee: Selection of K. H. Weigh's Records] (Hong Kong: Truth Book Room, 2020).

enthusiast of nationalist politics in his youth. He was initially against Christianity but turned to the faith miraculously by stumbling upon the Book of Psalms in a Buddhist temple.[39] After his conversion, he immediately closed his prosperous tobacco business and attended Wang Mingdao's Christian Tabernacle in Beijing. He later began to meet with the Local Church but remained in a good relationship with Wang. Before the war, he served the churches in Hangzhou. Because of his frail health from hypertension, he went to fill Weigh's place in Hong Kong and oversaw other warmer localities like Macau, Swatow, Canton, and Singapore.

The church in Hong Kong increased at the beginning of the war when the British colony became the preferred destination for refugees. The reported attendance grew from 15 to 200 over a couple of months. However, many church members could not find accommodation during the spike of refugees; 400,000 people flooded into Hong Kong in the first twelve months of the war.[40] The church changed its location several times and added a new meeting point in Macau in response to the overflow.

K. H. Weigh returned to Hong Kong in 1940 when the Japanese approached Kunming with no expectation of the eruption of the Pacific War. The Japanese military took the tiny haven of Hong Kong in less than three weeks at the end of 1941. The church in Hong Kong also felt the pressure of forced cooptation in July 1942, and Weigh publicly prayed that the

[39] Some of Luan's writings were reproduced and published. See Philip Luan, *Deshengzhe de daogao (fu renshi ni de choudi)* [Overcomer's Prayer & Know Your Enemy] (Hong Kong: Found Treasure, 1997).
[40] For a detailed study of Hong Kong's population change during Japanese occupation and the unnatural casualty number, see Tony Banham, "Hong Kong's Civilian Fatalities of the Second World War." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 59 (2019): 31–50. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26937829.

church could be "ignored and bypassed" by this effort.[41] During the next two years, the living conditions in Hong Kong became even worse when Japanese forces started to fall short. The lack of resources was so severe that the authorities deported hundreds of thousands of refugees back to Guangdong province. The famine resulted in 50,000 deaths after rationing was cancelled in 1944.[42] Philip Luan, fortunately, escaped this hardship. He went back to Beijing with terrible health issues, including tuberculosis, heart disease, and insomnia. Under poor health care. Luan died prematurely at the age of 42, just four months before the war ended.

4. Exercising Compassion in Faith: Lan Zhiyi in Hankou

Because of their teaching on prioritizing saving souls before society, the Local Church rejected the social gospel and seldom participated in any charity endeavours.[43] One exception was Lan Zhiyi (1908-1988). Lan converted to Christianity as a teenage rice mill apprentice in Jiangsu. After the Yangtze–Huai River floods in 1931 took nearly two million lives,[44] Lan volunteered at a Christian orphanage in Hankou. In 1934, he joined the Local Church and quit his denomination and job at the orphanage. His decision coincided with the published attacks of Watchman Nee's marriage and, therefore, also invited criticism from Lan's Christian friends.[45]

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[41] Weigh, *A Pure Person,* 103. For a more general discussion of Chinese Christians' response to Japanese colonial authorities in Hong Kong, see Joel S. Fetzer, and J. Christopher Soper, "Church and State in Japanese-Occupied Hong Kong." *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 25, no. 1 (April 1, 2018): 1-13.
[42] Yonggunag Xie, *San nian ling ba ge yue de kunan* [Three years and eight months of suffering] (Hong Kong: Mingpao, 1994), 93.
[43] For Watchman Nee's theological thinking on this matter, see "Towards the world" in CWWN 27:173-186 and *Love Not the World* (Fort Washington PA: CLC Publications, 2004).
[44] *Zhongguo jiuji shuizai weiyuanhui diaocha baogao, 1933* [Report of National Flood Relief Commission 1933], the caption of photo 11, between page 90 and 91.
[45] See *Tung wen bao* [The Chinese Christian Intelligencer] no. 16, 20, 25 (1935) and *Jin sheng yuekan* [*Jinsheng Monthly*], 5:4 and 6:2&3 (1935).

Lan's role in Wuhan became crucial in the early Sino-Japanese War as the city became the communication hub. His responsibility was to collect and distribute correspondence, publications, and emergency funds. His residence became a checkpoint for refugee members, while he held evangelistic events in other shelters and military hospitals. Lan later took over his old orphanage in 1938 when the missionaries withdrew.[46]

The Wuhan tri-city faced the heaviest assault from the Japanese army, tanks, and gunboats in the summer of 1938. Most of the Local Church members fled with the Nationalist Government to Chongqing, but Lan Zhiyi insisted on staying. In October, the city was much in ruin, and Lan's family and the orphanage staff were among the last to remain. Lan transferred about a dozen orphans to the empty meeting hall in 1939 and renamed it Faith Orphanage because they lost their sponsor. The orphanage would grow to nearly a hundred people in the coming years and constantly move until settled in Soochow. After the war ended, Lan testified triumphantly in Shanghai how timely offerings– their sole subsistence– had saved the orphanage five times on the verge of absolute destitution.[47]

5. Collaborating with Others in Evangelism: Stephen Kaung and Yin Renxian in Chongqing

The *Open Door* recorded not just a few examples of the Local Church's collaboration with other Protestants in evangelism in this unprecedented time, especially in Nationalist-controlled regions. Rushing with 60,000 refugees into Kunming and even more to Chongqing, the Christian community sought safety in the last strongholds of Chiang Kia-

[46] See Lan's correspondence in the *Open Door.* CWWN 31:128-129.
[47] See *Lan Zhiyi dixiong jianzheng* [Testimonies of Lan Zhiyi] (Norco CA: Chinese Christians Testimony Ministry, 1988) URL: www.cctmweb.net/LanZhiYi/xu.htm. Accessed June 10, 2024.

Shek and his Nationalist army. In these cities, a group of Chinese evangelists, including Calvin Chao (Zhao Junying, 1906-1996) and Moses Yu (Yu Ligong, 1920-2010), started a thriving college campus campaign, the Chinese Native Evangelical Crusade. The campaign attracted more than 2,000 student attendees in 1944 and transformed into a semi-annual event before the war ended.[48]

One of the star speakers of this campaign was, surprisingly, a young Local Church coworker. Stephen Kaung (Jiang Shoudao, 1915-2022) was born into a prestigious Methodist family in Shanghai. His father, C. C. Kaung (Jiang Changchuan, 1884-1958), was a founding member of the National Christian Council of China and chair of the board of Soochow University when the school became nationalized in 1927. C. C. Kaung's prominence was demonstrated in his officiating Soong Mei-ling and Chiang Kai-shek's marriage in 1927 (and Chiang's baptism three years later). This family background was the reason for the commotion when Stephen followed his teacher Tang Shoulin (1906-1993) to join the Local Church in Soochow in 1934. Well-educated and eloquent, Tang and Kaung became editors in the Gospel Book Room and became promising coworkers. Stephen Kaung often visited Hong Kong and other southern provinces upon invitation. He barely escaped Singapore when the Pacific war broke out nearby. After returning to Chongqing painstakingly through India, he attracted an audience of students, military officers, and government officials in the KMT's wartime base.

[48] Xu Yinglang, "Zhao Junying," Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christians, Global China Center, https://bdcconline.net/zh-hant/stories/zhao-junying, accessed March 21 2024; Yu Ling, "Yu Ligong," Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christians, Global China Center, https://bdcconline.net/zh-hant/stories/yu-ligong, accessed March 21 2024.

Yin Renxian (1887-1964) was the head of a small band of devoted Christian politicians on the home front. Yin was from an affluent family and a graduate of Harvard Business School. He married the daughter of Ding Limei (1871-1936), a renowned Chinese evangelist, but the couple were, at best, nominal Christians. They turned to faith decisively in 1931 when their five-year-old son David tragically drowned in a well. In his mourning, Yin encountered Dr. Thornton Stearns in Yantai, who shared his own experience of losing a two-year-old son with the same name as Yin's son. After this incident, the Yin couple became devoted evangelists and developed a connection with the Local Church. When Yin joined the Henan provincial government as the finance department head in 1932, he hosted evangelical meetings at home. Hundreds of government officials attended to hear from leading evangelists, including John Sung, Chi-Kuei Cheung, and many Local Church coworkers. During the early war years, Mrs. Yin was an active member of the Local Church in Kunming and Chongqing and hosted meetings at their home. Being promoted to direct the Ministry of Finance in 1941, Yin spoke extensively as a celebrity witness in the student gospel campaigns. He also established a Christian school according to the model of China Inland Mission's Yantai School for missionary children.[49]

Demobilization and the Resumption of Watchman Nee's Leadership, 1945-1949

On August 15, 1945, the surrender of Japan ended the eight-year war between China and Japan. Before that, the church in Shanghai had shrunk to as few as 40 to 50 people meeting in C. H. Yu's house. The demobilization brought hundreds of church members back

[49] Yin Renxian, *Sheng guang zhi yin: Yi Renxian meng en sanshi nian de jianzheng* [Guided by Holy Light: Yin Renxian's Testimony of Thirty Blessed years] (Hong Kong: Tyndale, 1998) and Moses Yu, "Yin Renxian yu sheng guang xuexiao" [Yin Renxian and the Holy Light School] in *Daoxiang* 9 (1997): 10-11.

from Kunming and Chongqing to coastal cities, including Ruth Lee and other coworkers. To fill the leadership void, they invited Witness Lee to join them because of the latter's absence from the turmoil in 1942. Considering the communist military activities in Manchuria, Lee accepted the invitation to move to the south. In Shanghai and Nanjing, Lee applied his experience of encouraging members for evangelism, recovered the disheartened coworkers, and helped the church attendance in Shanghai climb to 1,500 in 1947.[50]

The growing church attendance in Shanghai soon exceeded the maximum capacity of the old li-long houses.[51] Witness Lee established a "district-section" framework to accommodate the increase. According to this framework, church members living in an urban district would go to one designated home to meet with a fixated "section" of people. This practice had precedent in the Methodist classes and adapted the "one locality, one church" principle to a city with millions of residents. Shanghai still had only one small group of church elders, and they served all fifteen districts and their sections. Once a month, all church members attended the Sunday service together and packed the meeting hall and surrounding streets.

The revival in the church in Shanghai uplifted the morale, and most members returned, except for one. Watchman Nee refused to attend any church meeting after being removed from ministering by the Shanghai elders. It did not prevent some members from seeking his guidance in private,[52] and he was a welcomed speaker in Yin Renxian's private residence and

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[50] CWWL 1981 2:128-134; Norman Cliff, "The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee," 93-94.
[51] The church in Shanghai bought three neighboring units and knocked down the walls. The Gospel Book Room and the co-worker's residence occupied the upper floors.
[52] For example, *The Orthodoxy of the Church* (1945) was a series of talks about the seven Asia Minor churches in Revelations 2-3. Nee considered it a prophecy of the church history and applied it to the Brethren and their division after adopting exclusivism. Nee considered his teaching on the "local ground of oneness" in 1934 and

Christian school.[53] This connection remained unchanged for the first three years after the war. But little by little, rumours about his business practice evaporated, and the Shanghai elders privately regretted the careless decision to remove him.

Witness Lee initiated the reconciliation by arranging a private meeting between twenty coworkers and Nee in Fuzhou in February 1948. During this private meeting, Lee asked Nee how to handle the "chao" left by the war; he was referring to lack of proper leadership in churches and poor communication among coworkers caused by frequent dislocation and relocation. What to do with the self-declared "coworkers" if they are not qualified? How can we help a local church if the eldership becomes debilitated through the war? The *Open Door* reflected many of these cases. Dr. C. H. Yu had to travel to Xi'an and Northwest provinces to settle the contention among meetings in the same locality.[54] Ruth Lee, Witness Lee, and other senior coworkers reported about the shallowness and under-qualification of coworkers. After returning from his trip to Europe in July 1939, Nee began to teach intensively on the universal church as the Body of Christ, which was a doctrine inspired from Austin-Sparks and a balance to the local aspect of the church.[55]

In his response, Nee proposed a further development of his ecclesiological teachings based on the Scriptures. The separation of the apostles and the church elders was a distinctive feature in *Concerning our Mission*. However, Nee suggested at this point that it is possible for the church to voluntarily "hand over" itself to the work. In this case, the coworkers could

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1937 a proper prescription for the contemporary age. CWWN 47: 1-104. Another series of talk on suffering and spirituality, *The Release of the Spirit,* was later published in English. See CWWN 54:149-260.

[53] The two had close friendship since 1936 and Mr. Yin was also on the board of trustee of CBCL's Chongqing branch.

[54] CWWN 55:254.

[55] For example, CWWN 44:785-848.

follow the pattern of Peter in Jerusalem and John in Ephesus (indisputably, both were apostles) to assume eldership in the given church, thus providing direct leadership.[56] The same principle also applies to individuals. A junior coworker can hand over themselves to the work and listen to the assignment of a senior coworker. Nee also recognized that it is biblical to have a regional center for the work, usually the largest or the most populous city.[57]

A contention about the "Jerusalem model" soon appeared in Fuzhou. Those who joined the private meeting gave themselves fervently to Nee's assignment, and the elders in one of the Fuzhou congregations did the same. A latent division concerning Nee's ministry had always existed since 1924. Some people admired Nee's teaching and recognized themselves as part of the Local Church; others identified with a looser non-denominational, and independent church vision represented by Leland Wang and his evangelical ministry to Southeast Asia. Over the years, coworkers like K. H. Weigh tried to reconcile the two sides but failed.[58] Both sides, however, considered themselves together as one church in Fuzhou until this point. The two sides of the Church in Fuzhou eventually separated at this moment over this new teaching. The part that did not follow Nee's ministry after 1948 came to use the name "Christian Assembly Hall."

The reconciliation between Nee and the leadership in Shanghai was surprisingly smooth. The tension between Nee and Ruth Lee quickly defrosted after a private talk. In April, the national coworker meeting in Shanghai became the pivotal stage for Nee's return.

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[56] 1 Peter 5:1; 2 John 1

[57] Witness Lee record Nee's speaking and published in the first issue of the *Ministers.* See CWWN 55:3-6.

[58] There were other doctrinal issues that complicated the division. One example was Christian head covering. The Brethren taught female Christians to cover their head in meetings according to 1 Cor. 11:2-6 in the New Testament and the Local Church followed this practice; but some coworkers in Fuzhou, maybe out of the influence of feminism, opposed it. See CWWL 1981 2:134-136.

In one session, Watchman Nee disclosed his involvement in the pharmaceutical laboratory and the business world. To explain his motive, he named dozens of coworkers who had died of malnutrition and poverty and likened himself to a widow seeking remarriage to rescue her starving children. His statement affected the whole audience, and many, including Ruth Lee herself, repented in tears about their mistake of being susceptible to rumours. It was a moment of rebirth for many churches.[59]

After the reconciliation,[60] there was a national wave of handing over financial properties, personal devotions, and church administration to the work headed by Watchman Nee, Witness Lee, and other leaders. On the one hand, Nee urged wealthy members to take over the financial burden of churches; on the other hand, the more modest members willingly transferred their means and lived a communal life.[61] Religious fervour was not the sole reason behind this generosity. The freefalling inflation and political corruption cost many people's faith in Chiang Kai-shek and the KMT government. The economic context pushed some church members further into their faith community. However, one should not overestimate the funds collected in the handing-over process. It was likely close to 1,750 US dollars and afforded only half the down payment for the new meeting hall in Shanghai.[62]

There was also opposition to the "Jerusalem model." In Shanghai, a former coworker supported an itinerant preacher publishing seven open letters criticizing Nee's teaching of

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[59] CWWN 57:187-190.
[60] A group of coworkers and elders published a statement that said, "With respect to the person of Brother Watchman Nee, however, we can testify in one accord before the Lord that he is one of God's faithful servants. Although he engages in some form of business, his goal has never been to gain anything for himself. We are all in one accord with him in the matter of the truth, in the matter of the service, and in the matter of his business." CWWN 55:266.
[61] Maybe influenced by the example of the Jesus Family. Records in CWWN suggested an admiring attitude toward this group, see 56:387, 61:110.
[62] CWWL 1981 2:170.

ecclesiology as schismatic and self-contradictory.[63] K. S. Wang (Wang Kaisen), one of the founders of the church in Singapore, furiously rejected a Fuzhou-based coworker's request to hand over the church to him and cut ties with the Local Church.[64] Amid this tension, Nee distanced himself from direct administration and did not assume eldership in any big city. He continued to identify his role as the trainer of coworkers. He purchased some missionaries' summer bungalows in Kuling (today's Jin'an district of Fuzhou city) and started his first training term in the summer of 1948. About eighty male and female members participated in this six-month training.[65] Six days a week, Nee preached practical lessons to them about how to handle church affairs, study the Bible, and minister the word. Compared to modern seminaries, the Kuling training followed the precedents of Dora Yu and M. E. Barber to emphasize personal spiritual guidance and character building. Each day, Nee would invite participants to testify to their faith on stage, and he would examine and diagnose their spiritual progress.[66]

The first term of Kuling training finished in October 1948, and the trainees were ready for assignments. They were encouraged to go to the hinterlands, where the work of foreign missions was absent or discontinued. During wartime, some members migrated to Shaanxi, Inner Mongolia, and Jiangxi province to start cooperative farms according to the model of the Jesus Family. These cooperative farms were promoted as a sustainable model to "evangelize China." However, after a series of Nationalist defeats, the Communist takeover

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[63] Huang Yushen, *Cong hatong lu dao nanyang lu: zhi Ni Tuosheng xiansheng qi feng gongkai xin* [From Hadoong Road to Nanyang Road: Seven public letters addressed to Mr. Watchman Nee] (Hong Kong: Christian Literature Center, 1998).
[64] The coworker was Faithful Luke. See ch. 3. CWWL 1981 2:193-194. *The Newsletter* reported K. S. Wang's support of the "one locality, one church" principle and his resolution to split from the Open Brethren mission. See CWWN 26: 341-342.
[65] CWWL 1981 2:167.
[66] For a comprehensive record of Nee's courses in Kuling, see CWWN vol. 51-54.

was looming at the beginning of 1949. Facing the unexpected future, the Local Church was pressing to finish building the new meeting hall in Shanghai and start the next term of Kuling training. At an emergency coworker meeting in February 1949, the decision was that Witness Lee would be sent to Taiwan while most coworkers stayed in mainland China. In less than two months, the Nationalist army retreated, and the Communist Party established the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

The PRC State and the Early Three-Self Movement, 1949-1958

The leadership in the Local Church faced a dire question in 1949. What would the new government do with their faith? Like other Christians, the general attitude in the Local Church favoured the alliance between the Nationalist government and the United States during the Civil War. According to the *Open Door* (resumed during 1950-1952), the Local Church enjoyed relative freedom in evangelism and growth in the first two years of the New China. The attendance in church in Shanghai surpassed 3,500 in 1949; the churches in Qingdao and Beijing each built spacious meeting halls to accommodate over 1,000 regular attendees.[67]

Besides the active effort of evangelism, the influx from other churches has also contributed to the general increase. The China Inland Mission negotiated with Watchman Nee and peacefully transferred some of its congregations in 1951.[68] Other Christian groups did the same, which led to a discussion on the *Open Door* about how to absorb and unite other churches in the same locality.[69] The Chinese Civil War and the following political

[67] Caleb Yen, "Truly Hungry and Thirsty (Peking)," CWWN 55:207-208; Chang Tze-jieh, "A Door for the Gospel Being Opened (Tsingtao)," CWWN 55: 206-207.
[68] Lyall, *Three of China's Mighty Men*, 89
[69] CWWN 56: 327-384

transition forced another wave of missionary retraction and church reorganization. As a more resourceful and visible native group, the Local Church benefited from this change.

After a brief trip to Hong Kong to arrange for the overseas churches, Watchman Nee insisted on returning and staying in mainland China. Compared to other coworkers, Nee held a more open attitude toward the communist ideal. He acknowledged socialism as a moral cause– albeit not a Christian one– to change the unfair situation in human societies. Nee also had a personal connection with an active Communist Party member, Chang Ruli.[70] At that time, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference promised religious freedom in its Common Program, a predecessor of the PRC constitution. In May 1950, the YMCA leader Wu Yaozong (1893-1979) and other prominent Protestant leaders met with Zhou Enlai and published the "Christian Manifesto."[71] This document expressed the willingness of Chinese Christians to cooperate in struggling against imperialism and constructing a new China. Watchman Nee and other Local Church members were reserved about this effort led by the modernists in the Protestant establishment.[72]

The eruption of the Korean War and the Chinese part in it led to the "Resist American Aggression and Aid Korea" mass campaign. During this campaign, the obligation of the Protestant community was to purge the "imperialist poison" from their faith by organizing accusation meetings against missionaries and any doubtful relationships with foreign aggressions. As native churches, the Local Church did not receive much pressure initially.

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[70] Zhang was Nee's uncle-in-law. He served as the manager of Nee's pharmaceutical company for a short time and used that position as a cover for underground work. See Guo, "Academic Study of Watchman Nee in the West," 176.

[71] "Direction of Endeavor for Chinese Christianity in the Construction of New China," *People's Daily,* July 28, 1950.

[72] For the divide between modernist and fundamentalist in Chinese Protestantism, see the discussion in ch. 1.

However, the officials and Christian leaders overseeing the political cooptation, now called the Three-Self Reform movement, soon shifted their focus on the "supra-political" stance of the "spiritualists" because their teaching focused more on spiritual cultivation than social participation.[73] Notable representatives include Wang Mingdao, David Yang, Watchman Nee, Jia Yuming, and the Jesus Family. These leaders used this supra-political stance to allege their innocence from the imperialist cause and refused to be involved in any temporal political movement, including the Three-self Movement.

But one after another, the "spiritualists" faced tremendous pressure to give up their stance and join the accusation campaign. The coworkers in Fuzhou, Nanjing, Beijing, and eventually Shanghai had to concede to the "people's stand." Nee made a speech entitled "How I made the turn," in which he recognized the patriotic responsibility of Chinese Christians and the possibility that imperialism could infiltrate a person without the person knowing.[74] The compromise did not gain him much ground. The following "Three anti and Five anti" campaign targeted Watchman Nee for his "capitalist" identity as a business owner. Because he failed to list one expensive pressure cooker in the nationalization process of his pharmaceutical company, the authorities accused Nee of theft of state property and secretly arrested him in April 1952.

Watchman Nee was in detention for four years before trial. During this time, some Local Church members developed negative opinions toward the Three-Self movement.

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[73] The "spiritualists" insisted that human miseries were indicators of the world's downward trend and the imminent final judgement. In this sense, social reforms and political participation would be futile. Watchman Nee contributed to this viewpoint in his book *Love Not the World,* in which he likened human society to a wrecked boat destined to sink; the only thing that could be salvaged was the souls of the passengers.

[74] "Wo shi zenyang zhuan guo lai de" [How I made the turn]. Delivered on August 20, 1951. This speech was not published. Quotes from Ying, *Anti-imperialism,* 68-75.

Influenced by Wang Mingdao's firm resistance against any cooperation with the "unbelievers," Ruth Lee and others decided to withdraw the church in Shanghai from the Three-self Movement. The churches in Beijing, Wuhan, and many other places followed. Nonetheless, they declared their withdrawal was due to "the difference in faith" instead of disobedience to the authorities.

In the 1955-57 campaign to eradicate hidden counterrevolutionaries, Wang Mingdao became the first Protestant to be arrested as an accused "counterrevolutionary." In January 1956, the authorities staged a national crackdown on the Local Church leaders employing the same charge. The arrests spread across Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, and Hunan provinces, including Shanghai's leading coworkers and elders. The government argued that this was not targeting their Christian faith. A public exhibit of the proofs of Watchman Nee's purported economic crimes and moral depravity went on for 17 days in February 1956 and some younger coworkers accused Nee in a public denunciation meeting. Nee appeared in a trial and was sentenced 15 years in prison. Ruth Lee, Peace Wang, and a dozen other Local Church leaders received a similar sentence in 1958.[75]

The counterrevolutionary case heavily damaged the Local Church. A few coworkers who cooperated with the Three-Self Movement succeeded in leadership roles, including Tang Shoulin, Ren Zhongxiang (1918-1997), Zuo Furu (1902-1979), and Yan Jiale. They continued to negotiate the Local Church's spiritual legacy and the Three-Self Movement's political imperative, but the faith crisis was fatal. The 1957 National Coworker Conference reported the total membership to be around 70,000 in 700 churches,[76] but local attendance

[75] Ibid. 140.
[76] The number might be nominal membership: Ibid, 159, note 49.

decreased; for example, Shanghai dropped two-thirds from 900 to 300.[77] In the same period, the Anti-Rightist struggles (1957-58) and the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) caused further shrinking of the public space for Christians and other religious practitioners. In September 1957, the authorities merged all churches and cut Christian clergy to free up the labour force and production sites. In Shanghai, they downsized the active Christian churches from 208 to 22; in Beijing, 65 to 4.[78] The church in Shanghai, now under the leadership of Three-Self loyalists, donated their large meeting hall on Nanyang Road and joined the meeting in the Grace church in Jing'an district. The merge in 1958 buried all public denominational differences for Chinese Protestantism under the Three-Self Movement. Ironically, now there was indeed only one church in each locality in China, yet it was the Three-Self Patriotic church under state control.

Conclusion: The Local Church Beyond Watchman Nee

This chapter recounted the history of the Local Church from the eruption of the Second Sino-Japanese War to the first decade of the People's Republic of China. The church went through a lot of challenges during this time, including the afflictions of war, pressure from Japanese colonial authorities, and cooptation by the PRC state. Despite these challenges, the record shows that the vitality to spread the Christian faith and plant local churches had never stopped, and the movement continued to grow throughout this period. Most current sources highlighted the ups (1948) and downs (1942, 1952) of Nee's leadership and how that was intertwined the fate of the local churches in China. However, this chapter looks more broadly at the input of many other actors and suggests that the movement grew steadily throughout

[77] Ibid., 146, 158.
[78] Ibid, 180.

this period, and the individual agency of coworkers proved that the movement had entered a more mature stage.

The Local Church's plan to evangelize China allowed many members to step up for leadership. The war eruption interrupted the plan, and the emphasis transferred from the coastal to the hinterland region. During Nee's one-year trip to Europe and following involvement in the pharmaceutical business, Ruth Lee and others took responsibility for coordination and communication. The expansion of the war caused different situations for individual coworkers to cope with. This chapter raised many examples of how they continued evangelistic and philanthropy activities in the context of the shortage of resources, political pressure, and internal conflicts. They also revitalized the movement during the demobilization and economic recovery process and helped it return on track.

The resumption of Watchman Nee's ministry and the "Jerusalem Model" in 1948 were a watershed for the movement. For some outsiders, the Local Church seemingly embraced a denominational and centralizing turn that privileged Nee's absolute leadership.[79] According to this view, the Kuling training, especially a class about "Authority and Submission," [80] became a stage to turn coworkers and establish hierarchical relationships. This perspective, however, was based upon a body of research that focused exclusively on Watchman Nee's individual life and writings and seldom considered other voices in this movement. Examining the church correspondence suggests that Nee was far from an unchallenged authoritarian figure. His peers and followers thrice removed him from leadership positions in the

[79] Most of Watchman Nee's biographers held this view and considered it a turning point of his late ministry. See Kinnear*, Against the Tide,* 250-252; Lyall, *Three of China's Mighty Men*, 84-88; Chan, *My uncle Watchman Nee*, 59-70

[80] CWWN 59:97-245.

movement's short history (1924, 1942, and 1956). The fact that the Local Church leaders continued to form an oppositional opinion against Nee while embracing his church model suggested that there was little authoritarian culture within this movement.

The establishment of the People's Republic of China and its atheist ideology posed a new challenge to the Local Church and other Chinese Christians, and it soon became the most pressing question to all of them. The decision to retract their membership from the Three-Self Movement was the last decision the Local Church leaders made without Nee, though it did not make much difference. They all faced imprisonment in the corporate counterrevolutionary case. Of all the Local Church leaders discussed in this chapter, only Witness Lee, Stephen Kaung, and K. H. Weigh avoided the destiny of public struggle and prison terms. These three left China before 1949 and became pivotal figures in the overseas development of the Local Church in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States.

Chapter 3 "Local Church": Propagation to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia, 1949-1962

At the end of the Chinese Civil War, many Local Church members fled China and found refuge in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other important Southeast Asian cities. From 1949 to 1954, the churches in these localities saw a significant increase in membership. As the most prominent coworker who left China, Witness Lee emerged as the leader in this movement. However, the "local ground of oneness" doctrine again became a point of contention. Some coworkers in Taiwan, Manila, and Singapore disagreed with Lee's leadership and his application of the doctrine. These people looked up to T. Austin-Sparks, Nee's former associate in the West, as a symbolic leader. Throughout the 1950s, Austin-Sparks hosted a loose but far-reaching international fellowship among followers dispersed in Western Europe, the US, India, and Southeast Asia. The conflict ended with a schism. A significant number of coworkers and members left the local churches which followed Witness Lee's leadership and adhered to the teaching of local ground of oneness.

This chapter covers the development of the churches in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. Most attention goes to Witness Lee in Taiwan as the emerging center of communication and the most populous region for this movement. Putting the membership increase and the following schism in historical context, this chapter argues that the inherent search for new leadership in Nee's absence was also a search for the movement's identity. The diaspora experience encouraged the members to consolidate in their faith community, and the dialogue with T. Austin-Sparks and his colleagues brought unwanted tension.

The Local Church in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia before 1949 and Watchman Nee's Last Arrangements

The Local Church started to spread to Southeast Asia as early as the 1920s. It was a result of separate endeavours by Watchman Nee and Leland Wang. Because of the large Fuzhou community in this region, many churches would invite capable preachers from Fujian to minister to them.[1] Watchman Nee's first visit to Setiawan, Malaysia, was in 1924. The visitation resulted in the establishment of a new church in the following year. Later, Nee's publications also influenced the beginning of churches in Penang and Singapore around 1935. In addition, another line of transmission was through Leland Wang, who joined Robert A. Jaffrey (1873-1945) in 1929 in the latter's venture of preaching the gospel to the indigenous people in Malaya and the Dutch Indies. Wang's effort resulted in the raising up of independent meetings in Manila, Bangkok, and Surabaya. Wang followed up by introducing some of his associates to oversee these meetings according to the fashion of the Christian Assembly in Fuzhou.

Collaboration between the two separate networks, nonetheless, was possible, especially during the Second World War. For example, Nee personally visited Manila before he went to England in 1937, and the *Open Door* sometimes included the whereabouts of Leland Wang and his protégés. Many missionary accounts did not distinguish the difference and simply considered all of them as the Local Church in this region.[2] The coworkers from Fuzhou, however, usually maintained an awkwardly loose connection with Nee and his associates

[1] The main ones were Wilson Wang (Wang Zhi, 1903-1998), Simon Meek (Hok Siuw Meek) and Lukas Wu (Wu Renjie) in Manila, and Faithful Luke (Lu Zhongxin) in Singapore. See Ch.1 and Jean Debernardi, *Christian Circulation: Global Christianity and the Local Church in Penang and Singapore, 1819-2000* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2020), 264-296.
[2] For example, see chapter 11 of Cliff, "The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee."

before 1949. They used the name "Christian Assembly" and shared Nee's anti-denominationalism. However, they did not identify with Nee's teaching of the local ground of oneness and were not part of his training or the overcomer conferences he held.

Compared to Southeast Asia, the leadership in the churches in Taiwan and Hong Kong had a closer tie to Watchman Nee's leadership. The churches here were the result of wartime dislocation and consisted of new immigrants from different provinces. K. H. Weigh established the church in Hong Kong in 1937 and returned after Second Sino-Japanese War as a long-time elder. He had been Nee's classmate in middle school and had remained a loyal supporter of his leadership through the turmoils of the 1920s and 1930s.[3] Local Church members started to migrate to Taiwan after the former Japanese colony was returned to China in 1945. Watchman Nee personally visited Taipei in 1947 and Hong Kong in 1949 and 1950. He summoned one young coworker, James Chen (Chen Zexin, 1908-1986), to come to Hong Kong and help K. H. Weigh.[4] While ministering together with Witness Lee in this region, Watchman Nee appointed the elders in both places. The elders in Hong Kong were Weigh and Chen and three local brothers. The elders in Taipei were all recently arrived "mainlanders," including three protegés of Lee's from Shandong. To supply the financial needs of the work, Nee proposed to manufacture some of his pharmaceutical company's best-selling products in both places.[5] The last thing Nee did before return to Shanghai was to set up publishing branches of the Gospel Book Room in both Hong Kong and Taipei.[6] Nee left Hong Kong in March 1950 and was never able to go abroad again.

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[3] See Ch. 2.
[4] CWWN 61: 209.
[5] CWWL 1981 2: 278-279.
[6] Ibid. 204.

A New Beginning in Taiwan and Witness Lee's Emerging Leadership

Witness Lee left Shanghai for Taiwan in May 1949. At that time, he was joining a large retreat of one million people, including Kuomintang army personnel, party officials, and other refugees. None of them considered Taiwan a permanent home. After experiencing a decisive defeat and losing the mainland, the morale of these newcomers on the island was as low as it could get. Most refugees could only hope that the Taiwan Strait would delay the aggression of the People's Liberation Army and that the United States would change its policy and assist the Kuomintang again. Lee also shared the general atmosphere of defeat. According to his account, he lay on the floor of a temporary residence, where his family of twelve crowded into a single room, and asked himself the existential question, "Why am I here?"[7]

But with great challenge came great opportunity. After travelling through the island, Lee's attention was captured by Taiwan's concentrated population and the transportation system left by Japanese colonization. In August 1949, the church in Taipei had a new beginning. On a piece of land donated by two Chinese members from the Philippines, they built a wooden meeting hall accommodating 300 people.[8] Lee led the church to continue the successful experience of evangelism in Shanghai. The methods included tracts, banners, drum marches, and outdoor gospel rallies. A report of the gospel march prior to the 1951 rally demonstrated the scope of these rallies:

> The gospel march had two teams: the vehicle team and the on-foot team. The vehicle team had about 150 bicycles. The on-foot teams had three to four hundred brothers and sisters. The two

[7] Ibid. 274.
[8] This meeting hall is still under use after several renovations and expansions. After building several meeting halls in Taipei city in the 1950s, this original meeting hall became known as Hall One of the Church in Taipei. In 2024, there were more than one hundred meeting halls in the church in Taipei.

> teams launched at the same time. The "gospel automobile" drove at the front and directed the march through loudspeakers. It also led to singing and gospel preaching. After rounding the center of the city, the march returned to the park for a message. It was so popular that we had four sets of baptisms in the first five months of this year and added forty-two brothers…[9]

After the rally, the church would assign some experienced believers to visit the newly baptized and oversee their "new believer training". Sometimes, these training times were followed by "unleavened meetings," during which the believers buried their past by publicly burning their "worldly" or "superstitious" belongings. The responsible elders in each meeting hall or *fenjia* ("houses") would immediately encourage new members, no matter what their social status, to participate in various church services. The usual service tasks included meeting reception, hall cleaning, and providing hospitality to visitors. Applying his experiences in Yantai and Shanghai, Witness Lee effectively used this framework to keep people actively involved in church services. To frequently mobilize believers was one distinctive characteristic of the churches in Taiwan.

In 1951, Lee received a generous financial offer from one wealthy member in Manila, who pledged to cover all expenses of the gospel work in Taiwan.[10] This financial aid continued for a decade until 1961 and contributed in several different ways. It was used to build meeting halls and other facilities in key cities. The church in Taipei expanded the first meeting hall to accommodate 1,400 people and a new editorial office for the Taipei branch of the Gospel Book Room.[11] The church in Taipei went on to purchase or build six new smaller

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[9] *The Ministry of the Word* 1951:52.
[10] CWWL 1981 2:280-281.
[11] This chapter relies heavily upon two publications by this new editorial office. *Huayu zhishi* (*The Ministry of the Word*, 1951-1982) inherited the function of previous magazines by the Gospel Book Room, like *The Christians* or *Present Testimony*. *The Ministry of the Word* had a special section for church reports from 1951 to 1957. After 1957, the reports became an independent publication, *Jiaohui tong wen* (*Church News*, 1958-1984). It shared the same Chinese name as Nee's short-lived publication between 1934 and 1935. The reports in these publications covered the churches in Taiwan, the Philippines, the United States, and many more places. They

meeting halls in the next three years. During the same period, at least nine other churches also purchased their own meeting halls.[12] In 1952, the money was also used to pay the stipends for up to eighty new full-time coworkers. Most of them participated in Lee's personal training in 1951.

Figure 1 Gospel March in Taiwan[13]

The result of these measures was that the membership of the churches in Taiwan grew exponentially. From 1949 to 1954, most accounts indicated that the number increased from

also included translated letters from their foreign allies, especially those among T. Austin-Sparks and Honor Oak Christian Center's network.

[12] The ninth issue of *The Ministry of the Word* reported the proceedings of the fourth special perfecting meeting in Taiwan, February 3-13, 1952. It included a list of the addresses of these meeting halls. See *The Ministry of the Word*, 1952:386. The report also mentioned the "count of brothers and sisters in Taiwan increased from a hundred to 5,800."

[13] Photo Credit: The LA Years. https://www.layears.org/ Accessed June 5, 2024.

four to five hundred to over twenty thousand.[14] It was a remarkable ride, and most members, including Lee, considered it a time of revival. The success should be attributed to the culture of member participation and Witness Lee's effective leadership. Compared to some other churches starting from scratch in Taiwan, like the Lutherans and Baptists, the growth of the Local Church in these years indeed was more significant.[15] However, the record shows that the Local Church was not the only Christian group experiencing rapid growth on the island during this period.[16] For example, the number of Presbyterians increased from 56,591 in 1952 to 86,064 in 1954.[17] In the next decade from 1954 to 1964, the Presbyterians continued to double their membership while the Local Church's number stagnated. From the end of the WWII to the year 1960, the overall Protestant community in Taiwan grew from 37,000 to 200,000. The main reasons for this general growth included an influx of experienced missionaries and resources from the China mission field, a large number (about 50,000) of Christian migrants, and a generally friendly church-state relationship.[18]

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[14] Lee's own account often exceed this estimate and pointed to a hundredfold increase to close to 50,000 members by 1955. See CWWL 1961-1962, 1:358. Hollington Tong, Allen Swanson, and Dorothy Raber each attempted to provide an approximate figure but none of their approaches seem to lead to a scientific and accurate number. See Hollington Tong, *Christianity in Taiwan: A History* (Taipei: China Post, 1961), 114; Allen Swanson, *Taiwan: Mainline versus Independent Church Growth* (South Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library 1970), 294; Dorothy Raber, *Protestantism in Changing Taiwan: A Call to Creative Response* (Pasadena Calif: William Carrey, 1978), 189-190.

[15] These two denominations both gained less than ten thousand new members in the same period.

[16] For a demographic survey of the Protestants in Taiwan in this period, see Allen J. Swanson and Dorothy A. Raber's books cited above, and Qu Haiyuan, "Taiwan diqu jidujiao fazhan qushi zhi chubu tantao" [A preliminary study of the development of Protestantism in Taiwan] *Taiwanese Journal of Sociology* no. 6 (May 1982): 15-28. For a general narrative of Protestantism in Taiwan before the 1990s, see Murray Rubinstein, *The Protestant Community on Modern Taiwan: Mission, Seminary, and Church* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1991) and Zha Shijie, "Si shi nian de Taiwan Jiduj iaohui" [Forty years of the church in Taiwan] in *Zhonghua Minguo shi zhuanti lunwen ji* [Topical essays on the history of the Republic of China] (Taipei: Academia Historica, 1992).

[17] History committee of the Taiwan Presbyterian church, *Taiwan Jidu zhanglao jiaohui biannianshi* [A Hundred Years of the Taiwan Presbyterian Church] (Renguang, 1984), 352 and 491-92.

[18] Peter Chen-main Wang, "Christianity in Modern Taiwan–Struggling over the path of contextualization" in Stephen Uhalley Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu ed. *China and Christianity: Burden Past, Hopeful Future* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 322-325.

It should be noted that the friendliness from the state came with a condition. When the Korean War erupted in 1951, Chiang Kai-shek and his KMT government received much-needed military and financial support from the United States. Nonetheless, there was a dire need for him to gain even more alliance among the anti-communist camp. For this purpose, Chiang turned to his Christian supporters. According to the research of Chin Ken Pa, a group of "party-state Christians," who were officials or KMT party members themselves, actively assisted Chiang in this cause. They bundled their Christian faith and the official ideology together and proclaimed that the anti-communist war would decide the fate of Christianity in China.[19] At first glance, the mainlander-dominated, mandarin-speaking Local Church would be a natural ally in this political campaign. However, its apolitical spirituality inhibited the group from committing to politics. Instead, a rumour about Witness Lee working with the communists led to his trip to Hong Kong in 1950 being monitored by secret service agents.[20] The monitoring of Lee's whereabouts and the church meetings continued for about two years.

The tension between the Local Church's spiritual teachings and the intense political atmosphere was also demonstrated in the case of saluting the portrait of Sun Yat-sen, a ritual used by the Kuomintang to ensure ideological agreement and examine political loyalty. In 1954, three young Local Church members graduated from National Taiwan University and Taiwan Provincial College of Engineering and joined the reserve officer training in the army (for their compulsory military service). Because of their religious faith, they refused to bow

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[19] Chin Ken Pa, *Yuese he tade dixiongmen: hujiaofangong dangguo jidutu yu Taiwan jiyaopai de xingcheng* [Joseph and his brothers: anti-communist apologetic, party-state Christians, and the formation of Taiwanese fundamentalists,] (Tainan: Presbyterian Church in Taiwan Press, 2017)
[20] CWWL 1981 2:206-207, 404-405.

to the portrait of Sun Yat-sen during their training.[21] There was concern that these young Christians might be disciplined according to martial law, but the result was that they were simply discharged.[22] Later, the Legislative Yuan dismissed a petition concerning this issue, ruling that the demand to bow to the portrait was "constitutional" and forbidding any exemptions from the ritual for religious reasons.[23]

Because of this political atmosphere, Witness Lee was not able to make subsequent trips to Hong Kong until 1954. Enjoying the influx of immigrants from mainland China and the spiritual revival that followed Watchman Nee's appointment of Weigh and other elders, the church in Hong Kong experienced substantial growth in this period. The number increased from 300 in 1949 to 1,700 in 1953.[24] The number continued to grow to about the peak of 3000 in the 1950s.[25] Comparing the periods of 1942-1948 and 1949-1954, the average of annual baptisms increased from 43 to 280 people.[26] The church also purchased

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[21] This issue had already been discussed within the Local Church back in 1934. Watchman Nee, John Chang, and Witness Lee collectively endorsed a formal response that they published in the *Newsletters* dissuading members bowing to the portrait. See CWWN, 26:330-333.

[22] Huang Gui-sen (?-) was one of the members involved in this case. According to his private account to the author, Madame Chiang Soong Mei Ling, a devout Christian herself, intervened in this case from a human rights angle and prevented the case from going to court-martial. Official documents recording this event were collected by Lin-yi Tseng. See Tseng, "College Campuses under martial-law and party-state system: a brief talk on party organization and investigation among intelligentsia and education" (lecture, National Taiwan University, Taipei, May 15, 2019.) https://medium.com/台大歷史系學會學術部 ntuhistoryacademic/戒嚴時期黨國體制下的大學校園-淺談知青黨部與文教偵防講座紀錄-571f977c2099

[23] "Xiang guofu yixiang xing li wanquan fuhe xianfa jingshen" [Saluting the Portrait of Our National Father is Completely According to the Spirit of the Constitution] Central Daily News, April 1, 1956.

[24] Lukas Wu, "Fangwen tai gang ge di jiaohui er you de xin gan" [Impressions after visiting the churches in Taiwan and Hong Kong]," *The Ministry of the Word*, 1954:31, 1299.

[25] James Chen, "Ni Tuosheng dixiong jian shi" [A Brief History of Brother Watchman Nee] in Angus Kinnear et al. *Ni Tuosheng shengping teji* [A special collection of Watchman Nee's Life accounts] (Hong Kong: Found Treasure Publication, 2010), 321. According to Earl Herbert Cressy's early study, just like in Taiwan, the churches in Hong Kong also enjoyed substantial growth in the 1950s. The total membership of denominational churches grew from 53,017 to 73,470 between 1955 and 1958. See Cressy, *Urban Church Growth in Hong Kong*, 1955-1958 (Hong Kong: personally published, 1960.)

[26] Weigh, *A Pure Person,* 412.

several meeting halls, with the primary one in Tsim Shia Tsui occupying 9,000 square feet and seating 1,100. Lee resumed his visits to Hong Kong in 1954 and 1955.

Beginning in 1950, the church in Manila invited Lee to direct the work in the Philippines. For the next decade, he would spend at least three months in Manila every year. He attempted to bring the churches in the Philippines into the same profitable practices in Taiwan but with lesser success.[27] On the one hand, it was Leland Wang's network that established the church here; on the other hand, compared to Taiwan and Hong Kong, the church members in Manila did not experience the baptism of war and the loss of social entitlements.[28] Therefore, they may have less motivation to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the church community. Despite this difference, the church in Manila grew from 316 to 1,200 people in 1955.[29] There were also churches in Iloilo, Ozamis, and their nearby country towns in both Chinese and Filipino communities.[30]

This brought up the question of how much the Local Church identified Witness Lee as Watchman Nee's successor. Lee gained his credibility from several factors: first, he was one of the senior coworkers who followed Nee from the mid-1930s; second, he had a track record of bringing some forms of revival to the churches in Yantai and Shanghai; third, he had helped with the resumption of the ministry of Watchman Nee and received the latter's endorsement of directing the works overseas. However, some other coworkers also received personal discipleship and assignment from Nee (e.g., Stephen Kaung and James Chen) or

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[27] Stephen Kaung, "Min di jiaohui shifeng de xin anpai" [New Arrangements for the Services in the Church in Manila] in *The Ministry of the Word,* 1952:470-471.
[28] Ref. CWWL 1981 2:190-191.
[29] Weigh, *A Pure Person,* 430 and Angus Kinnear's survey cited in Norman Cliff's dissertation, 99. According to K. H. Weigh, the number of Manila continued to grow to 1,800 in 1961 before the schism.
[30] Simon Meek, "Guanyu fei dao zhong nan bu jiaohui de xiaoxi" [Information about the churches in the central and southern Philippine islands] in *The Ministry of the Word,* 1952: 422.

followed a separate trajectory and established their own reputation in a specific region (e. g. Simon Meek and Faithful Luke). The egalitarian culture of the Local Church might encourage these coworkers to view Lee more as one of their peers, and they did not always appreciate his leadership and serious spirituality. Moreover, during the first half of the 1950s, Lee's messages were mostly summarizing and representing Nee's previous teachings.[31] The shadow of Watchman Nee's absence was influencing this movement.

Interacting with T. Austin-Sparks and other Westerners, 1955-1958

The unspoken desire for an authoritative spiritual voice was the reason to invite T. Austin-Sparks to Southeast Asia in 1955. Several elders in Taiwan initiated this idea, and Witness Lee reluctantly agreed with it.[32] The connection between Austin-Sparks and Watchman Nee began with his trip to Europe in 1937. For years, the scope of Austin-Sparks' Honor Oak Christian Fellowship remained quite small, with a regular audience of around two to three hundred. Nonetheless, there was a growing international readership of his bimonthly publication, *A Witness and A Testimony* (1923-1971), among the missionaries and indigenous leaders who were dissatisfied with the control and interference of denominational and missional boards.[33] After the end of the WWII and successful surgical treatment for a

[31] Witness Lee considered that his most important writing during this period was *The Crucial Truths in the Holy Scriptures.* It was an effort to summarize Watchman Nee and the Local Church's teachings in 60 topics. See CWWL 1932-1949, vol. 3-4.
[32] Lee explained that his hesitation came from Watchman Nee's reluctance to invite Austin-Sparks and the difficulty brought by the representatives of the Exclusive Brethren in the 1930s. CWWL 1981 2: 283-284.
[33] Beyond Watchman Nee's followers, Austin-Sparks' supporters were mostly found in India. The most notable were two British missionaries, Raymond Golsworthy and Fred Flack, and the influential indigenous evangelist Bakht Singh. See A. J. Flack, *The Wonder of His Ways* (A. J. Flack, 2005); C. R. Golsworthy, *A Missionary's Love Story* (C. R. Golsworthy, 2003); T. E. Koshy, *Bakht Singh of India: The Incredible Account of a Modern-Day Apostle* (Westmont: Intervarsity, 2012). The autobiographies of Golsworthy and Flack can be retrieved from http://faithliterature.net/

stomach ailment, Austin-Sparks embarked on overseas trips to reach more of his audience.[34] Much like his Chinese counterpart Watchman Nee, Austin-Sparks suffered hostile rumours and alienation within domestic Christian circles because of his criticism of denominationalism.[35] The invitation endorsed by the Local Church coworkers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, therefore, was much welcomed.

T. Austin-Sparks first visited Taiwan in October 1955.[36] He and his companions first went to India and joined the famous indigenous evangelist Bakht Singh's (1903-2000) conference at Hyderabad. Afterwards, they went on to visit the Local Church churches in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Everywhere, they were welcomed at the airports by hundreds of passionate believers, and the audience in each conference meeting often exceeded 2,000. Because of the success of the first trip, both sides were happy to schedule a second and more extensive one at the beginning of 1957. However, during this stay, Austin-Sparks blatantly expressed his opinion against the doctrine of the local ground of oneness on several occasions, and Witness Lee firmly confronted him. Austin-Sparks emphasized the church in his teachings, but his understanding was more spiritual and heavenly. He asserted that there is no sole criterion of a church except the "stature of Christ" and that insisting upon the local ground of oneness would turn the church into a "little church." Witness Lee

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[34] Rex G. Beck, *Shaped by Vision: A Biography of T. Austin-Sparks* (Cleveland Heights, OH: Greater Purpose Publishing, 2005), 178.

[35] Lance Lambert, "The Life and Ministry of Theodore Austin-Sparks" in The Life and Ministry of Theodore Austin-Sparks (Wellington: Austin-Sparks.net, 2001), 21. Retrieved from https://www.austin-sparks.net/english/books/life_and_ministry_of_theodore_austinsparks_the.html. Accessed June 11, 2024.

[36] A record of his first trip to India and Southeast Asia can be seen in T. Austin-Sparks, Editorial of *A Witness and A Testimony* no. 34 (1956):19-21.

countered this idea by raising the legitimacy question of some spiritual figures' decision to remain in denominations and the practical question of how to care for new converts.[37]

It is worth noting that in some later issues of *A Witness and A Testimony,* Austin-Sparks deliberately tormented the restorationist search for an exact church model in the New Testament.[38] By doing so, he virtually opposed Watchman Nee's *Concerning Our Mission* because many principles in the book were based upon a close reading of the Book of Acts and the epistles. Austin-Sparks also banned this book from sale at Honor Oak, which was translated into English with the assistance his own colleagues. This development echoed Nee's frustration back in 1939 that the Honor Oak was secretly "on guard" against his contribution.[39] During their two trips to Asia, Austin-Sparks and his associates made critical comments regarding cultural differences, such as the brutality of cockfighting in the Philippines, poor sanitation in hotels, and Taiwanese soldiers' mannerisms of keeping their caps on indoors.[40] These comments caused minor offences to the listeners, and Witness Lee perceived them as signs of a superiority complex.[41]

After the English guests departed in 1957, Witness Lee immediately summoned a conference to clarify and reiterate the doctrine of the local ground of oneness.[42] In order to practice what they preached, Lee and the church elders in Taipei even proposed a merger with the leaders of several non-denominational churches. The offer included a public and

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[37] CWWL 1981 2:289-292; Beck, *Shaped by Vision,* 228-234.
[38] See the editorials of *A Witness and A Testimony* 36, no.3 and 37, no.1-3. https://www.austin-sparks.net/english/magazines/AWAT_chrono.html. These editorials are summarized in Rex G. Beck, *Shaped by Vision: A Biography of T. Austin-Sparks* (Cleveland Heights, OH: Greater Purpose Publishing, 2005), 223-228.
[39] "A Letter from Brother Watchman Nee," *The Open Door* (1939), no. 15 in CWWN 32:521-522.
[40] Weigh, 417; Poul Madsen, Rejsebrev. nr. 7', Mod Målet, April 1957, n.p; CWWL 1981 2: 332-333.
[41] "Private Talks between Witness Lee and K. H. Weigh," CWWL 1957 3:167.
[42] The formal talks were later published as *The Testimony and the Ground of the Church* in CWWL 1957 2:1-233. Witness Lee conveyed more on this matter to the elders and coworkers in CWWL 1957 vol. 1.

documented transfer of eldership and church property rights.[43] However, all participants, including Wu Yong (1920-2005) of Nanking East Road Chapel and Charles Lee (Li Jisheng, 1902-1961) of Taipei Christian Assembly, declined this offer.[44] In the same year, David Adeney (1911-1994), a former China Inland Mission missionary and representative of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students, came to see Witness Lee and proposed collaboration in university campus ministry. Lee turned down this proposal and discouraged the coworkers from collaborating in this manner as it would distract people from the unique goal of establishing local churches.[45]

[43] Witness Lee, *Life-study of Genesis*, 459-460.
[44] For the life of Wu Yong, see Jin Ming-wei, *Bu mie de deng huo: Wuyong zhanglao chuanqi de yisheng* [Eternal Flame: the Legendary Life of Elder Wu Yong,] (Taipei: Cosmic Light Holistic Care, 2006). There's no proper biography of Charles Lee. Some of his life accounts can be found on the websites of Taipei Christian Assembly (http://www.taipeiassembly.org/tpi/) and Malacca Gospel Hall (http://malaccagospelhall.org.my/). Also see Debernardi, *Christian Circulations,* 291-296.
[45] CWWL 1957 1:195-218.

Figure 2 Honor Oak's "International Conference" in Copenhagen, Denmark, July 1957.[46]

Despite the critical remarks, Austin-Sparks continued to maintain his ties with the Local Church. Later in the same year, Stephen Kaung and Bakht Singh joined the first-ever "international conference" at Honor Oak, an occasion demonstrating the once-wide scope of this network. Intending to see the work of Austin-Sparks in Honor Oak for himself, Witness Lee also accepted an invitation from Austin-Sparks to visit Western and Northern Europe.[47] He embarked on a round-the-globe trip in 1958. Besides England and Denmark, he also visited emerging congregations in Japan, the United States, and Thailand. Lee was given the

[46] Austin-Sparks is second from the right. Bakht Singh is sitting in front of Theodore Austin-Sparks. Poul Madsen is on the far left, with Stephen Kaung sitting in front of him.

[47] Most notably, Poul Madsen and his "Christian Fellowship" in Denmark. Madsen was one of the closest allies of Austin-Sparks in the 1950s and joined the latter in his second trip to Taiwan. Watchman Nee and Witness Lee both participated in Madsen's conference at the scenic site Nyborg Strand during their trips to Europe. See Geir Lie, "Poul Madsen and the Danish Kristent Fælleskab Movement," in *The Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association* 28:1 34-48.

podium in Honor Oak and spent significant time with Austin-Sparks in Scotland to discuss their differences. Unfortunately, neither of them was persuaded in this last attempt at seeking common ground. Witness Lee came back to Taipei and expressed in public that he was not impressed with the situation in Western churches.[48] Lee's observation was that he did not see genuine oneness among the non-denominational Christians gathered through Austin-Sparks' style of open fellowship.[49]

A Slow-Brewing Schism, 1959-1962

Witness Lee's published remarks became the last straw to the camp of dissatisfaction. The leaders of this camp were a group of young and talented coworkers in their thirties.[50] They had mostly joined the Local Church as college students during the postwar revival in Shanghai. After transferring to Taiwan, they were responsible for campus work in Taipei, Taichung, Tainan, Chiayi, and Kaohsiung. Using English reading clubs to promote Austin-Sparks' writings, their influence was especially felt among the younger generation. After Lee's report, they started to criticize Lee and his senior coworkers by emphasizing Austin-Sparks' spiritual authority. The criticism became widespread.

Although the source of this alternative opinion was from Taiwan, the earliest schism and secession broke out in Manila and Singapore.[51] The representative coworkers in these two places were Simon Meek and Faithful Luke; both were experienced preachers from Fuzhou. At the beginning of the 1950s, the churches in Manila and Singapore started to

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[48] "Fellowship on Impressions of the Trip Abroad," *Church News* no. 13 in CWWL 1958 1:308-316.
[49] CWWL 1958 1:191-200.
[50] Five of them were often named: Bellman Lin (Lin Sangang, 1925-), Newman Sze (Shi Bocheng, 1927-2022), Herald Hsu (Hsu Erjian,1922-), C. C. Wei (Wei Jianzhang, ?-2013) and He Guangming (?-?).
[51] CWWL 1981 2:181-198.

invite Witness Lee to assist them on a regular basis, but the Taiwan experience was not received by Manila, and Meek started to contend with Lee about leadership.[52] In 1959, the opposing opinion in Taiwan spread to Manila. In 1961, Simon Meek started to publicly criticize Witness Lee and one of the leading critics in Taiwan joined him in Manila. The conflict heightened during Lee and K. H. Weigh's scheduled visit later that year.[53] Meek 's faction controlled the church administration and blockaded the meeting hall with armed security guards. Soon after hearing of this event, Faithful Luke in Singapore also forsook the teachings of the local ground of oneness in 1962.[54] In both places, the minority which upheld the local ground of oneness formed their own meetings.

In his private letters to the side opposing Witness Lee, T. Austin-Spark expressed an ambiguous attitude to this emerging schism.[55] On the one hand, he condemned the forceful measure used to seize the meeting hall and declared that he loved Lee and would never choose sides; on the other hand, he continued to reiterate his rejection of the local ground of oneness as an "exclusive Brethren invention" and alleged that any Christian gathering in the name of Jesus was a genuine "church in effect." Faithful Luke and the dissenters in Taiwan cited this doctrinal opinion and disseminated it as a justification for their position. In 1962, Austin-Sparks sent to Manila an experienced missionary friend of his, Raymond Golsworthy, who worked there for the following ten years. Austin-Sparks himself visited Manila again in

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[52] CWWL 1981 2: 187-190
[53] Weigh, *A Pure Person,* 430-434.
[54] The church in Singapore grew from a dozen to three hundred in 1960. See Reifu Cheng's testimony in 1991. https://www.churchinhk.org/book-resource/新加坡教會歷史簡介/. Accessed June 11, 2024.
[55] The letter was translated by Herald Hsu and included in his personal testimony. Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20190909011912/http://heshbon.blogspot.com/2005/02/blog-post_28.html. Accessed June 11, 2024.

January 1964. He planned to go to Taiwan afterwards, which would possibly have resulted in a similar schism on the island, but the trip was cancelled because of a family emergency.

Witness Lee's advice on how to handle the 1961 schism only arrived in Manila after a separate meeting was formed.[56] In that year, the challenge to his leadership also heightened in Taiwan. The discourse discrediting him was fermenting in many localities, and a separate meeting formed in Kaohsiung.[57] Even though Lee was resolute in dealing with the source of dissent, he and his senior coworkers could not reach an agreement on which measures to take. In addition, Lee was facing financial hardship related to his business undertaking.[58] To cover the growing work expenses in Taiwan, he reinvested some donations in Southeast Asia. The investment yielded good returns in the first years, but problems emerged around 1960. The financial difficulties might have fed into the "bitterness" created during the schism between Lee and his coworkers in Taiwan.[59] After 1961, Witness Lee lingered in the United States, trying to cover the financial holes with some of his family members in Seattle. During his time in the US, he started to see a new opportunity for his spiritual ministry and decided to stay indefinitely. In 1964, Lee confronted T. Austin-Sparks in New York about the latter's intervention during the schism in Southeast Asia and ended the collaboration between the two.[60]

After Witness Lee shifted his focus and committed more time to overseas ministries, he relied on Chang Wuchen (1915-1995) and Chang Yulan (1901-1990) for most of the responsibilities on the island. They were both mainlanders who had been appointed as elders

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[56] CWWL 1981 2: 192.
[57] Ibid. 313.
[58] Weigh, *A Pure Person,* 297, 302, 420.
[59] CWWL 1986 2:429-431.
[60] CWWL 1981 2*:* 335.

by Watchman Nee in 1947. However, the problem was not resolved in Lee's absence. In 1965, the two Changs and eighty other coworkers sent a joint letter to Witness Lee, asking him to return to Taiwan and deal with the dissenters. Lee responded to this call and removed at least four leading opponents from the church work.[61] These coworkers formed their own meeting the next year.

The schism was about more than the doctrinal difference raised by T. Austin-Sparks and his followers. Lee's critics complained that Lee and his more senior coworkers brought spiritual and financial poverty to their coworkers.[62] Their complaints affected many. Beyond the second-generation coworkers and their protégés on college campuses, there were two other noticeable groups within this schism: the Taiwanese-speaking minority and the adherents of Pentecostalism. During the schism, two prominent Taiwanese-speaking evangelists left the movement, and each formed their own church.[63] One senior female coworker, Hou Hsiu-ying (?-1972), also sympathized with the separatists. She was experienced in the Shandong revival and was a strong figure in helping people experience the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Because of her influence, many church members in Taiwan who developed a taste for Pentecostalism also decided to leave. Many of them joined the "New Testament Church" established in Hong Kong by Jiang Duan-yi (1923-1966), including

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[61] Lee did this while promising their stipends and residence would remain unaffected. CWWL 1981 2: 299-302.
[62] Shaw Zunlan was one of the coworkers who left during the schism. He indicated in his autobiography that a coworker's stipend was less than the statutory basic salary, which, according to the data of the Ministry of Labor, was about 11.25 USD a month in 1964. See Shaw, *Cong nian shao dao fa bai [From Youth to Gray Hair: A Memoir of Fifty Years of Devotion]* (Self Publication, 2002). The opposition leaders made many private complaints about the hardship of making a living, see CWWL 1981 2: 309-319.
[63] They were Cheng Tien-fu (1926-2002) and Chang Gui-fu (1924-2001). Back in the 1950s, they had been instrumental in the conversion of the future President of Taiwan, Lee Teng-hui (1923-2020), who was baptized in Meeting Hall Four in the church in Taipei in 1961. After leaving, Cheng joined the church in Manila and later established the Taipei Church of God.

Hong San-qi or Elijah Hong, who later became the leader of this new Chinese indigenous Pentecostal movement.[64]

Conclusion

In 1957, more than one hundred Protestant churches in Taiwan jointly invited the celebrated American evangelist Billy Graham to bring his crusade to the island. This high-profile gospel rally used the largest available venue, the Armed Forces stadium, and attracted about 10,000 people in attendance, including the devout first lady, Madame Chiang Soong Mei-ling (1898-2003).[65] The Local Church did not participate in this rally. Yet, in less than two years, they single-handedly held a similar event and filled the same stadium with another event in Kaohsiung that appealed to five thousand more people in the audience. These huge events demonstrated the vitality of the Local Church and stunned some Protestant leaders.[66]

Despite this vitality, the expanding dissension and the following schism eventually resulted in a drop in membership in Taiwan. Internal sources suggest that this schism costs one-third of Taiwan's total membership.[67] Although the accounts often highlighted the doctrinal difference between Lee and Austin-Sparks, recent theory suggests that such conflicts are seldom the sole reason why a religion divides. According to the perspective of organizational ecology, one possible factor was the change of "niche" on the church-sect

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[64] Murray A. Rubinstein, "The New Testament Church and the Taiwanese Protestant Community" in *The Other Taiwan, 1945-92* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 455-484.
[65] The stadium was mostly reserved for official occasions and was highly political and ceremonial. See Lin Rong-hui, "The Field of Anti-communism and Anti-Soviet Union: A Study on the Historical Context of the Armed Forces Stadium (1950-1960)," Master Thesis, (National Taiwan Normal University, 2017).
[66] Jin, *Eternal Flame,* 167-168.
[67] Zhuo Zunhong et al. *Jidu yu zhaohui: Lee Changshou xiansheng xingyi fangtan lu* [Christ and the Church: interviews about Witness Lee's life and deeds] revised and expanded edition. (Taipei, Academica Historica, 2009), 151.

spectrum.[68] By growing into one of the biggest Christian groups in Taiwan, the once-small Local Church experienced growing internal calls to lower the degree of tension with their surrounding social environment. The financial hardship of the coworkers, the continual tension with other Christians because of the local ground of oneness doctrine, and the recent conflict with T. Austin-Sparks are all reasons for people to ask for compromise. In a sense, the debate underlying the schism was one about purity and flexibility: Witness Lee wanted to maintain the uniqueness of the movement by observing the local ground of oneness, while the opposing group desired to ease the tension and put an end to the seclusion.

Research also shows that religious groups with less centralized institutions and less professionalized clergies are more disposed for schism.[69] Groups like the Local Church did not have boards, committees, or other intermediary organizations to arbitrate conflicts and provide impartiality, nor did they have standardized qualifications and competitive salaries to rein in coworkers. Upholding the restorationist ideal, the Local Church was proud of its decentralized structure; nonetheless, the lack of balancing and regulating institutions between each local church and the coworkers resulted in unceasing turmoils and several future schisms. It also invited concerns about authoritarian control when the movement was at peace and flourishing. By constantly refusing more institutionalization– a process imposed by modernity, according to Max Weber– the Local Church continued to oscillate between the peril of schism and external suspicion of authoritative control.[70] This could be a more general

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[68] Roger Finke and Christopher P. Scheitle "Understanding Schisms: Theoretical Explanations for Their Origins" in James R. Lewis and Sarah M. Lewis ed., *Sacred Schism: How Religions divide* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11-34; Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 19-38.
[69] Ibid, 18-22, 24-27.
[70] John A. Coleman, S. J. "Church-Sect Typology and Organizational Precariousness" *Sociological Analysis* 29: 2 (Summer, 1968), pp. 55-66.

phenomenon in Chinese Christianity because many house churches and Pentecostal-oriented groups also faced the same dilemma.[71]

What was less professed in the primary materials was the significance of the schism. The schism effectively settled a latent debate for the movement on which way to take in Nee's absence. Those who sided with Witness Lee's leadership and insisted upon the local ground of oneness would gradually become identified as the "Local Church." Those who decided to depart from Lee in Taiwan, Manila, and Singapore continued to claim Watchman Nee and T. Austin-Sparks' legacy of some sort, and each became an independent group. Austin-Sparks passed away in 1971, and his influence started to shrink even before that.[72] The cessation of the collaboration between Witness Lee and T. Austin-Sparks did not mean that the "Local Church" would remain exclusive ever since. Witness Lee continued to look for like-minded Christians in the West who would identify with Nee's insight on the local ground of oneness, and the next chapter is on how he found his audience among the American evangelicals.

[71] Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, *China and the True Jesus: Charisma and Organization in a Chinese Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 16-20.
[72] Beck, *Shaped by Vision*, 237-290.

Chapter 4 "Living Stream": the Reverse Mission to the United States, 1962-1974

Witness Lee's relocation to the United States in 1962 brought a new direction to the Local Church. Before his arrival, many members of the Local Church had already immigrated to the United States due to the Chinese Civil War and the subsequent tension caused by the Cold War. These members gathered together and maintained contact with the overseas branch of the Local Church in Southeast Asia. When Lee came to the United States, he decided to work among ordinary Americans instead of only with Chinese immigrants. Against the backdrop of growing dissatisfaction with mainline Christianity and diversification of the religious market, a group of American Christians started to be drawn to Watchman Nee and his church ideals. Lee tirelessly worked among them and represented the Local Church as a fresh alternative to the "old religion." In about ten years, the Local Church in the United States spread to almost fifty localities and added about 5,000 members.

This chapter focuses on this "reverse mission" and discusses the possible reasons and historical context for Witness Lee and the Local Church's initial success in the United States from 1962 to 1974. The "reverse mission" is a concept referring to the sending of missionaries to Europe and North America by Christians from the non-Western world, particularly Africa, Asia and Latin America, which had been at the receiving end of Catholic and Protestant missions since the sixteenth century.[1] After establishing a "model church" in

[1] Some critics argue against the concept as it presupposes modern western missionaries as the norm, while Christian missions have been going all direction since the first century. Also, most examples of reverse missions appealed to immigrants of the same cultural or geographical origin instead of to the locals. That is not the case of Witness Lee and the Local Church as this chapter shows. See Matthew Ojo, "Reverse Mission" in Jonathan J. Bonk ed., *Encyclopedia of Mission and Missionaries* (London: Routledge, 2007), 380-382; Afe Adogame, *The*

Los Angeles, Lee initiated communication between churches in the US and Southeast Asia. The transnational communication and Lee's unique teaching helped nurture a new "church life," which was a series of new spiritual and worship practices that could be exercised individually and corporately. This chapter argues that the transnational tie and the new "church life" were the reasons that the Local Church could set foot in the changing religious and spirituality market in the United States.

The Context of American Christianity and the Local Church's Arrival in the Early 1960s

According to renowned historian of American Christianity, Mark A. Noll, the postwar years, especially the years under Dwight Eisenhower's presidency (1953-1961), was a period of "readjustment and consolidation" for American religion.[2] The Catholic church and the Protestant denominations all enjoyed a significant increase in the number of affiliations in the 1950s. The increase reflected an overall population growth brought about by the postwar baby boom. Young people flooded to live in the growing suburbs; house ownership and church membership were tokens of stability and adulthood. For external reasons, the Cold War and the threat of nuclear weapons were sources of insecurity that turned many to the psychological function of religion. The best example of this was Billy Graham's Los Angeles Revival in mid-September 1949. Just a couple of days before the event, the Soviet Union

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African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 169-189; Eric Morier-Genoud, "'Reverse Mission': A Critical Approach for A Problematic Subject" in Veronique Altglas and Matthew Wood ed. *Bringing Back the Social into the Sociology of Religion: Critical Approaches,* Studies in Critical Research on Religion vol. 8 (Boston: Brill, 2018), 169-188. For a comparative case of Asian reverse mission to America, see Rebecca Kim, *The Spirit Moves West: Korean Missionaries in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2] Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992) ch. 16. Kindle Edition.

successfully exploded an atomic bomb, and Mao Zedong's People's Liberation Army took over mainland China. The breaking news resulted in a huge turnout of 350,000 cumulative audience.[3]

The growth trend slowed during the 1960s as the effect of secularization caught up with the mainline denominations and resulted in their memberships declining.[4] Nonetheless, the conservative Protestant denominations, especially those who identified themselves as "evangelicals," continued to thrive.[5] Some have argued that the reason was that the conservative Christians maintained a higher level of commitment to their churches by protecting their core message from being absorbed by the secularizing society.[6] While their liberal counterparts were busy coping with rapid and radical ideological shifts, the conservatives and new sects insulated their youth with Bible studies and necessary doctrines while reshaping other aspects of their organizations to remain flexible. From independent churches (Calvary Chapel and Willow Creek) to para-church organizations (Campus Crusade for Christ and Promise Keepers), Christians seeking an increase eagerly adopt new music and worship styles, fresh recruiting methods, and new church planting models.[7]

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[3] Laura Porter and Heath W. Carter ed. *Turning Points in the History of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017) Loc. 4901. Kindle edition.
[4] Martin Marty indicated a 'seismic shift' for the mainline Protestants in the 1960s in his "Foreword" to Dean R. Hodge and David A. Roozen eds, *Understanding Church Growth and Decline, 1950-1978* (New York: Pilgrim, 1979). However, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argued that the losing of their share in the religious market went on for two centuries. See Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2006* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 235-253.
[5] For the definition of evangelicalism and how it became a phenomenon across denominations, see George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-century evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
[6] For more reasons for this phenomenon, see Dean M. Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (London: C. A. Watts & Co., 1966).
[7] Donald E. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America,* 248-253; Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210; Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2002), 207-209.

Chinese Protestantism in America also underwent a transition. When some of the Local Church members migrated to the United States at the beginning of the 1950s, most Chinese churches were small, dependent on mainline denominations, and serving only a function of transition. Assimilation seemed to be their imminent destiny.[8] At that time, half of the Chinese immigrant population lived in New York and San Francisco;[9] these were also the places where small Local Church congregations were found. Besides the immigrant Chinese members and college students from Taiwan, there were some returned missionaries and followers of T. Austin-Sparks who joined these churches.

When Witness Lee first visited the US from April 25 to July 31, 1958, there were only 55 known contacts in this country.[10] At the time, his observation was that the country was difficult because the atmosphere was filled with "materialism" and "religion."[11] However, he believed it was meaningful to introduce the Local Church. "Even though the United States is a Christian country, there is a need to help people know Christ as life and to build them up as God's dwelling place locality by locality."[12] He paid attention to the fruits of the successful evangelist crusades, including the work of Billy Graham and The Campus Crusade for Christ, and believed that the Local Church could provide "spiritual homes" and "daily

[8] Tim Tseng, "Protestantism in Twentieth-century Chinese America: The Impact of Transnationalism on the Chinese diaspora" in *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 13 (Jan. 2004): 121-148.
[9] Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 283-311.
[10] According to a North America contact list published in *Church News* 6:12-16 (July 6, 1958).
[11] *Church News,* 4:1-3 (June 8, 1958).
[12] CWWL 1958 1:187.

nourishment" to these new converts.[13] Because of Witness Lee's visit, some congregations sided with him in the upcoming conflict with Austin-Sparks.[14]

Witness Lee's Migration and the New Beginning on the West Coast, 1962-1964

When Lee visited again in 1962, the situation for him became different. On the one hand, he stayed longer because he was trying to solve the financial needs in Southeast Asia and escape from the uneasiness among his coworkers in the aftermath of the Taiwan schism.[15] On the other, he found a welcoming market among avid Christian book lovers. After the WWII, Christian publishing flourished alongside the overall increase of church affiliation.[16] Through the means of distributing ministries, mail-order catalogues, and local bookstores, millions of Christian books reached their audience. A religious middlebrow culture centred on Christian book clubs as a trending way of socializing further promoted the sales of Christian literature.[17]

Two of Watchman Nee's books, *The Normal Christian Life* and *The Normal Christian Church Life*, joined the religious booklovers' lists soon after their publication in 1957 and 1962, respectively.[18] *The Normal Christian Life* was a series of messages Nee delivered in Helsingor, Denmark, after attending the Keswick Convention in 1938. T. Austin-Sparks

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[13] CWWL 1958 2:125-126.
[14] CWWL 1981 2: 363-380; James Reetzke, *Recollections with Thanksgiving: A Brief history of the Beginnings of the Lord's Recovery in the United States* (Chicago: Chicago Bibles and Books, 2001); Bill Barker, *Beginnings on the East Coast* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Bibles and Books, 2002).
[15] See chapter 3. Weigh, *A Pure Person,* 420.
[16] Paul C. Gutjahr, "The Perseverance of Print-bound Saints: Protestant publishing" in Michael Schudson, Joan Shelley Rubin, David Paul Nord eds. *A History of the Book in America: vol. 5: The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 376-388.
[17] Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[18] Other well-received titles published through Angus Kinnear included *Sit, Walk, Stand* (1957) and *What Shall This Man Do* (1961). Both books were based on Nee's messages in Europe.

published them as a series in his periodical *A Witness and A Testimony* (November 1940-March 1942), and Nee's clear illustration of the effortless way leading to an "overcoming" Christian living attracted many. In 1957, Angus Kinnear, a missionary to India and T. Austin-Sparks' son-in-law, collected these messages and published them in a book in Bombay. By 1963, *The Normal Christian Life* had sold more than 50,000 copies and had been translated into more than 20 languages.[19] The success was followed by the publication of *The Normal Christian Church Life* (1962), an abridged and reissued version of *Concerning Our Mission* (1939). Nee originally gave these messages on the principles of mission, church, and coworkers to his Chinese coworkers on the eve of the widening Sino-Japanese War in 1937. During his second European trip, Nee directly oversaw the translation of these messages into English. Even though some at the Honor Oak disagreed with the local ground of oneness as laid out in *Concerning Our Mission*, many British and American readers found the book helpful as they were navigating new options in an era of interdenominational evangelism.[20] Some of them decided to reduce the China content and self-published this new version in America as a "proper sequel to the one on Christian life by Mr. Nee."[21]

To cultivate this emerging interest in Watchman Nee's writings, Witness Lee made the decision to stay in the United States. He chose Los Angeles as his base, where a small congregation had recently accepted the local ground of oneness and split from Austin-Sparks' representative. Lee found his companions here: two trusted Chinese members from

[19] According to the advertisement of the Chinese version in *The Ministry of the Word* 139&140: 5051.
[20] Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* 208.
[21] Karl Hammond, the leader of a Christian free group in Los Angeles, published the book. A brief narrative of how he came to publish the book appeared in *The Stream* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 1963): 11.

Shanghai and Hong Kong and two promising American members who were well-educated and insightful in theology.[22] He prepared closely with them and organized the first special conference in the United States from December 21 to 31, 1962. About 60 adults joined this year-end conference, including American believers from Sacramento, Louisville, Chicago, and New York.[23]

Figure 3 The "All-inclusive Christ" Conference, Dec. 21-31, 1962.[24]

The title of this conference was "The All-inclusive Christ." Witness Lee used an Old Testament typology to teach that Christ is the source of all spiritual supplies to his believers, just like the land of Israel was the source of physical supplies to the residents.[25] It is worth noting that the conference was arguably the starting point of Witness Lee's further

[22] Their names were Paul Ma, Samuel Chang, James Reetzke, and John Ingalls. See Reetzke, *Recollection with Thanksgiving*, 6-20.
[23] *Church News* 53:11-14
[24] Photo retrieved from James Reetzke, *Recollection with Thanksgiving,* 21.
[25] CWWL 1962 2:194-363.

development of Watchman Nee's teaching.[26] An important focus of his theology surrounds the biblical passages about eating, drinking, and breathing. According to Lee, Christian believers literally consumed spiritual nourishment for their spiritual life while reading the Bible and praying.[27] The biblical quotes about eating and drinking are descriptions of a parallel spiritual reality instead of just metaphors. In this spiritual realm as well as in the physical realm, he taught, a regular diet helps maintain one's health and strength, and this kind of spiritual intake is the destined way to achieve the Christian goals laid out by Watchman Nee and the Keswick traditions, namely effortless victory over sin and building the spiritual community in the church.[28]

A welcoming door became open to Witness Lee following the "All-inclusive Christ" conference. In just four months, the number of the Church in Los Angeles jumped from 20 to about 200 people after three congregations– one Charismatic, one Brethren, and one immigrant East Asian– voluntarily joined them.[29] A similar merger also occurred in Sacramento, where the number increased from single digits to seventy.[30] Those who came cited the inspiration from *The Normal Christian Church Life* and demonstrated their willingness to practice what the book taught. Combining different worship styles caused

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[26] Some earlier examples were Lee's messages on the symbol of the "tree of life" in the 1940s and on how to "enjoy God" in the late 1950s. These messages foreshadowed his new departure in the 1960s. See CWWL 1932-1949 2:153-156, 223-226; CWWL 1958 1:364-573.
[27] This theme was ubiquitous in Lee's writings. For example, see CWWL 1972 1:18-89.
[28] In a sense, Witness Lee's theology was contending with his opposers in Taiwan in the recent schism. Some of these coworkers emphasized the subjective experience of the cross and meticulous "dealing" with one's fallen, sinful nature as a component of Watchman Nee's spirituality. Lee claimed that his way was more constructive and spontaneous. See CWWL 1975-1976 2:196-275.
[29] Ibid. 54:11-15.
[30] Ibid. 55:16 and 57:8. Attempts at merging with other conservative, non-denominational groups occurred frequently in Local Church history. Notable cases were found in Yantai, Shanghai, and Taipei, but most of them were fruitless. In his teachings, Watchman Nee urged the effort to watch out for and approach other non-denominational Christians in the same locality before establishing any church. See "The Unity of the Church: A Record of A Fellowship Meeting with the Coworkers," CWWN 56: 327-395.

some initial problems, but people agreed to coordinate in advance.[31] In Texas, some students and staff members at the Wayland Baptist College and Baylor University joined the movement in 1963. They gave up their career paths in the Southern Baptist denomination and started new churches in Plainview, Tyler, Waco, and Dallas.[32]

After the All-inclusive Christ conference, Witness Lee's reputation as Watchman Nee's Chinese coworker spread by word of mouth. Starting in mid-1963, Witness Lee and his new coworkers industriously reached out to potential audiences through visiting and publishing. From September to November, they visited twenty-two interested congregations in the Southwest and West coast.[33] This sort of intensive visitation went on for several years until 1974. Lee also set up the Stream Publishers (later became the Living Stream Ministry) and started to publish *The Stream* on June 1, 1963.[34] The magazine usually included one or two messages, church and conference announcements, advertisements of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's new books, and reader correspondences. The magazine grew to have more than 4,000 copies in circulation by 1965.[35]

The Transnational Ties and the New Church Life, 1965-1968

Since 1964, some American members started to pay personal visits to the churches in Southeast Asia.[36] They wanted to see for their own eyes that the church model in *Normal*

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[31] Ibid. 54:12-14; 55:15; 57:10.
[32] Anonymous ed. *Higher Ground: A History of the Lord's Recovery in Texas from 1962 through 1970.* This is a transcript of eighteen testimonies from early members of the churches in Texas. The appendix included two theological analyses of the Local Church written by Fred D. Howard, a Greek professor in Wayland Baptist College.
[33] *Church News* 56:16.
[34] *The Stream: Book One & Two* (Anaheim CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1980).
[35] *The Ministry of the Word* 167:200. The magazine grew to have 7,500 in circulation and 4,000 subscribers by 1969. See "Further Visits (Louisville)" CWWL Letters & Gleanings 1:358.
[36] See *The Ministry of the Word* 166:154-155.

Christian Church Life was not just an ideal; they were not disappointed and continued to recommend others to do so. It was the same year that the coworkers in Taiwan requested Lee to resolve the growing schism (See Chapter 3). When Lee went back to Taiwan in September 1965, he also brought five American members with him. During a conference at Monopoly Bureau Stadium, these American members strongly identified with Lee's leadership in front of 4,500 Local Church members in attendance.[37] Lee also declared what he considered a providential timing that the movement arrived in the United States when simultaneously there was a rise in the Christian population, growing dissatisfaction of mainline denominations, and the welcoming of Watchman Nee's books.[38] All these contextual factors led to the possibility of a reverse mission. Lee said:

> "Although I and some other brothers and sisters came from the Far East, where Christianity was introduced at a later time, we had something that those in the United States, an advanced Christian country, did not have. We were able to bring to them what we had and supply their need at that time. In February 1963 I stayed again with a certain American brother... This brother said, "In the past we Americans sent many missionaries to China and southern Africa to preach the gospel to the 'natives.' We gathered the natives, trained them, and sent them out. Now the Lord has sent a Chinese brother here, and we are sitting at his feet like the natives to be trained by him and sent out." The brother who made this comment was a publisher of a Christian newspaper. It is truly a wonder that we have something that people in an old Christian country do not have."[39]

The presence of these American believers as a token of Lee's success in the US obviously vindicated the leadership's decision during the schism.[40] During a coworker meeting, Lee sturdily indicated that he would not change his way concerning the local ground of oneness and suggested that those who were against it start their own work. Before that, Chang Wu-chen and other leading coworkers in Taiwan were already touring the island to consolidate

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[37] The names of these American believers were Don Morsey (with his wife), John Ingalls, Gene Edwards, and James Barber. See *The Ministry of the Word* 172:397-400, 173&174: 451-459.
[38] CWWL 1965 4: 227-228.
[39] CWWL 1965 4: 232.
[40] This attitude can be seen in the announcement of Lee's trip on *The Ministry of the Word* 171:353-355.

their position on this matter. Witness Lee later joined them in visiting the localities previously overseen by his opposers.

Lee's return trip to Taiwan in 1965 laid the foundation for a transnational tie between the churches in Southeast Asia and the United States. The Taiwan coworkers fixed their ties with Lee and asked him, after four years of his absence, to resume close supervision of the work on the island. In return, Lee introduced his American friends to participate in literary work in Hong Kong and evangelism in the Philippines. The two ends of this transpacific tie were the church in Taipei and the church in Los Angeles. After two years of frequent visits, Lee and his coworkers recommended that some American followers relocate to Los Angeles to join more training and conferences. Lee also realized that merely showcasing the Southeast Asian churches was not enough to convince American audiences; it was necessary to have at least one exemplary church in America as well. In 1965, the church in Los Angeles purchased a meeting hall sitting on 11th and Elden, Los Angeles, that could accommodate 500 people.[41] The Elden Hall became a stable home for the church in Los Angeles during its most energetic decade.

[41] Ironically, the previous title owner was the son of James Taylor Jr., the prominent Brethren teacher who attempted to recruit Watchman Nee and offered to purchase a meeting hall in Shanghai. See chapter 1 and CWWL 1973-1974 1:52.

Figure 4 An Early Picture of the Elden Hall.[42]

Since 1965, the Local Church in Taiwan and the American West Coast communicated with each other frequently and established a new "church life" together. These new practices were according to Witness Lee's theological emphasis on spiritual vitality and freshness and included at least four key developments. The first development was the practice of "pray-reading." Pray-reading was the practice of converting the words in the Bible into prayer. There was a long tradition among Christians to practice praying and Bible-reading together, and the Local Church teaching had always highlighted the spiritual approach to the Bible.[43] After the schism happened in Taiwan, many churches were downhearted and faced a

[42] Photo retrieved from the Church in Chicago website. https://www.thechurchinchicago.org/contact-us/history-of-the-church-in-chicago/.

[43] The Local Church published a compilation of historical examples of prayer reading, see Ray Graver, *'Lord, Thou Saidst': The Revelation of the Scriptures and The Testimony of Church History Regarding the Intimate and Vital Relationship between God's Word and Prayer* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1981). For Watchman Nee's teaching on this approach, see CWWN 12:206, 54:9-18.

shortage of leadership in meetings. In this context, some members of Tainan started a new practice to pray the Bible directly. When Witness Lee learned about this practice in 1966, he immediately promoted this new method, and many churches followed. In a conference in San Francisco next year, different versions of this practice were merged into one, and the name "pray-reading" was adopted.[44]

Despite the surprising resemblance with Lectio Divina in medieval monasticism,[45] the Local Church's pray-reading practice can appear foreign to some outsiders. It includes four steps: repeat, emphasize, vitalize, and pray.[46] Each practice usually includes only one to several Bible verses. After choosing the verse, the practitioners read the verses out loud and spontaneously follow their inspiration to repeat certain words or phrases with stress. The "taste" or adapted meaning usually becomes stronger and clearer when one repeats this process. This is when one can move on to "vitalize" the reading by verbalizing the inspiration and applying the words to a context. Vitalizing has two-fold meanings: reading for a living and applicatory understanding and reading in a vital and dynamic atmosphere. One can give thanks, praise, or other simple responses to the words without diverging from the subject. After exercising these steps, one can organize the inspirations into a prayer, and the prayer will consist of expressions and ideas from the Bible.

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[44] CWWL 1969 2:193-194.

[45] Lectio Divina literally means "divine reading." It was rooted in early monasticism and enjoys renewed Catholic and Orthodox Christianity interests. The practice emphasized verbal repetition and meditation. For more on this topic, see Enzo Bianchi, *Praying the Word: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1998); Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998); Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011). The similarity likely came from Madam Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717). Guyon was a French Catholic mystic who spent much time in the monastery. She was an important inspiration to the Keswick convention and Watchman Nee. A Shanghai elder, C. H. Yu (Yu Chenghua, 1901-1955,) translated several of Guyon's works into Chinese during 1937-1939, including *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer* (1685), which specifically talked about "meditative" or "prayerful" reading.

[46] CWWL 1987 1:279.

Because all steps in pray-reading are verbal and audible, it is easy for group practitioners to pick up each other's inspirations and develop them interactively. The process intensifies as the communication increases and brings out a clear direction of interpretation while building up a certain rhythm and enthusiasm. It is a group improvisation without a high requirement of skills. For participants, the effect of establishing spiritual fellowship with others can be extraordinary.[47] The practice connects with Witness Lee's theological emphasis on spiritual "eating" and "drinking." To him, pray-reading as an incremental, verbal, and spiritual reading method was a practical way to "masticate" and "digest" the word of God, a biblical metaphor he shared with the Lectio Divina tradition.

The second development was "burial" through water baptism.[48] At the end of 1967, Witness Lee used the case of John the Baptist to teach that the real significance of baptism was to bury the believer's oldness so that the person could become new. Being impressed by this teaching, one attendee went to the basin and asked to be baptized immediately, even though he had received the baptism before.[49] After that, more members followed the example of requesting a "burial" through re-baptism, even though they were aware that this was unusual.[50] Soon, the members in Taiwan also joined. Reciprocally, some members in Los Angeles adopted the Taiwanese practice of cleansing their old past by burning their belongings.[51] Lee's initial response to this new development was neutral, but he later released a clarification that such practice could only be fully spontaneous; it was not a

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[47] Witness Lee talked a lot about pray-reading in 1966-68. For example, "Concerning the Practice and Benefit of Pray-reading" CWWL 1966 3:199-204; *Pray-reading the Word,* CWWL 1967 1:396-433; "The Practice of Pray-reading meeting" CWWL 1968 2:297-317.
[48] Witness Lee's message can be found in CWWL 1967 2:575-583.
[49] CWWL 1981 2: 457-458, 464-465.
[50] Some Christian traditions require re-baptism when the person changes affiliation, but it is only to ensure that the baptism is legitimate according to denominational standards. Ref. Ephesians 4:5
[51] *Church News (Resumed)* 12:18-20.

normal experience and was never part of his teaching or promotion.[52] The practice itself became short-lived, but it aided to fan the flame.

The third development was the publication of a new hymn book.[53] The compilation of hymn books always reflects the theological orientation and worship style of a church body. Watchman Nee and the gospel bookroom in Shanghai translated, edited, and compiled two major Chinese hymn books (1928, 1952) for the Local Church.[54] The need for an English hymn book arose with the increase of English-speaking members, and Lee used this opportunity to update the hymn book by adding 130 new hymns he wrote recently. He recently wrote many of these hymns to express his insights on the topics of the Holy Spirit, inner life, and church. In 1966, the Stream publishers published the English hymnal with 1080 hymns. The hymnal included a fair share of significant hymn writers in history, like Isaac Watts (10) and Charles Wesley (15). The majority of the hymns came from the late nineteenth-century American hymn publishing industry. This industry emerged surrounding the success of Ira D. Sankey (1840-1908), Dwight L. Moody's musical partner in gospel campaigns. The most prolific hymnist who worked with Sankey, Fanny J. Crosby (1820-1915), contributed 14 hymns to the Local Church hymnal. The editors of the Local Church hymnal also picked from Francis Bevan (6, translator of German Pietism,) Jeanne Guyon (4, quietism,) and M. E. Barber (14) to reflect its theological emphasis. Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's works comprised most of the 277 new additions previously not available in

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[52] CWWL 1968 2:185-188.
[53] CWWL Bible Notes & Hymns 4:vi-x.
[54] For a brief history of the hymn books used in the Local Church, see "A History of the hymnal of the Lord's Recovery" *"Having this ministry…"* no. 17 (Februrary 2023) URL: https://newsletters.lsm.org/having-this-ministry/issues/Feb2023-017/history-hymnal.html Accessed April 7, 2024; also see Wang Xiuduan, *Fuzhou jidu jiaohui yinyue yu shige yanjiu: yi jidutu juhuichu wei gean* [The Study of Fuzhou Christian Music and Hymns–Taking the Hymns of the Little Flock as the example], Fujian Normal University Master thesis, 2006.

English.[55] In 1967, the Taiwan Gospel Book Room also updated the Chinese hymn book to match the English one and included most of Lee's new compositions.[56]

The fourth development was hosting international visits and conferences.[57] After several individuals testified regarding their wonderful trips to Taiwan, more members in the United States requested an arranged tour. From July 25 to September 5, 1968, one hundred forty-one American members flew to the Far East to visit the churches in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Japan.[58] 2,500 Taiwanese members turned out just to welcome them at the airport. They took their guests to a marathon of conferences, culminating in five nights at the Monopoly Bureau Stadium with an average audience of 5,000. During these five nights, Lee proclaimed a way to grasp two thousand years of church history: the first fifteen centuries was "the Age of God," when the Apostolic councils and medieval scholasticism were devoted to consolidating the doctrines of God; the next four hundred years was "the Age of the Lamb" because justification by faith had been the foundation of the Protestant Reformation and the core message of evangelism by Western missionaries. The twentieth century, according to Lee, was "the Age of the Spirit," referencing the rise of Revivalism, Pentecostalism, and the Local Church itself. To cope with this age, one needed to follow the

[55] *The Stream*, vol. 5, no. 2 (May 1, 1967): 32.
[56] *Church News (Resumed)* 10:1-6.
[57] To be fair, several previous conferences held in Taiwan, including the ones featuring T. Austin-Sparks, were already "international" in nature and attracted guests from multiple Southeast Asian countries, Japan, and Korea. But the 1968 conference stood out for its scope, number of foreign guests, and duration.
[58] For a record of the conference, see *Church News (Resumed)* no. 12-15. In addition to the American members, 121 guests from another eleven countries joined this conference. See *Church News (Resumed)* 12:3-4. Twenty-three of the American visitors were from Texas, including one who obtained a leave from his military duty in Vietnam. See *Higher Ground,* 67, 112.

inspiration of spirit through actively participating in pray-reading instead of passively receiving doctrinal preaching and following rituals.[59]

After the intensive meetings, the American visitors went on to tour the major cities on the island. Everywhere they were hosted in private homes of Taiwanese members and asked to exhibit their practice of pray-reading, now reinforced by the practice of "calling on the name of the Lord," which was to insert a ringing shout of "O Lord! Amen! Hallelujah!" The Taiwan churches enthusiastically incorporated these practices on all occasions, including weddings.[60] The American members also participated in a gospel march in Taipei; soon, they would rehearse the Fuzhou-originated, white-vested rally on the streets of Los Angeles.[61]

The 1968 conference ended on a high note. It established an example for future international conferences and was an enthusiastic exhibit of the new church culture co-created by Witness Lee and his followers across the Pacific Ocean. In his summarizing comment on this satisfying conference, Lee quoted the first line of Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The Ballad of East and West" (1889):

> "Before coming, as we were praying in the church in Los Angeles, we quoted this word… "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." However, we believe that the Lord's testimony in the East and West has become one, and there will never be a distinction between East and West. When the saints came to this part in prayer, we experienced a glorious release. We can truly say that in Taiwan, those from the East and those from the West were one."[62]

The Peak of Revival, Migration, and Oppositions, 1968-1974

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[59] In his message, the idea of the three ages corresponds to the three stages of Jesus Christ's ministry: he was God (John 1:1), in his incarnation he became the redeeming Lamb (John 1:19), and in his resurrection he became the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). See CWWL 1968 2:91-98.
[60] *Church News (Resumed)* 11:15. The Local Church tradition replaced the traditional Christian ceremony with a "wedding meeting" where the religious message claims the center instead of the couple.
[61] The marches took place on March 7 and 24, 1970. A report can be found in *The Stream* vol. 8 no. 2 (May 1, 1970): 746-747.
[62] CWWL 1968 2:166.

Back at the home front of America, 1968 was a conjunction of many historical events that proved to be impactful for American Christianity and society in general: the rise and fall of the hippie movement, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Tet Offensive in Vietnam, and the international student protests and Prague Spring. The year was full of chaos. It was also at this time the upward tick of church membership was finally caught up by the effect of secularization. The loss of church attendance, especially among the young and educated, seemed imminent; the political sit-ins, psychedelic havens, and music festivals were merely some destinations for people to visualize where the young people went and which ideologies they embraced then.

To accommodate the changing social atmosphere, Witness Lee and his followers made some transition after their return from Taiwan in September 1968. Following the proclamation of "the Age of the Spirit" in Taiwan, Lee spent a lot of time bombarding the "old religion" over the next two years.[63] Following Watchman Nee, Witness Lee used the terms "religion" and "Christianity" in a negative sense. To them, "religion" refers to the external human-invented institution imposed upon the internal divine-inspired faith.[64] In this understanding, "Christian-ity" is a collection of doctrine and rituals, moral decrees, and organizations, which is redundant and obstructive to one's experience of the "living Christ." The concept of religion as a category was born in the development of comparative religion and religious pluralism. The Chinese term for religion, *zongjiao* (宗教), was a Japanese

[63] Witness Lee's most substantial and complete take on this was *Christ versus Religion*. See CWWL 1970 2:1-157.

[64] From the perspective of religious studies, this dichotomy of religion versus faith originated in the Protestant Reformation and was completed during the Enlightenment period when the term "religion" became more and more relative and categorical. See Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious" in Mark C. Taylor ed. *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 269-284.

coined *waseikango*, imported only at the end of the nineteenth century.[65] By emphasizing restorationism, Watchman Nee and his followers adopted this recent concept and claimed freshness and vitality by distancing themselves from historical Christianity as the "old religion."

In Lee's interpretation during 1968-1969, Jesus and the Apostles' dismissal of Judaism was not toward Judaism per se but religions in general. He criticized that contemporary Protestant Christianity might have become one of the religions in which the truths in the Bible were reduced to vain teachings and ancestral ordinances. According to Lee, the local ground of oneness was the solution to division among Christians, whether in China or America.

The criticism against the religious establishment and the encouragement of member participation proved to be appealing, not only to those who were disillusioned about their previous church experiences but also to a younger generation whose taste was gradually fashioned by the counterculture. From 1965 to 1969, the church in Los Angeles doubled in attendance. The beginning of focusing on recruiting college students in 1967 was one factor. A certain number of "hippies" joined the church as well.[66] From this point of view, the Local Church paralleled the "Jesus Movement," which accepted many former hippies seeking more spiritual depth to join Christian churches.[67] Witness Lee fostered tolerance of the hippies' unsophisticated appearance and liberal use of music in the church meetings. He indicated that

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[65] Christian Meyer, "How the 'Science of Religion'(zongjiaoxue) as a discipline globalized 'Religion' in Late Qing and Republican China, 1890-1949: Global Concepts, Knowledge Transfer, and Local Discourses" in Thomas Jansen et al. eds. *Religion in Chinese Societies: Globalization and the Making of Religious Modernity in China: Transnational Religions, Local Agents, and the Study of Religion, 1800-Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).
[66] CWWL 1967 2: 101-111, 115-125, 206-233, 485-490.
[67] See Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

the idiosyncratic John the Baptist, who wore camel hair and a leather belt and ate locusts and honey, was also a "hippie" of his time.[68] Forcing church attire was not the way of the Spirit but part of the religious ordinances.

Because of this emphasis on following the creativity of the spirit and forsaking ordinances, the worship style in the church of Los Angeles became highly spontaneous and free of programs.[69] One Taiwanese member made his observation of a Lord's table meeting on August 24, 1969:

> The meeting was scheduled to begin at 7 p.m., but in fact, people started at 6:30. At the time of dismissal, it was already 10 p.m. Three hours long but no one was exhausted.… We sang seven hymns in total to praise the name of the Lord. As we began with "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," all our spirits began to climb up. After singing, the sound of "Amen" was loud and harmonious, followed by buzzy, simultaneous praising…During the simultaneous prayer, a brother asked everyone to call on "Jesus my Lord" for five times. (This kind of praising is a characteristic of LA church; everyone can follow the spirit to call a hymn or a short sentence for everyone to declare together…) As we sang, the passing of the Holy bread and cup began without notice. (It is not always the case that some brothers officiating at the front before passing the bread and cup) …
>
> We voluntarily clap as we sing, plus someone fills in with "Amen" or "Hallelujah." It was lively and elevated…. Because they were familiar with the hymns, no need for them to stare at the hymn book; instead, they looked around and smiled at each other. When needed, they turned up or down their volume and even shouted. So liberated, so spontaneous…At the highest point, "Hallelujah" was heard unceasingly. At a point, we started to sing "Hallelujah, hallelujah" using the melody of the previous hymn. All put down their books, singing, clapping, smiling, over and over, until we all felt sufficient, and the shout of hallelujah fills the meeting hall again…
>
> After people returned to their seats and the service came to a period, we did not turn back to silence. One by one, everyone spoke something. The speaking was like a prayer, a testimony, and a sharing of feelings at the same time; it wasn't clear if the speaking was toward the Lord or the congregation or just as a proclamation: "Only in the Local Church can we do this!" "We are Hallelujah people, in the temple of Hallelujah!" etc…
>
> A brother from Tokyo took the chance to stand up and said, "This is Hallelujah from Japan; the church in Tokyo greets everyone!"…After giving us a report about the church life in Japan, he started to lead us to shout, "O Lord, Amen Hallelujah!" in Japanese, and immediately everyone followed and cheered...Another brother who came all the way from Brazil also stood up and fellowshipped. He began by shouting "O Lord!" in Portuguese, and there was another wave of cheering. And he said, "Today, I've heard the voice of many waters and mighty thunders (Rev. 19:6)." The crowd responded with such voices right away, and it

[68] CWWL 1981 2: 460.
[69] Many visitors could relate the atmosphere to their previous experiences in the Pentecostal or Charismatic movements.

> continued for dozens of seconds. This brother was emotionally overwhelmed and could hardly speak.[70]

The inclusivity of individual inspiration and the affective excitement were the experiences that many participants wanted to share more widely. People who were experienced in evangelism or church planting discussed the possibility of duplicating the Local Church in other major cities as early as 1964. Witness Lee persuaded them to receive more training in LA before taking further action. In 1969, Lee deemed that the time was ripe. Over the next year, three hundred adults and their children "migrated" to five target cities: Houston, Seattle, Akron, Atlanta, and Chicago. This operation was considered successful as each of these localities saw a 50 to 250% attendance increase in a short period. Therefore, in the following year (1971), another 300 people joined the relocation to Dallas, Detroit, San Diego, San Jose, and Portland. The selection of these cities was based on the number of existing correspondents, immigrant population, and job opportunities. In total, over 1,000 church members, including children, were involved in the migration to these ten cities.[71]

Destination City	Number of Adults
Houston, TX	80
Seattle, WA	70
Akron, OH	80
Atlanta, GA	40
Chicago, IL	40
Dallas, TX	35*
Detroit, MI	18*
San Diego, CA	20
San Jose, CA	30
Portland, OR	23

[70] *Church New (Resumed)* 17:3-11.
[71] CWWL 1971, 4:202-204.

Total	436[72]

Table 1 Number of Adults Who Participated in the Migration, 1970-1971.

Despite the exciting atmosphere and rapid increase, some objections to the new church culture surfaced in the late 1960s. James Chen (Chen Zexin, 1908-1986) was one of Hong Kong's elders who had been handpicked by Watchman Nee. Despite the disagreement by K. H. Weigh, Chen strongly supported the dissenters in Taiwan after the 1965 schism broke out.[73] He also accused Witness Lee's new hymns contained heretical teachings. In 1970, Chen's followers instigated a violent conflict during Witness Lee's visit to Hong Kong and caused several injuries in a meeting. After the incident, Chen exited the Local Church and filed a five-year lawsuit for the property rights of the meeting hall.[74]

A perhaps even more influential source of contention was Stephen Kaung in New York. Unlike Chen, Kaung played more of a mediator role during the Taiwan schism.[75] After Lee's immigration, Kaung continued to be instrumental among the churches on the American East Coast while maintaining close contact with T. Austin-Sparks' network. He became agreeable with some of Chen's accusations. Kaung especially condemned the practices of calling upon the name of the Lord and pray-reading as drawing on the "latent power of the soul" instead of the Holy Spirit.[76] Kaung eventually left New York in 1972 and declared that he no longer accepted the doctrine of the local ground of oneness. Both Chen

[72] Some of these members were on a second assignment.
[73] Newman Sze, *Wo cheng le he deng ren* [I am what I am by God's grace] (Rosemead CA: Testimony Publications, 2015), 142-144; Weigh, *A Pure Person,* 316-330.
[74] Weigh, *A Pure Person,* 337-339; 374.
[75] CWWL 1981 2: 411.
[76] "The Latent Power of the Soul" was a series of Watchman Nee's messages originally published on the *Present Testimony*, no. 26-28 in CWWN 10:459-516. Nee acknowledged the possibility of humans performing supernatural abilities yet resorted this ability to the created potential originally seen in Adam in Genesis. Most people lost this potential through the fall; those who possessed it risked being manipulated by the devil and merited no spiritual value.

and Kaung's accusations became seeds of future criticism against Lee and the Local Church. Another worrying sign was that the migration yielded less success than in the first two years. The original plan was to expand to five cities every year and 23 more cities before 1977.[77] However, after 1973, some expansions proved to be premature, and people retreated to their previous hub cities for "consolidation."[78]

At this point, Lee was nearly seventy years of age and was dealing with some medical issues.[79] The church in Los Angeles also determined that the growing suburb of Orange County had a better prospect for expansion than the maturing downtown Los Angeles. In 1974, Witness Lee and 400 other church members moved to Costa Mesa and Anaheim, where they built a spacious meeting hall and a ministry depot. In the same year, Lee announced that his ministry was shifting to a new phase of "releasing the living Word of God" and began a verse-by-verse Bible exposition project called the "Life-Study."[80] The project was open to all and attracted thousands of Local Church members to travel to Anaheim twice a year to attend Witness Lee's training. The project took twenty-one years to finish in 1995 when Lee was 90 years old.[81]

Conclusion

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[77] CWWL 1971 4:206.
[78] CWWL 1981 1:386. According to Witness Lee's later interpretation, a few ambitious evangelists pushed for rapid increase and influenced others to focus on the methods of expansion instead of the growth of inner life. These evangelists eventually left the Local Church in 1978. See the next chapter and CWWL 1981 2: 462.
[79] Cataracts and retinal detachment. *Church News (Resumed)* 1974 44:1.
[80] *Church News (Resumed)* 1974 43:2-3.
[81] Based on these teachings, Witness Lee published his magnum opus, *Life-Study of the Bible,* which contained 1,984 messages. Starting in 1984, with the help of some Biblical language experts, he also published a new translation of the New Testament, the *Recovery Version* (English 1985, Chinese 1987,) which included footnotes based on the *Life-study.*

This chapter began by tracing the spread of the Local Church to the United States of America during the post-war waves of immigration. Witness Lee's relocation to Los Angeles made the city a new center of gravity for people who had been exposed to Watchman Nee's writings. After establishing a model church in Los Angeles and a tie with the churches in Asia, a new church life was born mainly through the positive response to Witness Lee's renewed leadership and theology. Lee's announcement of "the Age of the Spirit" in 1968 was, in fact, a response to the spirit of the age. The late 1960s was all about forming idealistic and affective communities where people could connect emotionally with virtual strangers by sharing a moral cause; the difference was that the Local Church was not after racial equality, political transformation, or anti-war ideals but the recovery of New Testament church life.

The success in gaining a following among Americans made Witness Lee and the Local Church a rare case of Chinese "reverse mission" to the United States. What paved the way was the broadcasting of Watchman Nee's life and teaching by his English friends. Witness Lee arrived in the country at a unique time when the American religious landscape was shifting, and new religious approaches were welcomed. His new theological emphasis on member participation and enthusiastic spiritual exercises also appealed to the younger generation. All these factors contributed to the successful transplant of a Christian movement which had been largely ethnically Chinese up until then.

The Local Church started to lose its initial momentum around 1974 when it joined other conservative churches to enter a plateau in terms of attendance growth. According to Lee, there were 43 churches and 4,500 members in 1974, and the number became 80 and

7,000 in 1981.[82] Beyond the failure to sustain migrations, growing criticism and competition from the evangelical Protestants, especially in southern California, had become an issue. For a reverse mission to be successful, the authenticity and originality of the message were equally crucial. Compared to other cases that were mostly centred around Pentecostalism, the Local Church preached a restorationist church model and anti-establishment spirituality. These insights were born in the Chinese mission field and are now tested to be applicable beyond. Some American evangelical audiences found these topics relevant and timely, while others found them challenging and even offensive. The critics collected past criticisms against the Local Church while also examining Lee's more recent comments against "Christianity" as an old religion. To be excluded by other Christians was unexpected to the people in the Local Church. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

[82] *Church News (Resumed)* 1974 43:3; CWWL 1981 2:476.

Chapter 5 The "God-Men": Struggling against the Label of "Cult" in the US, 1975-1985

The topic of this chapter is the Local Church's development in the US and its struggle against charges from the modern countercult movement between 1977 and 1985. This new wave of countercult movement emerged from the scene of American counterculture and religious pluralism in the 1960s and 70s.[1] From 1975 to 1978, several books appeared listing Witness Lee and the Local Church in the US as one of the cults, accusing Lee and the church of teaching heterodoxy and using cultic practices to control its members. In response, Witness and some local churches filed libel lawsuits against the authors and publishers of two of the books that had been the primary sources for the others (notice that the cases were not about the religious claims, but whether the use of the word "cult" is libelous or protected under freedom of speech.) One of the two books was withdrawn with an apology. In the other case, the plaintiffs won the case in 1985 with a record-setting compensation.[2]

Even with the victory in court, the cult-related accusations of the Local Church continued to spread, and public opinion among US Christians did not appreciate the legal measures taken by the Local Church. This chapter traces the process of this conflict and argues that racial discrimination based on Lee's Chinese background was a previously ignored dimension behind the countercultist attack. The impact of this incident reverberated through other countries, especially China.

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[1] For the Local church's viewpoint on the events discussed in this chapter, see the website of Defense and Confirmation Project, an apologetic arm of the Local Church. https://contendingforthefaith.org/en/.
[2] *Lee v. Duddy*, No. 540, 585-9, Superior Court of the State of California, Judge Leon Seyranian, Statement of Decision, June 26, 1985.

A Brief History of the Countercult Movement in the United States, 1970-1985

Chapter Four discussed how the Local Church found its initial success in the United States through meeting the needs in the changing American religious market. The church continued to grow steadily through the decade of 1970s toward 7,000 members in 80 localities around the country despite the emerging context of secularization and religious pluralism.[3] Some scholars have argued that conservative Christians, unlike their peers in mainline Protestant denominations, continued to increase during this period because they were able to filter the noise and maintain a unanimous theological message.[4] This also seems to be the case with the Local Church. The church life was mostly insulated from political discussions from the left and right–e. g. Anti-Vietnam War protests, the Civil Rights movement, and the debate around abortion. Meanwhile, it was impossible for the Local Church not to notice and reference the successes of other Christian groups, like the non-denominational megachurches, the adoption of radio, television, and other media, and Billy Graham's phenomenal crusades. The Local Church did not immediately follow these trends, however, and they were content with the influx of newcomers seeking fresh alternatives.

At the same time, anxiety was growing among other evangelical Christians about the "counterculture" and its influence on the next generation.[5] The main components of the counterculture were educated American youth protesting political developments, especially the Vietnam War, and the dominant value system. At least three elements of the

[3] According to Witness Lee's figure in 1981. "A Brief Account of the Lord's Recovery in the United States," CWWL 1981 2:476.
[4] Dean M. Kelly, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
[5] Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 124-132. For more context of evangelicalism in the 1970s, see Steven P. Miller, *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

counterculture were highly connected to what some scholars called the rise of "new religious consciousnesses":[6] growing interest in "oriental" and mystical ideas (including varieties of Hinduism, Taoism, and Buddhism), the use and abuse of psychedelic and other drugs, and the growth of political activism on college campuses and the rise of the New Left.[7]

Despite the rather marginal presence of these new religious sects in the American religious market,[8] people became concerned about their family members joining them, especially certain groups like the Transcendental Meditation, Unification Church, and Hare Krishna. In their perception, their loved ones' questionable decisions of forsaking a more conventional career or educational trajectory and joining a communal lifestyle based on sweeping religious ideas necessitated their intervention. Some of these concerned people turned to the countercult movement for assistance, which is composed of Christian apologetics who have been warning about heretical teachings and protested the Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Sciences since the previous century.[9] Others would start to associate and formed local initiatives against high-control groups as the modern secular anti-cult movement.[10] Sometimes, they hired so-called "deprogrammers" to

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[6] Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah ed., *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).
[7] See Thomas Robbins, *Cults, Converts and Charisma: The Sociology of New Religious Movements* (London: SAGE publications, 1988), 1-3.
[8] See Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 237-240.
[9] For the differentiation of the countercult movement and anti-cult movement, see J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Garland, 1992), 335-358; Douglas E. Cowan, *Bearing False Witness? An Introduction to the Christian Countercult* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 15-28.
[10] For the history of the short-lived Anti-cult movement, see Anson D. Shupe Jr., David G. Bromley, and Donna Oliver, *The Anti-Cult Movement in America: A Bibliography and Historical Survey* (New York: Garland, 1984); Anson Shupe and David G. Bromley ed., *A Documentary History of the Anti-Cult Movement* (Arlington: Center for Social Research University of Texas at Arlington, 1985); David G. Bromley and Anson Shupe ed., *Anti-cult Movements in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994).For the social sources of cult controversies, see James A. Beckford, "The Continuum between 'cults' and 'normal' religion" in Pauline Cote ed. *Chercheurs de Dieux dans l'epace Public* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001,) 11-20.

help their cause. These deprogrammers were self-proclaimed experts, often with policing or military backgrounds. They would abduct the targets vigilante-style, restrict their liberty, and apply interrogation skills to reverse the "brainwashing" process on alleged victims.[11] At that time, the efficacy of the "brainwashing" technique was widely accepted by the public because of the popularity of post-Korean War literature detailing the communist methods for attitude change.[12]

The media coverage of high-profile incidents such as the Manson family murder case (1969), the abduction of Patty Hearst (1974), and the People's Temple corporate suicide in Guyana (1978) further fed into this public fear of cults. In 1974, the Citizens' Freedom Foundation became the first national institution devoted to the rejection of cults, followed by the American Family Foundation and the Cult Awareness Network in the 1980s.[13] These consolidated institutions incorporated the expertise of more medical and mental health professionals, and they eventually pushed to replace the provocative and coercive deprogramming practices with more modest "exit counselling."[14] Through arranging workshops and publishing periodicals, these institutions shaped a new paradigm of framing destructive cultism as mental damage.[15]

The line between the countercult and anti-cult movement became blurred when the countercultists learned that the anti-cultists' accusations of sociological deviance and criminal behaviors were more potent than accusations of incorrect doctrine. However, the

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[11] Shupe, Bromley, and Oliver, *The ACM in America,* 25-36.
[12] For the widespread belief in brainwashing in this context, see Matthew Dunn, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).
[13] Bromley and Shupe, *ACM in Cross-Cultural Perspective,* 4-9.
[14] Stephen A. Kent and Joseph P. Szimhart, "Exit-Counseling and the Decline of Deprogramming" *Cultic Studies Review,* 1:3(2002) 241-291.
[15] Bromley and Shupe, *ACM in Cross-Cultural Perspective,* 9-14.

scope of this both movements did not expand persistently. There were several reasons for that. First, besides a few exceptions like the Unification Church, most new religious movements were either short-lived or remained small and local.[16] Second, to avoid stigma and to turn a new page in their lives, people stopped using the anti-cult services after their case was taken care of and their family members were brought back to normal life. Third, the movement failed to gain enough political allies to back up their cause and to pass sweeping legislation, which had possible conflicts with constitutional freedom and received obstruction from civil-libertarian groups.[17]

The First Encounters between the Countercultists and the Local Church

In the mid-1980s, people in the countercult movement attempted to broaden its scope by expanding the target list to more new religious groups.[18] Unfortunately, this expansion included the Local Church. Walter Martin (1928-1989) and his Christian Research Institute (1960-) were among the first to pay attention to the Local Church. Martin was a Christian apologetic who published extensive examinations of the doctrine of the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Science, Mormonism, and other Christian-based new religious movements. In 1960, he established the Christian Research Institute, first in New Jersey and later relocated to Southern California in 1974. Through this institute, he trained speakers and writers, built up a library of primary sources, and published a periodical

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[16] According to Robert Wuthnow's research, the general growth of new religious movements in the USA stopped around 1975-76, followed by stability and decline. See James A. Beckford ed., *New Religious Movements and Rapid Social Change* (London: Sage, 1986), 12.
[17] Bromley and Shupe, *ACM in Cross-Cultural Perspective,* 16-25.
[18] Ibid., 14-16. This move diluted the definition of "cult" to almost every high-demand, centrally-governed, and communal religious organization. Originally a technical term, the word picked up a pejorative sense through the usage of the ACM. The term is gradually replaced by a more neutral "new religious movement". This transition of meaning happened during the same period when the events discussed in this chapter unfolded. For the various definitions of cults, see Thomas Robbins, *Cults, Converts, and Charisma: the Sociology of New Religious Movement* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1988), 150-158.

entitled *Forward* (renamed the *Christian Research Journal* in 1987). The Christian Research Institute's research staff started distributing pamphlets about the Local Church as early as 1975. At the beginning of 1977, Martin himself started to publicly speak against the Local Church as a concerning new religious group in Southern California. The Local Church members protested strongly against this comment by publishing a statement in the local newspaper and cramming the telephone line of Walter Martin's well-received radio show, the Bible Answer Man.[19] To resolve this feud, Walter Martin accepted Witness Lee's invitation to sit and talk in person as a fellow Christian.[20] During this conversation, they recognized each other's beliefs and told their followers to cease fire. However, the Local Church members and the countercultist community did not trust each other, and the dispute soon reemerged despite the peace talks.

Another apologetic agency that looked closely into the Local Church around the same time was the Spiritual Counterfeit Project (SCP). The SCP was founded by a former Campus Crusade staff member, Jack N. Sparks (1928-2011).[21] Sparks started several Christian initiatives on the campus of the University of California, Berkeley, including the Christian

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[19] Two journal editorial staff members at the time, Elliot Miller and Gretchen Passantino, recounted the interaction between the Local Church and Christian Research Institute in *Christian Research Journal* 32, no. 6 (2009): 10-13, 48-50.

[20] The conversation took place on February 21, 1977.

[21] During their time working in the Campus Crusade, Jack Sparks and several other field coordinators and overseas program directors, including Jon Braun, Peter Gillquist, Richard (Dick) Ballew, Gordon Walker, Ken Berven, and Ray Nethery, grew frustrated with the parachurch model and left the crusade to create a new denomination. The inspiration of the New Testament Apostolic Order (1975), and later Evangelical Orthodox Church (1979), included restorationist ecclesiology in Watchman Nee's *Normal Christian Church Life*, historical doctrines of the Greek Orthodox, and the hierarchical structure of the Shepherding movement. Some of the leaders participated in Local Church meetings before creating this denomination. See John Turner, *Bill Bright & Campus Crusade for Christ: The Renewal of Evangelicalism in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 134; Lloyd R. Thompson, "A Critical Analysis of the Evangelical Orthodox Church (New Covenant Apostolic Order)" (Ph.D. diss., Yale Divinity School, 1979; Transcript of interview with Peter Gillquist by Calvin Skaggs, "'With God on Our Side': Campus Crusade," (New York, NY: Lumiere Productions, August 28, 1995), William Martin Religious Right research collection, Rice University, Box 74, 16-17; also Skaggs's interview with Jon Braun in the same collection, 51, 57.

World Liberation Front (CWLF), a student group using the tactics of radical political activism to promote Christian beliefs.[22] He also gathered several young researchers who had previous experiences in "eastern religions" to help him start the Spiritual Counterfeit Project. The SCP built up a national profile by helping to keep another new religious movement, Transcendental Meditation, out of New Jersey public schools.[23] In 1975, Sparks asked one of his young researchers to write a manuscript about Witness Lee and the Local Church.[24] In the process of converting the CWLF into a new church, Jack Sparks parted ways with the SCP. Sparks and the SCP each expanded Wallerstedt's draft into publications targeting Lee and the Local Church as a cult. (*The God-Men* by SCP, 1977, 1981; and *The Mindbenders* by Sparks, 1977, 1978).[25]

Spiraling from these three sources– the Christian Research Institute's periodical, The Spiritual Counterfeit Project's *The God-Men,* and Jack Sparks' *The Mindbenders*– many other books and pamphlets cited the Local Church as a cult in the coming years.[26] Most of the later publications did not conduct their own original research but referenced one or more of the three sources. The following is a discussion of how the major accusations in these books came into place and evolved.

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[22] The name came directly from The Third World Liberation Front and the group was famous among the Jesus Movement through its successful publication, *Right On.* For a general portrait of this movement, see Ronald M. Enroth et al. ed. *The Jesus People: Old Time Religion in the Age of Aquarius* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1972), 102-115; Charles Y. Glock and Roberta Bellah ed., *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 143-162.

[23] Sarah Barringer Gordon, "Malnak v. Yogi: The New Age and the New Law," *Law and Religion: Cases in Context*, Leslie C. Griffin, ed. (New York: Aspen Publishers, 2010), 11-31.

[24] The author's name is Alan Wallerstedt. He later becomes one of the editors of *Orthodox Study Bible* (1993).

[25] The first edition of *The God-men* published by Spiritual Counterfeit Project did not specify its author. *The Mindbenders* was a collaboration between Jack Sparks and his associates in the New Covenant Apostolic Order, see the acknowledgement of *The Mindbenders*.

[26] Witness Lee raised four examples during 1979-1980 that were resolved by formal communications with publisher and authors. See CWWL 1981 2:406-408.

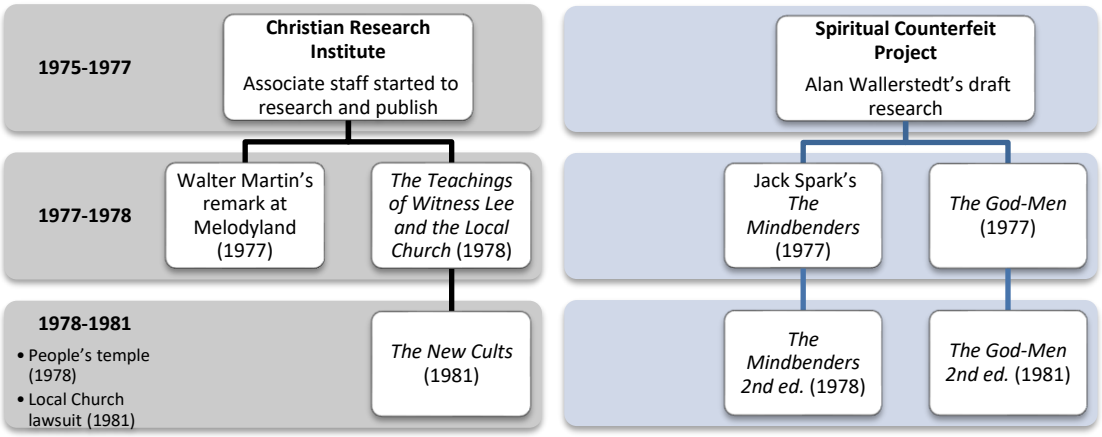

Table 2 A Timeline of Some Countercultists' Original Research, 1975-1981.

The Development of Cult Accusations against the Local Church, 1975-1978

In the beginning, the research staff in the Christian Research Institute and Spiritual Counterfeit Project focused on the unique theological doctrines of the Local Church in their research.[27] They spent much of the content comparing the doctrinal differences between the Local Church and ordinary evangelical beliefs, including the Trinitarian formula, Christology, sanctification, and ecclesiology. This debate on whether the Local Church teachings digressed from the Christian orthodoxy is not the major concern of this study. More important was the accusation about "cultic" and anti-social practices. From 1975 to 1978, all three writing projects gradually picked up the following three accusations against the Local Church: 1) that the Local Church exalted itself as the only legitimate church and attacked other forms of Christianity; 2) that the Local Church teachings and practices

[27] This was seen in Wallerstedt's draft, transcription of Walter Martin's course and pamphlet authored by Martin's staff. See Cal Beisner, Rob and Gretchen Passantino, *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church* (San Juan Capistrano CA.: Christian Research Institute, 1978).

discouraged the rightful and liberal use of one's mind and judgment; 3) that the Local Church had built an authoritarian culture and demanded its member to live a detached, communal lifestyle. There was also a shared tendency to attribute these accusations to the "Eastern"/Asian/Chinese cultural background of this movement.

One frequently cited quote substantiating Witness Lee and the Local Church's exclusivism and hostility toward the Christian community is from Lee's interpretation of the Book of Revelation:

> Judaism is Satanic, Catholicism is demonic, and Protestantism is without Christ. They teach Christ's name, but He is not there. Do you really believe that today, the living Lord Jesus is in the Protestant churches? Whether you believe it or not, the Lord says that He is outside of the door (Rev. 3:20).[28]

This controversial quote demonstrates Lee and his audience shared the criticism against the religious institution of Judaism and Catholicism which can be found in other forms of fundamentalism, while adding the Local Church's own anti-denominationalism into the mix.[29] Watchman Nee began this interpretation from the earliest days of his ministry, and his Chinese followers accepted it with the foreign missions' hypocrisy and imperialism in mind.[30] What is new in Witness Lee's expression was to use "Protestantism" as a totality of the Protestant denominationalism. The last chapter discussed how Lee rode on the tide of the transforming religious landscape in the United States to advocate for a leave from the "old religions." Also, note his criticism of Protestantism as "without Christ." After developing this discourse for more than thirty years, Witness Lee drew upon the legacy of Quietism, the

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[28] *The Stream,* 14, no. 4 (November 1976): 12.
[29] For the link between fundamentalism, anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism, see David A. Rausch, *Fundamentalist-Evangelicals and Anti-Semitism* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993); John Maiden, "Fundamentalism and Anti-Catholicism in Interwar English Evangelicalism" in David Bebbington and David Ceric Jones ed. *Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism in the United Kingdom during the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[30] See ch. 1.

Holiness movement, and Nee's work to address the alleged superficial spirituality of American Christianity.[31]

It was apparent that Lee's interlocutors were Christians. To the cult watchers, however, he and his movement were foreign enough to be counted as a dangerous diversion from Christianity and a new religious movement. They understood his harsh criticism of "Protestantism" as an act of self-exclusion instead of a call for reform.[32] They also found difficulty grappling with the doctrine of "the local ground of oneness." Those who understood the doctrine rehearsed the doubts on its practicality (first raised by T. Austin-Sparks and his followers) and dismissed the possibility of breaking the denominational boundaries and unifying churches in one locality;[33] those who misunderstood the doctrine were infuriated by the seeming arrogance of the Local Church claiming itself as "the only genuine church."[34] This seemingly exclusivism, combined with the antagonistic comment toward "Protestantism," became to the cult-watchers the strongest evidence that the Local Church was not a normal Christian movement but something else.

The second accusation about discouraging using one's mind or anti-intellectualism was based upon the Local Church's teaching on theological anthropology.[35] Watchman Nee and his followers held the view that humans as one integral entity composed of three inseparable parts: spirit, soul, and body.[36] To divide the "spirit" from the "soul" and to subordinate the

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[31] For more about Lee's approach to promote the Local Church in the US, see ch.4.
[32] *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church,* 10-12; *The Mindbenders,* 247-253; *The God-Men,* 43-50, 61.
[33] See ch. 3 for Austin-Sparks' critique of the practicality of the local ground of oneness.
[34] For a clarification of how the cult-watchers came to this misreading, see Christian Research Institute's *The Christian Research Journal* 32:6 (2009), 32-38.
[35] *The God-Men,* 6-7, 27-28, 35-40, 54-57; *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church,* 15-19.
[36] There were many works in Chinese and English discussing Nee's teaching on tripartism. See A. McCafferty, "Dichotomy, the Orthodox View of Human Constitution."(April, 2002); Yuan-Wei Liao, "Watchman Nee's

"soul" to the "spirit" were keys to Nee's spiritual teaching, especially in *The Spiritual Man* (1928) and *The Breaking of the Outward Man and the Release of the Spirit* (1949). The tripartite view has gradually become a minority in Christian history but was not without well-known supporters, including many church fathers and Martin Luther.[37] It was especially widespread among the Holiness movement and its many teachers who directly inspired Nee, including Andrew Murray, F. B. Meyer, and Jessie Penn Lewis.[38] The spiritual urge to lay down one's rational curiosity and to emphasize the subjective experience of one's inner life aligned with the Holiness movement's root in nineteenth-century romanticism.[39]

According to Nee's further tripartite teaching, one's soul is composed of mind, emotion, and will, and one must deal with them all to become a "spiritual man." For the cult watchers, they found the instruction on "closing" or "emptying" one's mind the most disturbing.[40] When put into practice, Nee and Lee's teachings were not so different from common wisdom, such as rejecting outward distractions or not confusing intellectual pursuits with spiritual growth. But to the cult watchers, downgrading the importance of one's mind opened a door for manipulation and brainwashing. Another key issue was the Local Church's

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Theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from a Lutheran Perspective", Th. D. diss. Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1997; Lin Rong-hong, *Shuling shenxue: Ni Tuosheng sixiang de yanjiu* [Spiritual Theology: A Study of Watchman Nee's Thoughts](Hong Kong: C&MA publishing, 1985); Leung Kalun "Shu ling ren yu Ni Tuosheng de sanyuan ren guan: jian lun binluyi shimu dui ta de yingxiang" [Spiritual Man and Watchman Nee's Tripartite Anthropology, Plus Jessie Penn-Lewis's Influence on Him] in *Jian Dao: A journal of Bible and theology,* no. 13 (Dec 1999); Jonathan Chao, "Jin dai zhongguo jiaohui shi zhong de renguan" [Anthropology in Modern Chinese Church history] 2002 Cross-strait Symposium of Church and Theology: Anthropology of Chinese Church.

[37] Martin Luther, "Commentary on the Magnificat" *Luther's Works*, ed., Jaroslar Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 21:303–304. For a list of note-worthy Christians and their works supporting tripartism, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tripartite_(theology)#cite_note-90 accessed Feb. 22, 2022.

[38] Ibid.

[39] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain,* 167-168

[40] On this point, many evangelical anti-cultists argued that teaching and learning the doctrine with one's intellect was indispensable for orthodox Christianity. For example, *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church,* 12-15 and *The God-Men,* 67-68. Ironically, church historian Mark A. Noll argued that anti-intellectualism was a trait generally shared by evangelical Christians. See Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Eerdmans, 1995.)

exceptional practices of "calling upon the Name of the Lord" and "pray-reading" (See chapter 4).[41] The countercultists considered these audible practices as techniques to stop one's mind and to create an optimal mental state for brainwashing.[42]

The third accusation about authoritarian culture came later because it was not based on a study of the Local Church teachings. For the countercultists, it was a combination of the two above items that created a hotbed for authoritarianism. In their eyes, a closed community within which intellectual study was discouraged spontaneously nurtures authoritarian figures.[43] They determined that the underscoring of spiritual, subjective experience generated authority for certain senior members, especially Witness Lee himself. It is a hypothesis that became validated when the countercultists had more access to primary contacts. *The Mindbenders* chapter on the Local Church was the first to include alleged primary sources, and the book became the harshest and the most determined to address the Local Church as a cult.[44] The book asserted that the intense church meetings had a suffocating effect, that the church members concerted their behavior in proselytizing activities, and there were fear and stress in exiting the church.[45] The author accused that the Local Church "stands outside of the historic Christian Church and is, therefore, no church at all but a cult that stands self-refuted and self-condemned."[46]

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[41] *The God-Men*, 40-43; *The Mindbenders,* 228-229, 240.
[42] To contend for its orthodoxy, the Local Church published a booklet containing biblical sources and historical examples in church history exercising prayer and Bible-reading in juxtaposition. See Ray Graver, '*Lord, Thou Saidst': The Revelation of the Scriptures and The Testimony of Church History regarding the intimate and vital relationship between God's Word and Prayer* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1981).
[43] *The God-Men,* 23-26. *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church,* 12-15.
[44] Jon Braun wrote the chapter based on his negative experience in Gene Edwards' (1932-) congregation in Isla Vista, California. Edwards was an itinerant evangelist who participated in the Local Church in its early years in Texas and joined the 1965 trip to Taiwan. He gradually left the Local Church in the early 1970s.
[45] *The Mindbenders,* 229-232.
[46] Ibid. 254.

The countercultists were more than ready to link these accusations with other cults in their comparative study. They argued that the Local Church's attitude against the established church and proselytizing process was "quite similar" to that of the Children of God and The Way, International.[47] Due to the ecstatic vibe and repetitive sound, they also compared "calling on the name of the Lord" and "pray-reading" to those chanting exercises in Hare Krishna and Transcendental Meditation instead of Christian revivalism and Pentecostalism. The author of *The Mindbenders* chapter called the audible practices "the Local Church 'Mantra'" and attributed its foreignness to Lee's Chinese accent.[48]

But the key to connecting the Local Church to "Eastern mysticism" was yet another technical term, mingling.[49] Witness Lee chose to use the term to describe the mystical union between God and humans. According to Lee, Jesus Christ was the first "God-Man," in whom the divine and human nature mingled into one being (hence the SCP book title). The goal of Christian pursuit, in a nutshell, was to become the same as many God-men. The countercultists summarized Witness Lee's teaching on how to achieve this goal: on the one hand, one needs to exercise the human spirit to receive God with the "techniques" (calling upon the name of the Lord and pray-reading), and on the other, by applying Christ's crucifixion to "kill" Satan, who dwells in the human body in the form of fleshly desire.[50]

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[47] *The Mindbenders*, 226.
[48] *The God-Men,* 65-68; *The Mindbenders,* 220, 226-227.
[49] *The Mindbenders,* 232-242; *The God-Men,* 35-40.
[50] *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church,* 15-18; *The God-men,* 35-40.

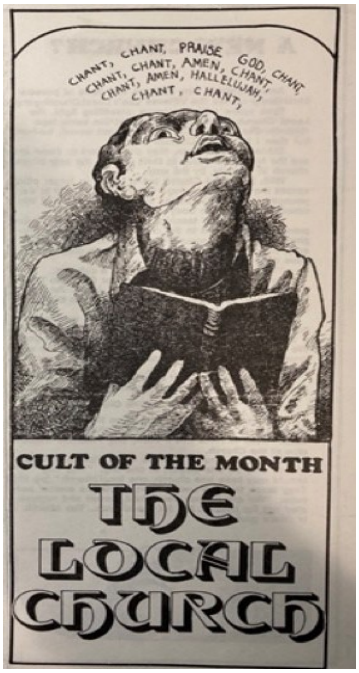

Figure 5 A Caricature of Pray-reading.[51]

All these formulas were foreign to the outsiders. Some countercultists thought Lee was teaching Eutychianism, a heresy the ecumenical councils condemned since 451 CE.[52] Lee and his followers specified their use of the English term "mingling" as compatible with the definition of the orthodox faith and published a booklet to defend it.[53] The explanation did not convince the countercultists.[54] They deemed the whole spirituality of the Local Church to be close to Eastern mysticism in which the ontological distinction between God and creatures was confused, a blasphemy in Christian terms.[55] The dichotomies of rational/mystical in religion and democratic/authoritarian in politics featured prominently in the countercultist

[51] Retrieved from a handout printed by Jesus People USA. 1975
[52] This historical heresy taught by Eutyches of Constantinople (380-456) stated that the divine and human natures combined into a third, unique nature in Christ. See T. Herbert Bindley ed., *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith* (London: Methuen, 1899).
[53] Bill Freeman, *The Testimony of Church History Regarding the Mystery of the Mingling of God with Man* (Los Angeles: The Stream Publishers, 1977).
[54] *The God-Men* cited the above source in p. 56.
[55] *The God-Men,* 65, 69.

arbitrary division of the West/East. No countercultist, however, was able to identify a specific "eastern" cultural or religious source of inspiration in the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee in their survey of the Local Church's origin in China and Taiwan.[56]

The Intensification of Accusations and their Reception, 1978-1981

1978 was a pivotal year for the countercultist campaign against the Local Church. The publications were well-received despite some concerns within the publisher about the quality of research.[57] The task for an updated version was to include more primary contacts (a.k.a. "victim" testimonies) and sociological analysis to make the work more solid.[58] During this time, they found more material on the internal fissure of the Local Church

A significant leader who had recently left the Local Church provided the needed source. Max D. Rapoport was a salesman and LSD abuser before converting to Charismatic Christianity and youth ministry in the late 1960s. In June 1970, he joined the Local Church and became a prominent speaker and leader during the years of migration (1970-1973). His departure in July 1978 influenced hundreds of members, especially in Boston and Anaheim.[59] Rapoport did an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* at the end of that year, warning parents to pull their younger offspring out of this movement. He insisted that, although the

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[56] *The Mindbenders,* 221-226; *The God-Men,* 17-19.
[57] There were internal voices within the publisher, Thomas Nelson, against the publication of *The Mindbenders*. Larry Stone, the advertising manager, and Jim Powell, the marketing manager of special projects, both thought the book was too subjective and lacking in factual basis to be published. At one point, the then-president of Thomas Nelson, Sam Moore, stepped in and asked Stone to revise the book. But Peter Gillquist, one of the apostles at New Covenant Apostolic Order and responsible editor of the book, pushed forcefully for the publication of the book. See Larry Stone, Jim Powell, and Sam Moore's letters collected during the early discovery process.
[58] Deposition of James Sire, Senior Editor of InterVarsity Press, June 3, 1983.
[59] The Local Church and Rapoport had conflicting interpretation to the reason of Rapoport's exit. One certain fact was that Rapoport left the movement voluntarily; he was not excommunicated. See https://shepherdingwords.com/were-max-rapoport-and-john-ingalls-forced-out/ Accessed Mar 16, 2022.

members in this movement were "real, born-again Christians," there was "morbid fear" and "tremendous pressure" imposed on them. The report also said he recommended deprogramming if necessary.[60]

According to Rapoport, what triggered his confession was the unfolding of the horrific Peoples Temple mass suicide on November 18. The Peoples Temple of the Disciples of Christ was built around Rev. Jim Jones (1931-1978) and his socialist ideal and faith healing in 1955. After several news articles disclosed the movement's cultic nature and economic crimes, Jones persuaded about 900 members to move with him to Guyana, where he promised a socialist paradise at an agricultural settlement nicknamed "Jonestown." One US congressman, Leo Ryan, visited Jonestown on November 14, 1978, to investigate claims of abuse. When he was leaving with two defectors, the temple security guards opened fire at Ryan's company and killed him and four other people at a local airstrip.[61] In the aftermath, Jones commanded all his followers to commit suicide by drinking poison, causing the death of 918 people, including 276 children.

This shocking tragedy created a media frenzy and a national sensation. It became one of the most widely known public events in the Gallup Poll's history, with 98 percent of Americans reporting in 1979 that they were aware of this event.[62] The fear of cults was pushed to its culmination with the establishment of the Cult Awareness Network as the first

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[60] John Dart, "Cult Defector Warns Parents" *Los Angeles Times* (Dec. 11, 1978), 30. In a later meeting with Local Church representatives on May 9, 1981, Rapoport claimed that the report distorted his words; he did not compare the Local Church to People's temple, nor did he suggest deprogramming.
[61] Tim Reiterman with John Jacobs, *Raven: The Untold Story of the Rev. Jim Jones and His People* (New York: Dutton, 1982), 487-531. A more recent treatment on the Peoples Temple is Jeff Guinn, *The Road to Jonestown: Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple* (New York: Simon Schuster, 2017).
[62] John R. Hall, *Gone from the Promised Land: Jonestown in American Cultural History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1987), 289.

national countercult institution. The existing countercult literature became hot in demand and assumed more authority. Riding this tide, Walter Martin, Jack Sparks, and the Spiritual Counterfeit Project each developed new publications or expanded their existing ones. Jack Sparks quickly composed a new chapter on the Peoples Temple, immediately following the Local Church chapter in the second edition of *The Mindbenders* (1979).[63] Walter Martin published a new book, *The New Cults,* in 1981 and included "The Local Church of Witness Lee" as a 27-page appendix. The warning in this book was somewhat compromised because it categorized the Local Church as "confused Christians … [which] cannot be called a non-Christian cult, but it has strong elements of cultism in some of its theology and practices."[64] The appendix referenced Rapoport's defection and the Christian Research Institute's own skirmish with the Local Church as proof of the group's controversial nature.[65]

[63] He mentioned Rapoport's defect in the preface. Jack Sparks, *The Mindbenders* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979). From now on referenced as *The Mindbenders 2nd ed.*
[64] Walter Martin, *The New Cults* (Ventura CA: Vision House, 1978), 379.
[65] Martin, *The New Cults,* 382.

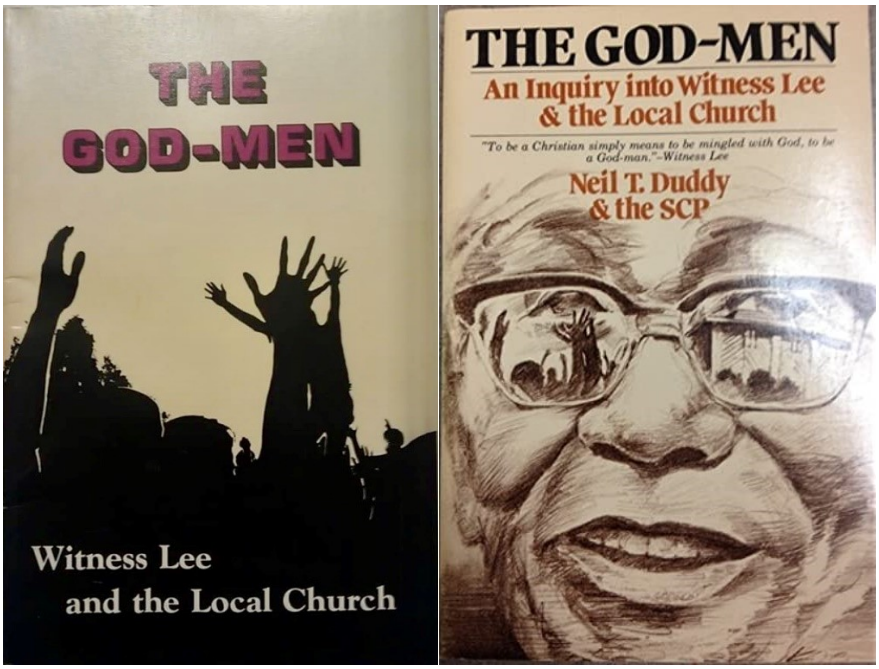

Figure 6 The Covers of the First (Left) and Second (Right) Editions of *The God-Men*. Witness Lee's face appears on the cover of the second edition.

The second edition of *The God-Men* (1981) expanded the content from 80 to 156 pages.[66] Neil Duddy was the chief author. He was a youth pastor recently hired by SCP, and he penned a new chapter titled "The Local Church in Action."[67] He interviewed Max Rapoport twice, and the latter was a prominent voice in this edition.[68] In order to provide more sociological analysis as required by the publisher, Duddy appropriated parts of John Lofland and Rodney Stark's conversion theory and renamed it "recruitment syndrome."[69] He also briefly referenced Margaret Singer's psychological research on ex-members of new religious movements.[70] Between the space devoted to these theories, Duddy interpreted the

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[66] Neil T. Duddy and The SCP, *The God-Men: An Inquiry into Witness Lee and The Local Church* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1981). From now on referenced as *The God-Men 2nd ed.*
[67] *The God-Men, 2nd ed.,* 107-135.
[68] Rapoport refused to approve the manuscript after it was finished.
[69] *The God-Men 2nd ed.* 108-110. He cited the model from John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective," *American Sociological Review,* 30:6 (1965), 862-875. The usage was later refuted by Stark in his witness.
[70] Ibid, 128. Margaret T. Singer, "Coming out of the Cults," *Psychology Today* (January 1979), 75.

Local Church's intensive training program, teaching against worldly fashion, and gospel migration as a "loyalty mechanism."[71] To summarize, his accusation was that the Local Church's spiritual demands created high intensity. This intensity was utilized to create an isolated social space and make the converts more dependent on the Local Church and less on their original personal network. He included two case studies in this chapter to support his adapted theory.[72]

All these books enjoyed great sales. For example, Thomas Nelson, the publisher of *The Mindbenders,* ordered five reprints, a total of 43,178 copies of the first edition. In response, Local Church members wrote hundreds of letters to the publisher complaining about the misrepresentations in this book. The complaints included debates on church doctrines but more about the stigmatization and ensuing threats to family relationships, job opportunities, and personal liberty. According to the Local Church's own investigation, there were at least eight cases of attempted deprogramming of Local Church members in Iowa, California, Texas, Ohio, and Oklahoma.[73] In Cleveland, street rumours about a Local Church building project instigated two reporters to publish a week-long investigative series titled "Church or Cult?" in *The Cleveland Press* newspaper.[74] On college campuses, Christian student groups distributed *The Mindbenders* to potential converts to discredit the Local Church and its evangelism.[75] Physical assaults and verbal threats against Local Church members became

[71] Ibid. 117-124.
[72] Ibid. 110-117.
[73] Damages on the Local Church members are according to the Defense and Confirmation Project's unpublished manuscript, *In the Name of God (1),* 241-242 and *In the Name of God (2),* 290-292.
[74] The journalists were John Funk and Walter Johns Jr. Their reports ran from March 16 to 23, 1981.
[75] *In the Name of God (1),* 255.

quite common.[76] Moreover, the countercult campaign grew internationally as *The God-Men* was translated into Chinese and German.[77]

The Local Church's Legal Cases against *The Mindbenders* and *The God-Men*, 1980-1985

Facing this challenge to its existence, the Local Church decided to take legal action in 1980. At the beginning of 1980, the Local Church realized they needed stronger measures against *The Mindbenders* and *The God-Men.* But the decision to go to court was not an easy one. In March, the participants of a regional conference in Albuquerque discussed the wide effect of the books. In that conference, Witness Lee expressed his feeling to resort to legal actions and proposed that each locality take the matter to prayer and consideration. In another conference held in May, Lee spoke about four different ways to settle a dispute with other Christians; the legal action, he said, should be the last resort only when the other three options– Christian fellowship, publishing explanation on controversial issues, and mediation via a respected third-party– were exhausted. In response to Lee's speech, the litigation process against the authors of *The Mindbenders* and the publisher, Thomas Nelson, began as follows: on May 23, 1980, eleven churches in Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma and eleven individuals associated with those churches filed suit in Dallas County District Court; the same day, twenty churches in California and nine individuals filed suit in the Superior Court of the State of California in Orange County; in the following week six churches in Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, and Puerto Rico and one individual filed suit in United States District Court for the Northern District of Georgia, Atlanta Division; two months later, a

[76] *In the Name of God (1),* 222-223.
[77] Schwengler-Verlag in Germany and China Sunday School Association in Taiwan were the publishers preparing to publish these translations.

fourth group of churches from Ohio filed a separate action in the Court of Common Pleas, Cuyahoga County, Ohio. The Local Church members were originally concerned about the Bible's teaching against suing fellow believers.[78] But later, they found confirmation in apostle Paul's example of "appealing to Caesar" when his life and ministry were under threat.[79]

To prove that a statement is libelous and beyond the protection of freedom of speech under the First Amendment is difficult; malice on the defendant's side must be proved. Because of the immense burden of preparing evidence, the plaintiffs and defendants agreed during the discovery process that the evidence submitted in one case could be applied in all four. Thomas Nelson submitted 1,700 pages of internal documents, which revealed that Peter Gillquist, one of Jack Sparks' coworkers at New Covenant Apostolic Order and the responsible editor in Thomas Nelson, pushed hard for the publication of *The Mindbenders* despite opinions against the book's authenticity. It also became clear that the Local Church was the book's main target among new religious movements.[80] The deposition began on January 26, 1981. During the depositions, evidence was brought forward that many claims in the book about Local Church were unsubstantiated, and the authors demonstrated malice in their private and business communications. The publisher also failed to respond to many internal and external complaints about the book; instead, Gillquist and others pushed for publication and ordered reprints even after the litigation started. After these revelations, the two parties started to negotiate a settlement and reached an agreement in February 1983.

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[78] 1 Cor. 6.
[79] Acts 25:11.
[80] Because of the publishers' concern, two evangelical scholars were invited to rewrite the chapter on the Local Church. However, Gillquist and Sparks threatened to block publication if the chapter was changed, according to the Local Church representatives' interview with Jim Powell, Thomas Nelson's marketing manager, on August 24, 1981.

From April to June 1983, Thomas Nelson published a retracting statement in major newspapers and Christian periodicals stating that "The Local Churches should not have been included in either edition of *The Mindbenders*" and withdrew both editions from publication and distribution.

Witness Lee, the church in Anaheim, and another Local Church member filed the libel suit against *The God-Men* to the California state superior court in Alameda County on December 8, 1980.[81] The case is known as *Lee v. Duddy,* and the deposition began on August 3, 1982. During the deposition process, Duddy and other SCP staff who had participated in the writing process admitted that they neither had enough evidence nor conducted the required investigation to substantiate the more damaging claims in the book. These claims included financial mismanagement, deceptive recruiting, authoritative control of current members, "Thought-reform" or brainwashing, harassment of ex-members, and the correlation between the Local Church teaching and Eastern mysticism. They also confessed that many quotes were taken out of context and misrepresented Witness Lee's meaning.

After people at SCP learned that settlement was not an option without retracting libelous statements in the book, they filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy just before the California trial began. With this move, the SCP delayed the trial and avoided appearing in court. After examining the evidence, Judge Leon Seyranian agreed to hear the testimonies anyway. The hearings were convened in May and June 1985. About half of the hearing time

[81] The complaint was originally filed to a Swiss court against Schwengeler-Verlag, the publisher of the German version, *Die Sonderlehre des Witness Lee und seiner Ortsgemeinde.* The version came out in November 1980 and was based upon Neil T. Duddy's expanded manuscript which was still under review by InterVarsity Press. The German version used many loaded languages and directly associated the Local Church with the People's Temple. The Swiss court ruled that the case be taken back to the United States because the events discussed in the books happened there.

was given to the expert witnesses.[82] These witnesses were scholars in cults and new religious movements, theology, history of religion, psychology, and sociology.[83] Overall, the experts pointed out that *The God-Men* intentionally misrepresented the Local Church as a heretical cult and distorted Witness Lee's teaching and that the Local Church merely constituted "one more variation of emphases and themes familiar in Christian history."[84] More specifically, Dr. Rodney Stark pointed out that Duddy's adaptation of his religious conversion theory was a "willful distortion" of his and his colleagues' works. Major Robert Dussault, a military instructor of POW/captive training, confirmed through his investigation that there was no coercion in the Local Church, and the practices of this church did not meet the criteria of brainwashing.[85] After listening to the expert witnesses, the court reached a decision that all accusations made in the first and second editions of *The God-Men* and the German translation were "false, defamatory, and unprivileged, and, therefore, libelous."[86] The court awarded the plaintiffs $11.9 million, at that time the largest compensation awarded in a libel case.

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[82] Collaborating with the expert witnesses was the first of such efforts by the Local Church to seek vindication from academia. People in the Local Church, like other conservative/evangelical Christians, usually considered seminaries and divinity schools as places for overly intellectual pursuits and havens of liberal modernists. After the 1980s litigation, the Local Church established relationships with scholars and academic institutions. Some of them previously held critical opinions against the Local Church, e. g. the Moody Bible Institute and Christian Research Institute. The Living Stream Ministry later published the expert witness testimonies from this hearing. See *The Experts Speaks: Concerning Witness Lee and the Local Churches* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1995).

[83] They were J. Gordon Melton (cult and NRMs), John A. Saliba (cult and NRMs), H. Newton Malony (Psychology), Rodney Stark (Sociology), Eugene Van Ness Goetchius (Bible scholar), and Edwin S. Gaustad (History of Religion).

[84] Quotes from Edwin S. Gaustad's deposition, titled "Libel, the First Amendment, and the Local Church."

[85] "The testimony of H. Newton Maloney, Ph. D." Contending for the Faith (Defense and Confirmation Project's archive website), Accessed October 24, 2023. https://contendingforthefaith.org/en/the-experts-speak-h-newton-malony-ph-d/

[86] *Lee v. Duddy*, No. 540, Superior Court of the State of California, Judge Leon Seyranian, Statement of Decision, June 26, 1985.

There was one noticeable outcome of the libel cases regarding *The God-Men*, which was the Spiritual Counterfeit Project's collusion with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the People's Republic of China. In 1982, the resuscitated Religious Affairs Bureau of China clashed with some house churches in Zhejiang province, which received and followed Witness Lee's ministry. To cooperate with the official investigation of this incident, two elders in the church in Shanghai, Tang Shoulin and Ren Zhongxiang, produced a study material introducing Witness Lee's teaching as "heretical and heterodox."[87] This study material listed ten items, half of which can be traced back to the first edition of *The God-Men,* which had been handed to Tang through one of his relatives. After learning about this development in China, the president of SCP reached out to Tang in September 1983, seeking his assistance on the libel case.[88] The two sides then formed an echoing chamber on each other's claims against the Local Church. Later that year, Tang and Ren expanded the study material into a book, *Contending for the Faith* (1982).[89] The book referenced *The God-Men* explicitly and copied about thirty quotes that the US court verdict would rule as distortion and out-of-context.[90] On the other hand, through their lawyer, the SCP filed a subpoena for a list of correspondence between Witness Lee, the Living Stream Ministry, and any known resident within the People's Republic of China. Witness Lee's legal representative argued against this move because it may lead to the arrest and persecution of these church members, but the SCP doubted if it would "make any difference" since the arrest of Witness Lee's

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[87] Tang Shoulin and Ren Zhongxiang, *Jianjue dizhi Li Changshou de yiduan xieshuo* [Firmly Resisting Witness Lee's Heretical Teachings] (Nanjing: Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, 1983). For more about Tang Shoulin's background, see chapter 2.

[88] After a visit to Tang in Shanghai and learning about the request, Bellman Lin, one of the Taiwan opposers of Lee's in the late 1950s and now a resident in the United States, volunteered to help with the communication of both sides and wrote to SCP on Tang's behalf.

[89] Tang Shoulin and Ren Zhongxiang, *Wei zhendao jieli zhengbian* [Contending for the Faith] (Shanghai: Christian Council Committee, 1983)

[90] Bill Squires, the president of SCP, confirmed this series of communication in his deposition.

Chinese followers already continued for several months.[91] Witness Lee never yielded such a list.

Aftermath and Conclusion

Among American Christians, the response to the libel cases was generally negative. Many media covered SCP's bankruptcy and commented on how the litigation process could have a "chilling effect" on others who attempted to stand against new religious movements.[92] This discourse did not change even after the judge in California ruled against the SCP. Despite the ruling, the representatives of the SCP continued to claim in interviews that they believed they could have won the case if provided with more funds.[93] A few news pieces covered the rejoicing and relief of the Local Church members after the ruling.[94]

Even though the Local Church won the case, its public image was dented. By covering the Local Church's negotiations with other publishers and authors concerning potentially libelous comments, the media painted the movement with a "litigious" image.[95] Reluctantly acknowledging it as a Christian group, many American Christians continued to consider the Local Church as militant, closed, and aberrant after the ruling was made. In 1999, Harvest House published a reference book of cults and new religious movements and listed the Local Church based on *The God-Men.*[96] The two sides eventually went to court again, but the case

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[91] According to the SCP's *Legal Update,* no. 9 (August 10, 1984).
[92] For example, John Dart, "Bankruptcy Filing delays Sect's Libel Suit," Los Angeles Times, March 16, 1985, 6-7; Don Lattin, "Church's Libel Suit Bankrupt critics," San Francisco Examiner, June 2, 1985, B1, B5; Steven Lawson, "Bankrupt: Spiritual Counterfeits Runs out of Money," *Charisma,* June 1985.
[93] For example, Bay City News Service, "Author Libels Bible Teacher, Judge Rules," The Tribune (Oakland, CA), June 28, 1985, B-2.
[94] Carl M. Ostrom, "Lifting of 'Cult' Label Brings Rejoicing for Evangelical Church," The Seattle Times, July 3, 1985; Sharon Parshall, "Hoping for Redemption," Journal American (Bellevue, WA), July 27, 1985.
[95] For example, John Dart, "Bankruptcy Filing delays Sect's Libel Suit." The article discussed two other negotiations with the Moody Press and Christian Herald. Both cases did not end up in court.
[96] John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1999).

was dismissed by the Texas Court of Appeals as it was considered merely a religious dispute over theological issues.[97] More than seventy evangelical figures subsequently cosigned an open letter urging the Local Church to give up its controversial teachings and the use of litigation as a means against criticism.[98]

In hindsight, the most difficult question to resolve is what led to this entrenched opinion of the Local Church as a cult. An examination of the teachings and practices of the Local Church suggests that all ingredients– Holiness movement, evangelicalism, and Brethren– were the same as the American evangelical Christianity at the beginning of the twentieth century, except compounded in a different laboratory.[99] However, Lee's leadership, the local ground of oneness, and the verbal spiritual practices presented an otherness in appearance, and the association between those practices and the burgeoning Eastern religions was plausible for outsiders. From the viewpoint of world Christianity, it was an interesting case of how the "younger" churches could be foreign to the "older" churches, and the two could confront each other without sufficient mutual understanding.

Cold War mentality and racism toward Witness Lee as a Chinese immigrant also appear to be a factor. The FBI investigated Lee on suspicion of him being a communist.[100] Before the countercult literature appeared, there was a street rumour associating the church in

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[97] For the Local Church perspective on this case and the court decisions, visit https://contendingforthefaith.org/en/defense-against-libel/encyclopedia-of-cults-and-new-religions/ accessed Apr 15, 2022.

[98] The open letter can be found at http://www.open-letter.org/. An interesting turn was that the Christian Research Institute, one of the earliest to investigate the Local Church in this story, published a special issue titled "We were wrong" to respond the points raised in this open letter. After six years of re-assessment, the CRI reversed its accusations and considered the Local Church an orthodox Christian group in this special issue. See *Christian Research Journal* 32, no. 6 (2009).

[99] For a discussion of Nee and the Local Church's sources of influence, see chapter 1 and Wu Dongsheng, "Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation: Interpreting Watchman Nee through Mark McIntosh's works on Spirituality and Theology," PhD diss (Graduate Theological Union, 2006), 64-105.

[100] The exact time was unknown but should be in the late 1960s. CWWL 1981 2:405.

Anaheim with the Unification Church, apparently confusing Witness Lee with Sun Myung Moon.[101] The countercult publications discussed in this chapter made more than a few racist comments, like attributing the foreignness of pray-reading to Lee's Chinese accent and presupposing eastern cultural emphases as the principal factor that "led astray" Lee's theology.[102] Some news reports addressed Lee's ethnicity as an "enigmatic Chinese immigrant."[103]

Lee also assumed racism was part of the motivation behind these publications. In his court testimony, he listed three factors leading to the accusations against him and the Local Church, including

> "Number one, just because I'm a Chinese from the Far East. And some of the publishers did tell [a local church elder] that if I were not Chinese, they would not do this… Number two, when I came to this country, I came at a time in the sixties. At that time, the hippie movement was going on. At the same time, some heathen cults came to this country from India, like Hare Krishna…, so these writers… might have thought that I might be a person like that. So, they spread the rumour that I came from a Buddhist background. They thought I was Buddhist or I was much influenced by Buddhism. They studied wrongly."[104]

Lee's perception of discrimination toward himself could be subjective, and the countercultists could have sincerely believed they were guarding the purity of biblical faith. But the action of presuming foreign or exotic sources without proper proof was irresponsible. Sadly, it was the common treatment of a cultural other. The next chapter finds that these US-born accusations about the Local Church migrated to the People's Republic of China and stimulated a new paradigm of church-state relationship. The vehicle of this migration was the translation of *The God-Men*. The Chinese official documents condemning the Local Church

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[101] "A Rumor, Not a Fact" *Orange County Register,* Oct. 25, 1976. The Citizens Freedom Foundation, the largest anti-cult movement institution in the 1970s, considered the Unification Church the "archetypal cult" at the time. Bromley and Schupe, *ACM in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 6.
[102] *The Mindbenders 2nd ed,* 220, 226-227; *The God-Men 2nd ed.* 82-83.
[103] Davie Ferrell, "'Local Church' Ruled by Enigmatic Chinese Immigrant," Los Angeles Times Sept. 2-3, 1978.
[104] Witness Lee's testimony on June 2, 1985. The last factor he mentioned was jealousy of his success in southern California.

as a cult, nonetheless, dropped the suggestions about the roots in Eastern mysticism. Instead, they emphasized Witness Lee's base in the United States and intentionally ignored the movement's roots in Republican China.[105] Apparently, the Local Church could find itself treated as alien not only in the US but also in its place of origin.

[105] For example, see "Xian yi rending de xiejiao zuzhi qingkuang" [Current Status of Identified Evil Cult Organizations], attachment of "Gongan bu guanyu rending he qudi xiejiao zuzhi ruogan wenti de tongzhi" [Public Security Bureau's notice about identifying and banning evil cult organizations] April 30, 2000.

Chapter 6 "Shouters": Negotiation with the Chinese state in the Reform and Opening period, 1978-2001

Chapter Five discussed the legal cases between some countercultists and the Local Church. One of the surprising developments of these legal cases was the involvement of some Chinese Christian leaders in mainland China. These Chinese Christian leaders– Tang Shoulin and Ren Zhongxiang, most notably– were former Local Church members who became leaders in the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the Protestants who cooperated with the CCP's united front policy. Tang and Ren monitored the recent entrance of Witness Lee's publication and his influence, which were converging with the resurgence of the Local Church after a long period of underground activities.

This chapter shifted the scene back to China and will pick up from the end of chapter two. The topic is the Local Church's revival in the Reform and Opening of China, focusing on the church and state relationship. The tension between the Local Church and the PRC government, starting from the mass arrest in 1956, continued in this new era. This chapter begins with a discussion of the development of religious policies during the Deng Xiaoping era from 1978 to 1997. It describes the renewed conflict and negotiation between the CCP and the Local Church as the overseas branches tried to re-enter China and connect with the remaining members. It argues that the encounter with a group of Local Church members, stigmatized as the "shouters," provided a new discourse and paradigm for the CCP's regulation of religion in this new era. This paradigm opposed "evil" or "destructive" cults to normal religions.

The Regulation of Religions in the Reform and Opening Period, 1978-2001

After the anti-revolutionary case put Watchman Nee and many of his coworkers in prison in 1956, the Local Church in China largely operated underground. Meanwhile, China entered a series of mobilization campaigns, including the Anti-rightist campaign (1957-1958), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960), and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). During these campaigns, the Local Church members often found themselves unwelcomed because of their Christian and middle-class identities (and, in some cases, their past involvement with Kuomintang party politics). As a result, more than a few members became targeted by the denunciation meetings, categorized as "bad elements," and sent to the labour camps for re-education.[1] During the Cultural Revolution, suppression expanded to all forms of religion. The slogan of "destruct the four-olds" (old ideas, culture, customs, and habits) was so loud that even the more cooperative components of the five official religions found their public space shrink to virtually none. In the name of sweeping away "feudal superstitions," "imperialist poison," and "bourgeois lifestyles," religious activities faced the crisis of extinction. All gods must decrease, and Mao and his ideology must increase.

The situation was supposed to change when Deng Xiaoping returned to power, and his economic policies kickstarted the Reform and Opening period in 1978. In this new age, the People's Republic of China eased the "politics in command" ideology, allowed privatization gradually and opened its border for foreign trade. The transition succeeded in recovering economic and social stability. However, the transitions also posed many challenges to the governance. CCP economist Chen Yun first came up with the slogan, "crossing the river by

[1] Charity Chang, Watchman Nee's wife, was one of them. See Wan Xiaoling, "Ji Ni Tuosheng fufu muoho er sans hi" [A Record of Several Things about the Late Nee Couple] *Jindengtai yuekan,* no. 48 (December 1993).

touching stones"; the spirit of experimental pragmatism characterized not only the economic plans but also social policies, including the ones on religion.

During his visit to the United States in 1979, Deng Xiaoping promised U. S. President Jimmy Carter to allow religious freedom in several ways, including opening churches, allowing pastors to return to their jobs, and resuming bible-printing.[2] These measures heralded the beginning of lessening pressures on religious activities in this new era. Temples, Mosques, and other religious sites were open for public use under the management of the resumed Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) and "patriotic organizations." The RAB and the patriotic organizations- like the Three-self Patriotic Protestant Movement and Catholic Patriotic Association, for example- were the first-line agencies for the CCP and religious communities to negotiate with each other. Created in the 1950s and suspended during the Cultural Revolution, the resumption of these administrative bodies represents the normalization of religion in socialist society. It also signifies that after decades of being targeted by forceful eradication, religious activities are now considered more in the "zone of indifference."[3]

The RAB and patriotic organizations of major religions listen to a higher authority. The United Front Work Department (UFWD) is the Chinese Communist Party's arm when working with non-party people or organizations; they also relay party policy to different religious groups. The Public Security Bureau (PSB) and the RAB are under the State Council. The local PSB forces will intervene when there is a situation concerning criminal

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[2] Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China, K.H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 220, 233.
[3] Tang Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution and Post-Mao Reforms: A Historical Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 18.

activities or social disruptions. These three government ministries– UFWD, RAB, and PSB– together with the patriotic associations, were responsible for executing the religious policy of China.

On March 31, 1982, the Party Central published "The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question During Our Country's Socialist Period."[4] This document, often called Document 19, was the most direct expression of the CCP's religious policy in this era. It recognizes that religions will continue to exist for a long time until the next stage of socialism; therefore, the strategy toward any "normal religious activities" should be cooptation through united front work instead of converting them to communism by force. In the following month, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China included a rewritten article that protects the "freedom of religious faith." Article 36 stated that "no organ of state, mass organization, or person is allowed to force any citizen to believe or not believe in religion." This article also forbids anyone from using religion to conduct counter-revolutionary activities, disrupt social order, harm people's health, obstruct the educational system, or subject to the control of foreign countries.[5]

Even though these documents issued by the top authorities expressed a turn of tolerance in general, the message they sent was not without ambiguities. For example, what counts as "normal religious activities"? Is it implying that only those who join patriotic organizations can be protected? Also, to indicate the freedom of "religious faith" instead of "religion" seems to limit that freedom to the private and even one's internal sphere. At the same time, the PRC government continued to pay close attention to any infiltration of foreign

[4] Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 8-25.
[5] Ibid. 34-35.

political influence that is in the name of religion. Islam in the country's far west and Tibetan Buddhism are two examples.[6] Deng Liqun (1915-2015), Hu Qiaomu (1912-1992), and other conservative Leftist components in the government led the "Anti-spiritual pollution campaign." This campaign targeted emerging Western ideas (liberalism and humanism) in literary and intellectual circles. It also kept an eye on other "spiritual" trends clandestinely crossing the border, like foreign religious workers and their publications.[7] Without more directives from the central government, local administrations also devised ways to supervise the growth of the religious population and activities. The most significant innovation is mandatory registration. More and more localities required religious groups to register their personnel, sites, and active regions with the Religious Affairs Bureau. Those who refuse to do so because of past distrust would face the danger of suppression.

1988 to 1989 was another moment for the Chinese Communist Party to reflect upon its religious policy. The considerable unrest in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Tiananmen Square were challenges to the core of the CCP's political rules. Beyond these domestic incidents, Eastern European communist regimes also faced many challenges from the alliance of democracy and Christianity. Considering these contexts, the CCP started the Religious Work Conference and moved religious affairs up on their agenda. The first Religious Work Conference in December 1990 was hosted by the highest-ranked party leaders and resulted in a new policy document.[8] Document 6 largely reiterated what the previous documents have said while

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[6] Daniel Bays, *A New History,* 188.
[7] Geremie Barmé and John Minford eds. *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988).
[8] Central Committee of Chinese Communist Part and State Council, "Guanyu jin yi bu zuo hao zongjiao gongzuo ruogan wenti de tongzhi" [Circular on Some Problems Concerning Further Improving Work on Religion] no. 6 (February 5, 1991)

emphasizing that implementing the administration of religious affairs is aimed at "bringing religious activities within the bounds of law, regulation, and policy."[9]

Jiang Zemin was one of the top party leaders who hosted the Religious Work Conference and appeared to be Deng's successor after becoming the General Secretary in 1989. Persisting Deng's reformist approach, Jiang's ascension encouraged some hope that more social freedom may come. Instead, Jiang's religious policy largely inherited the previous ones. In his statement at the National United Front Work Conference on November 7, 1993. 1993, often referred to as the "three sentences," Jiang emphasized the need for religious freedom to be "correctly" implemented, the administration of religious affairs in accordance with the law, and the party actively guiding the "mutual adaptation of religions and socialist society." The last one, while indirectly confirming that religion and the socialist society can and should coexist in the future, demanded the transformation of religion according to party guidance.

The State Council's "1997 White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in China" and other official statements continued to reiterate the policy goals laid out in the "three sentences."[10] The "adaptation to socialist society" inspired many measures like patriotic education and theological reconstruction.[11] In terms of the goal of legalization, despite the continual push for clearer administrative regulation on the local and national levels, a

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[9] Zhao Ziyang originally promoted the construction of the legal system as part of the political reform agenda during the 13th Party Congress in 1987.

[10] For example, Xiaowen Ye, "Dangqian woguo de zongjiao wenti: guanyu zongjiao wu xing de zai tantao" [China's Current Religious Question: Another Inquiry into the Five Characteristics of Religion] (22 March 1996)

[11] Ryan Dunch, "Christianity and 'Adaptation to Socialism'" in Mayfair Mei-hui Yang ed, *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 155-178; Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K.H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007).

national law of religion never came to be. The Regulation on Religious Affairs (2005) was the most comprehensive response to the calls from religious communities, yet its nature remained as administrative regulations instead of laws, and the definition of key terms like "normal religious activities" was still undetermined.[12]

Notwithstanding these uncertainties, the Reform and Opening created long-desired breathing space for the resumption of religious activities. As a result, many people witnessed a religious renaissance in China in the 1980s and 1990s.[13] Besides the five official religions– Protestantism, Catholicism, Taoism, Islam, and Buddhism– practitioners of popular and alternative religions like qigong also saw explosive growth over the next few years.[14] A significant portion of this religious renaissance was the resurfacing of underground, private practitioners, but there were also many new converts seeking alternative meaning in life after years of widespread political turmoil. There is a visible discrepancy often found between the gloomy and harsh official policies and its "public transcript" as the vibrant and blooming religious population.[15] The Local Church was also one of the examples since the overseas branch and the mainland Chinese members came into contact in the late 1970s.

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[12] Fuk-Tsang Ying, "New Wine in Old Wineskins: An Appraisal of Religious Legislation in China and the Regulations on Religious Affairs of 2005." *Religion, State & Society* 34, no. 4 (December 2006): 347-73.
[13] Jaime Florcruz et al., "Inside China's Search for its Soul," *Time*, Vol. 15, No. 14 (4 October 1999), 68-72; Arthur Waldron, "Religious Revivals in Communist China," *Orbis*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Spring 1998), 323-332; Donald MacInnis, "From Suppression to Repression: Religion in China Today," *Current History* 95 (September 1996): 284-89; Alan Hunter and Kim Kwong Chan, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). The religious renaissance was by no means just a phenomenon in China. Scholars in religious studies often also considered the Islamic revolution in Iran (1979) and the founding of the Moral Majority in the US (1979) as part of a pushback to secularization, a process previously viewed as inevitable. For example, see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).
[14] Kenneth Dean, "Revival of Religious Practices in Fujian: A Case Study" in Julian F. Pas ed. *The Turning of the Tide: Religion in China Today* (Hong Kong: Royal Asiatic Society, Hong Kong Branch and Oxford University Press, 1989), 51-78.
[15] Carsten T. Vala, *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 27-54; Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *The China Quarterly* no. 174 (2003): 317-337.

Testing Water: Distribution of Publications and the First Conflict in Zhejiang Province

Back in 1978, when two Hong Kong members visited the churches in Fujian, they surprisingly learned about the resilience of the members operating underground. They also realized the dire need for Bibles and other printed materials, most of which were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. A group of Local Church members thus devised a system to secretly transport Bibles and Local Church publications into China. Hong Kong served as the connecting hub for communicating and scheduling the mission. Overseas members from the United States, Australia, and other countries would use tourism or business trips to carry the books in their luggage because theirs are often less monitored at customs. Four to five members in Guangzhou took the riskiest job of warehousing the books and hosting the members from other localities.[16]

The members who arrived at the Bible depot were often representatives of their locality and carried the sum of savings. The trip was tiring, and some of them had to travel up to four consecutive days by rail. But the return trips were even more arduous. To find their way home, each one of them must make multiple detours, travelling on foot or cattle to avoid checkpoints. In about four years, like a string of ants passing food on their backs, the Local Church members transported nearly 1 million copies of the Bible into China, a number close to the more celebrated one-time operation of Brother Andrew's "Project Pearl" on June 18, 1981.[17]

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[16] Based on the primary accounts of the Local Church members who joined the Bible transportation in Guangzhou and were later arrested for it. See Zhao Shihe ed., *Lishi yu jianzheng* [*History and Testimonies*], unpublished manuscript in the archive of Living Stream Ministry, 3-25.

[17] "Brother Andrew" was the name used by Andrew Van de Bijl (1928-), a Dutch missionary who endeavoured to bring the Christian gospel into Communist countries during the cold war era. He was behind many covert

The Chinese government was not unaware of the Bible smuggling activities. A report submitted to the State Council showed that the Religious Affairs Bureau, Public Security Department, and Foreign Affairs Department noticed the "religious infiltration problem" as early as February 1980.[18] They collected information on the numbers of foreign missionaries in major cities, their activities and local contacts, and the Catholic and Protestant denominations behind them. These bureaus noticed that there was a domestic market open to these infiltrations. They pointed out the priority of strengthening the TSPM churches and the united front work among Christian leaders. The document did not suggest using sterner measures against these activities. In October 1981, the TSPM leadership in Shanghai identified the church which received the Bibles from a foreign source and practiced "calling on the name of the Lord."[19]

In 1982, to stop the rapid spread of religious activities, some TSPM and RAB officials began to experiment with new local administrative rules. These rules prohibited or limited religious activities outside of officially designated sites, participation of minors under 18 years of age, proselytization in most forms, and "superstitious" acts like healing and

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operations to transport Bibles into these countries and earned the name "God's smuggler." Project Pearl was a one-time mission using a barge to drop more than 232 one-ton packages in the sea near Shantou (Swatow) and had thousands of Chinese Christians prepared on the beach to retrieve them. Some evangelicals considered Project Pearl and the media coverage of it, including a *Time* magazine article, as a stimulant for China to resume its production of the Bible and other Christian literature. But the fact is, the decision to do so had already been made in February 1980 at the expanded meeting of the National TSPM committee and confirmed in October 1980 at the third National Conference of Christianity in China. For more on this topic, see Brother David and Paul Hattaway, *Project Pearl: The One Million Smuggled Bible that Changed China* (Monarch, 2007); Brother Andrew, John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *God's Smuggler* (Chosen, 2001).

[18] State Council of the People's Republic of China, "Guanyu dizhi waiguo jiaohui dui wuo jinxing zongjiao shentou wenti de qingshi baogao" [Report and Inquiry about Boycotting the Religious Infiltration by Foreign Churches] February 12, 1980.

[19] Xikang Zhang, *Zhang Xikang huiyi lu* [A Memoir of Zhang Xikang] (Hong Kong: Guang Rong, 2012), 343, 393.

exorcism.[20] The officials adopted different methods to enforce these rules, ranging from soft persuasion to coercive force and co-opting local militia. In some localities, officials required church members to sign a "patriotic pact" to secure compliance.[21] Many Christians refused or complained about these regulations.[22]

The clash between these new regulations and the Local Church happened in two Zhejiang counties, Dongyang and Yiwu, in February 1982. After the official chapels reopened, the TSPM leaders and RAB officials in these localities went on to experiment with what was later to be called the "Three-fix" policy.[23] To secure membership in the official chapel, these officials alleged that only the official chapels were legal and used force to close other meeting points, including some of the Local Church meetings in distant villages. Local Church members protested this measure by holding a public praying gathering outside of two TSPM meetings. The officials summoned public security to quell this disruption. According to eyewitnesses, a few participants jostled and shouted the slogan "Down with Three-Self!" and the security officers responded with electric batons and pepper spray.[24] In the further suppression measures over the following days, the local militia used even more violence,

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[20] Jonathan Chao and Rosanna Chong, *Dangdai zhongguo jidujiao fazhan shi, 1949-1997* [A History of Christianity in Socialist China, 1949-1997] (Taipei: CMI Publishing, 2011), 328-329.
[21] Ibid
[22] Bishop K. H. Ting (1915-2012), the head of the official church in China, later complained about this strict policy because it devastated many genuine Christians. See "Ting to the Religious Affairs Bureau", September 26, 1988. The letter was published on a Hong Kong bi-monthly, *Baixing*, no. 187 (March 1989): 17-19. Ting's complaint was about forcing house churches to register their meeting points and the ban of those which refused to do so. The Christians in Dongyang and Yiwu protested similar policy and Ting commented on another occasion that the TSPM and RAB officials should take responsibility in the conflict. See Tony Lambert, *The Resurrection of the Chinese Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton and Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1991), 85.
[23] The "three-fix" referred to fixed personnel, fixed religious sites, and fixed active regions. The Religious Affairs Bureau required all religious groups to register in these three categories.
[24] For example, "Wei dongyang xintu de daidao xin" [A Prayer Letter for the Believers in Dongyang] *The Lord in China,* no. 1(1982):4.

including beating, waterboarding, and dynamite. The suppression resulted in the death of one Local Church member.[25]

Weeks after these incidents, house churches in China started circulating letters requesting prayers for Dongyang and Yiwu.[26] Several Christian organizations in Hong Kong, including Rev. Jonathan Chao (Zhao Tianen, 1938-2004) and his Chinese Church Research Center, started to reprint these letters and cover the persecution of Chinese underground churches.[27] These reports pointed out that Witness Lee and his teachings had become targets of the government investigation but also warned that the persecution was by no means restricted to Lee's followers; it was a much broader threat to all underground Christians who refused to join the official churches.[28]

These reports instigated a wave of overseas criticism of the communist regime in China. The TSPM leadership on the mainland noticed this trend and realized that the Local Church was at the center of this criticism. They also learned about the fast growth of the Local Church in the Yangtze Delta and Fujian province. The Local Church in those regions had enjoyed a revival that added thousands of members during 1973-1976 when the Cultural Revolution waned into factionalism in the party central. The imported Bibles and literature further boosted the churches and connected them to Witness Lee's teachings. According to a 1982 survey by the TSPM officials, there were approximately 100,000 Christians following Witness Lee's instructions in Zhejiang province.

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] For Jonathan Chao's bio and the founding of CCRC, visit https://bdcconline.net/zh-hant/stories/zhao-tianen.
[28] Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions: The Costly Revival* (London: Monarch, 1999), 124.

Based on this information and the report on the conflict in Dongyang and Yiwu, a high-ranked party official embarked on a formal investigation. From 1982 to 1986, Jiang Ping (1920-2022) was the deputy head of the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. In January 1983, Jiang made a trip to Shanghai and the major cities in Zhejiang, where he convened and listened to local officials. In the report he submitted to the United Front Work Department, he used the name *huhanpai* or "shouters" to designate Witness Lee's followers. The derogatory term singled out the audible spiritual practice of calling on the name of the Lord and prayer reading as an indicator of this religious group. Jiang's report emphasized the source of foreign influence, reactionary political leaning, and how the "shouting" practice was disruptive to public order. Jiang also suggested that, besides the united front work among Christians, local governments should collaborate with their prosecuting and policing arms to strike and punish the "counter-revolutionary elements under the disguise of religion."[29] In the following conference held by the United Front Work Department and the Public Security Bureau, Jiang's report became the topic of discussion, and the panel decided to ban the shouters.

During his trip, Jiang Ping consulted two TSPM representatives from the Local Church. Tang Shoulin and Ren Zhongxiang were among the leaders of the church in Shanghai, and they worked in the Gospel Book Room around the 1950s.[30] Part of a few Local Church coworkers who joined the TSPM leadership,[31] Tang and Ren began to write a

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[29] Jiang Ping, "Guanyu huhanpai wenti de diaocha baogao" [Investigation Report about the "Shouters" Problem] in *Minzu zongjiao wenti lunwen ji* [Essays on the Ethnic and Religious Questions] (Beijing: History of Chinese Communist Party Publishing House, 1995), 330-336.

[30] Tang was an elder and Ren was a deacon in the church in Shanghai. For more on Tang's background in the Local Church, see ch. 2 of this dissertation.

[31] Tang became the vice president of the national committee of TSPM in 1980. Several coworkers or prominent leaders with a Local Church background entered the leadership in the TSPM system, including Zuo Furu (1902-1979), Yen Jiale (Caleb Yen, ?-?), and Ji Jianhong (1932-2019).

booklet to criticize Witness Lee's teaching after the Dongyang-Yiwu incident, and Jiang encouraged their effort. The booklet was called *Jianjue dizhi Li Changshou de yiduan xieshuo* [Firmly Resisting Witness Lee's Heretical Teachings].[32] The content was based upon the Chinese version of the *God-men* and another booklet repeating James Chen's allegations.[33] Later, Tang Shoulin and the Spiritual Counterfeit Project, the publisher of *The God-Men,* formed a tighter connection to help each other's cases against Witness Lee. In the expanded edition of the book, Tang included more content from the second edition of *The God-Men* and gave credit to it in the preface.[34]

Firmly Resisting Witness Lee's Heretical Teachings and the expanded version, *Contending for the Truth,* was an accumulation and reiteration of past criticisms by overseas dissenters and American cult watchers. The book provided the basis for the upcoming suppression campaigns. After the book was published, The TSPM/RAB officials organized local study meetings and disseminated 90,000 copies to the public security forces and registered churches.[35] In the meantime, the TSPM/RAB officials also tried to counter negative opinions at the origin in Hong Kong. They visited and offered their accounts of the Dongyang-Yiwu incident to some Christian leaders for publication.[36] On May 1, 1983, a new

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[32] "Introducing 'Firmly Resisting Witness Lee's Heretical Teachings'" *Tianfeng,* no. 4 (1983): 13.
[33] See chapters 4 and 5. Based in Hong Kong, James Chen's criticism of Witness Lee's theology entered the mainland as soon as the border opened. A group of Nee's coworkers in the southern provinces reproduced these criticisms in a booklet, which was referenced by Tang and Ren alongside *The God-Men.* See Chen Kesan and Huang De'en, *Tanhua jilu* [A Record of conversation], 1981.
[34] Tang Shoulin and Ren Zhongxiang, *Wei zhendao jieli zhengbian* [Contending for the Truth] (Nanjing: Jinling Seminary, 1983).
[35] "China: Persecution of a Protestant Sect" in *Human Rights Watch/Asia* 6, no. 6 (June 1994): 4.
[36] For example, Cheung Hui Kwan and Mok Shu-en, "Dongyang yiwu shijian de ling yi mian" [Another Side of the Dongyang-Yiwu Incident] *Xinxi* (October 1982). Cheung and Mok were executives of the Hong Kong Christian Council, and *Xinxi* was its official bulletin. This article was reprinted the next month in a more widely-read magazine, *The Seventies.* Tao Feng Shan Ecumenical Centre's Lin Ru-sheng also published an article, "A Few Recent Happenings Related to Chinese Protestants," *Ching Feng* 71 (September 1982): 38-41. All three articles blamed the followers of Witness Lee for the violent incident.

journal, *Bridge: Church Life in China Today,* was born to balance the "two church" (underground church vs official church) narrative and represent more of the TSPM's voice. The second issue of *Bridge* included an interview of Tang Shoulin and Ren Zhongxiang and their comments on the Dongyang-Yiwu incident and Witness Lee.[37]

It was difficult to recover the truth about the Dongyang-Yiwu incident. But it was clear that the conflict was accidental and local.[38] There was no united coalition behind either the underground churches or the TSPM officials back in 1982. Both sides of this conflict made their own decision instead of being ordered by a higher authority. On the one hand, Witness Lee and other overseas members did not have any channel to command the underground Christians in 1982. On the other hand, the "three-fix" was not a general policy until later, and the local governments which enforced the policy with more vigorous measures received strong pushback. The Local Church was not alone in sharing the antagonism toward these experimental regulations.

Compared to the accidental local conflict, managing the circulation of Christian publications was a more challenging task for the government. The underground Christians spent a considerable fortune on these publications; their willingness to break the law in smuggling and transporting prohibited items was concerning for the government.[39] The People's Republic of China has a serious *hukou* or household registration system; from a

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[37] "Li Changshou yu huhanpai" [Li Changshou and the 'Shouter sect'] *Bridge: Church Life in China Today,* no. 2 (November 1983): 16.

[38] Both Jiang's investigation report and Bishop K. H. Ting's later comment compared the shouters with the red guards regarding their subversive conduct. They suggest that, instead of the "counter-revolutionary" or supposedly oppositional political stance, the Dongyang-Yiwu incident may have been encouraged by the culture of local struggling sessions in the past decade. K. H. Ting, "Tong huhanpai xintu tan tan" [Talk with the Shouters believers] in *Xinxi* (June 1984): 7-10.

[39] See notes 19 and 20 of this chapter.

political perspective, the system helps to contain social unrest by restricting the mobility of citizens.[40] Any underground activity that nurtures concatenation across localities, including travelling Bible salespeople, pop-up training, and underground church networks, would be viewed as a source of trouble.

Government Crackdowns and Suppression Campaigns from 1983-1994

The first wave of government crackdown happened in 1983. After the Dongyang-Yiwu incident in February 1982, the government spent over a year gathering information and discussing the incidents in meetings at different levels.[41] Besides the "heretical" teachings and "cultic" practices, the accusations focused more and more on their political insurgency and social disruption. In May 1983, the CCP Central Committee approved a report submitted by three related bureaus– United Front Work Department, Public Security Bureau, and Religious Affairs Bureau– and decided to ban and arrest the "shouters" as a "reactionary organization."[42] From June to August, Public Security personnel began arresting church leaders in Zhejiang, Fujian, and Henan. The suppression campaign expanded in August 1983 and merged with two political campaigns that started later in the year. The "anti-spiritual pollution campaign" was headed by Deng Liqun (1915-2015), Hu Qiaomu (1912-1992), and other conservative Leftists in the government. "Spiritual pollution" referred to the Western ideologies– e.g. liberalism and humanism– emerging in the literary and intellectual circles.

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[40] This system requires Chinese citizens to maintain registration with the local government of their residency. Numerous community-based rights, opportunities, and benefits are tied to one's registered locality. For a comprehensive study of the system, see Fei-Ling Wang, *Organizing through Division and Exclusion: China's* Hukou *System* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[41] Chao and Chong, *A History,* 355-356.

[42] Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party, "Pi zhuan zhongyang tongzhan deng san bumen 'guanyu chuli suowei huhanpai wenti' de tongzhi" [Notice on the United Front Work Department et al. 'Report on Handling the Problem of the 'Shouters'] (May 9, 1983).

The "strike hard" campaign responded to a rise in organized crimes resulting from a high unemployment rate at the end of the Cultural Revolution. These two political movements were to balance the social transitions that happened in the Reform and Opening period. To include the "shouters" as an object for both movements, the authorities behind the suppression emphasized that this group possessed and distributed foreign reactionary literature, and the conflict in Dongyang and Yiwu exposed their criminal nature.[43]

The suppression campaign soon expanded to more than seventeen provinces, and the estimated number of national arrests was 2800.[44] Besides the leadership of large churches, the authorities also arrested the key members serving the Bible depot in Guangzhou, trying to end the smuggling of Christian literature after four years. The crackdown also influenced many other underground Christians.[45] These Christians did not procure books from Witness Lee's ministry nor follow his teachings; they were either being confused with the "shouters" or targeted because they refused to join the official churches or were connected to some interlocal/international Christian networks. The authorities used the "shouters" more as an umbrella term in this suppression campaign, and other Protestant groups were also caught up in it.[46]

The methods used in the crackdown varied from place to place. In most cases, the authorities arrested the leadership individually and shut down the meetings discreetly. But the crackdown in Lushan County, Henan, was different. Sources said that the Local Church

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[43] Chao and Chong, *A History,* 356-359.
[44] Seventeen included Beijing and Shanghai, both being provincial-level municipalities at the time. Chao and Chuang, *A History,* 376-380; The estimated arrest number was according to Tang Shoulin's conversation with Bellman Lin in September 1983. Defense and Confirmation Project Interview with Bellman Lin in Feb. 1985.
[45] Lambert, *Resurrection of the Chinese Church*, 84-85.
[46] David H. Adeney, *China: The Church's Long March*, 159.

had about 200,000 members in Lushan and nearby counties and frequently held province-wide conferences and proselytizing events in the early 1980s.[47] Because of this large presence, the authorities in Lushan publicly arrested a dozen leaders in June 1983. The orchestrated trial at the Lushan County Square the following month attracted thousands of witnesses. It was followed by a four-day, ten-village parade of the detainees as "reactionary elements."[48] For the arrested members, it provided a rare situation in which they could inspire and encourage each other in a narrative of martyrdom.[49] These twelve members each received a relatively lengthy prison sentence, ranging from six to fifteen years. In the following years, the authorities arranged many re-education sessions for the remaining members; some sessions summoned thousands of people and used severe physical force.[50] However, there was no data on how the campaign impacted the membership of the Local Church in Henan and other places.

The crackdown had one unexpected effect. Primarily targeting the leadership responsible for teaching and communication, the arrest suddenly disbanded its target into many less-informed and ill-regulated groups. These isolated groups quickly followed charismatic figures and became havens for more "cultic" practices. From 1985 to 1995, public security listed many cultic sects that were reportedly spin-offs of the "shouters". For example, the Human Rights Watch report in 1994 listed Cheng You as one of the "shouters" serving his prison term at the time.[51] However, according to local testimony, Cheng only became part of the leadership after the first wave of the crackdown. He introduced dubious

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[47] "China: Persecution of a Protestant Sect," 4, 8.
[48] Ibid, 5
[49] Zhao, *History and Testimony,* 75-106.
[50] "China: Persecution of a Protestant Sect," 9.
[51] Ibid. appendix.

interpretations of the Local Church teachings, and his followers started to apply titles like "Lord" and "father" to Cheng and his associates. They also respected Cheng with unusual etiquettes, like kissing and kneeling. A visitor witnessed Cheng's followers paying worship to Witness Lee, calling him "Lord Changshou" in their meetings and reported this incident in a Hong Kong Christian newspaper.[52] Learning this, Witness Lee was surprised by their gullibility and sent an audio tape to dissuade them from this idolatry. The authorities, nonetheless, listed Cheng as the head of the "Lord Changshou sect" and arrested him in 1987. Similar situations happened elsewhere. The Public Security Bureau claimed that the "shouters" inspired at least five other heretical sects,[53] including the "Lord Changshou sect" and the widespread Church of Almighty God, or Eastern Lightning.[54]

The Evolution of the "*Xiejiao*" Paradigm, 1995-2001

From 1990 to 1995, the relationship between the government and underground Christians seemed to enter a more peaceful period. The government replaced formal charges and imprisonment with short-term administrative detention and fines as the primary method of control.[55] Around 1995, however, the international coverage of a series of tragic events raised public concern about the danger of cults. These events included the siege of the Branch Davidians in the U.S. (1993), the mass murder and suicide of the Order of the Solar

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[52] Changshou is Witness Lee's first name in Chinese. This description of how Witness Lee learned about the Changshou sect is according to the Chinese website of the Defense and Confirmation Project. https://cftfc.com/「常受主派」的緣起、演變及其異端本質/. Accessed June 5, 2024.

[53] Public Security Department, "Guanyu rending he qudi xiejiao zuzhi ruogan wenti de tongzhi" [The Notice about the problems of identifying and banning evil cult organizations]" no. 39 (2000).

54 For more information on this group, see Emily Dunn, *Lightning from the East: Heterodoxy and Christianity in Contemporary China* (Boston: Brill, 2015) and Massimo Introvigne, *Inside the Church of Almighty God: The Most Persecuted Religious Movement in China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[55] "China: Persecution of a Protestant Sect," 8.

Temple in Europe (1994 and 1995), and the terrorist act of Aum Shinrikyo in Japan (1995).[56] For the first time, the Communist Party Central Committee and State Council announced an official list of "*xiejiao*" in November 1995.[57] This list included six religious groups, and the "shouters" was the first and the only one referred to in the title.[58] The announcement of this list was followed by another wave of arrests and suppression.

The label of "*xiejiao*" was both new and old at the same time. Many scholars have pointed out that differentiating and suppressing heterodox religions was a long imperial tradition,[59] and the modern *xiejiaos* bear many resemblances to other popular religions in Chinese history.[60] However, this inaugural list apparently targeted Christian-inspired groups instead of other popular religions. Before this announcement, the Public Security often charged the alleged "shouters" with "counter-revolutionary" crimes, and the TSPM/RAB officials sometimes condemned them for their "heretical teaching" (*yiduan xieshuo*). The fact that the government was ready to adopt the term "*xiejiao*" and produced a list suggests that there was an existing discourse. This discourse was not solely from the imperial tradition;

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[56] David Palmer, "Heretical Doctrines, Reactionary Secret Societies, Evil Cults; Labelling Heterodoxy in Twentieth-Century China," in Yang, *Chinese Religiosities*, 126.
[57] General Office of the State Council, "Guanyu zuanfa 'gonganbu guanyu chajin qudi huhanpai deng xiejiao zuzhi de qingkwang ji gongzuo yijian' de tongzhi" [Notice of endorsing the Public Security Department's opinion and report about banning "shouters" and other evil cult organizations], no. 50 (1995).
[58] The list included seven religious groups. All of them were Christian-inspired except the Taiwan-based Guanyin Dharma Gate.
[59] Timothy Brook, "The Politics of Religion: Late-Imperial Origins of the Regulatory State," in Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank ed. *Making Religion, Making the State: the politics of religion in modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 22-42; Daniel H. Bays, "A Tradition of State Dominance" in Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin eds. *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions* (Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 25-39; Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2011).
[60] For example, see Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: the rise of popular Christianity in modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Daniel H. Bays, "Chinese Popular Religion and Christianity Before and After the 1949 revolution: A Retrospective View," *Fides et Historia* 23, no. 1 (1991): 69-78; Daniel L. Overmyer, "From 'Feudal Superstition' to 'Popular Beliefs': New Directions in Mainland Chinese Studies of Chinese Popular Religion," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 12 Religions Chinoises: Nouvelles Méthodes, Nouveaux Enjeux, (2001): 103-126.

Western countercult materials, including the example of *The God-Men*, were also an important source of influence.[61] Although the word *xiejiao* was not part of Tang's vocabulary in 1983, his book made a comparison between the Local Church and the People's Temple and applied the category of "fanatic superstitious group" to both. He also accused the Local Church of "harming members' physical health" and "disrupting social order" beyond the religious issue of teaching heresies.[62]

It is helpful to illustrate this transition by introducing the case of Lin Zilong (1917-2016). Lin was a Local Church member and middle school teacher in Fuqing, Fujian. He had participated in the second term of Watchman Nee's Kuling training in 1948 and became a full-time Local Church coworker in 1955. Lin was arrested for the first time in Nee's counter-revolutionary group case in 1956. Later, the government continued to charge Lin in 1963, 1983, and 1998 for his leadership in the churches, and he received a total of 24 years of sentence in prison or labour camp.[63] Comparing the different charges he received helps to illuminate the transition in the Chinese legal framework for regulating underground religious activities.[64]

Time	Length of sentence	Name of the Campaign	Name of the Charge
1956	One year	Campaign to eradicate hidden Counter-revolutionaries	Counter-revolutionary

[61] David Palmer agrees that "the contemporary reappearance of the *xiejiao* label is thus associated with Christian and foreign groups and translates Western categories of the "cult" disseminated by the anticult movement which, in North America, is dominated by Christian interests." See Ibid., 126.
[62] Tang, *Firmly Resisting,* 209-212. Based on this, one may argue that Tang and his colleagues already implied Witness Lee and his followers as "*xiejiaos*" in their accusations. However, either they hadn't found the expression yet or Tang's insider knowledge about Witness Lee and the Local Church prevented him from using the indicator.
[63] Lin Zilong, *Shen en hao da* [The Abounding Grace of God] (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2002). Besides the four formal charges listed here, he was detained six other times in 1976 (18 days and 15 days), 1993 (40 days), 1997 (12 days), 1999 (30 days) and 2001 (21 days).
[64] Lin's case was not alone. Another elder (Chen Chuan-Guang) in Yongtai, Fujian, served his imprisonment at similar length and timing: 1958 (1 year), 1963 (10 years), 1983 (3 years), and 1996 (1 year). See Zhao, *History and Testimony,* 53-70.

1963	Ten years of labour re-education	Socialist Education Movement	Counter-revolutionary
1983	Ten years (served 7 1/2 years)	Suppression of underground Christians (Following the investigation of the Dongyang-Yiwu incident)	Counter-revolutionary
1998	Three years (served three months with medical parole)	Suppression of underground Christians (Following the declaration of the official *xiejiao* list)	Disrupting Social Order (Article 300)

Table 3 The Charges and Sentences Against Lin Zilong as a Local Church leader

It was clear that the transition of the legal framework happened between the third and fourth imprisonment. Even though the authorities had already accused Lin and others in the 1983 campaign of "collaborating with foreign reactionary forces and spreading heretical teaching," the formal charge was still citing counter-revolutionary crimes (defined in article 90 as "any act that is committed with the aim of overthrowing the political power of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist system and endangers the People's Republic of China").[65] In 1997, a significant revision of the Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China replaced the counter-revolutionary crimes with the crime of "subverting the state" (Dianfu guojia zhengquan), under the general heading of Crimes of Endangering National Security.[66] It also added a new article under the section "The crime of disrupting public order," specifically covering religious activities. Article 300 condemns the activity of "organizing or utilizing superstitious sects, secret societies, *xiejiao* organizations to subvert the laws."[67] The fourth and last formal charge against Lin reflected this transition.

[65] Criminal Law of the People's Republic of China was first adopted at the Second Session of the Fifth National People's Congress on July 1, 1979, and became effective on January 1, 1980. URL: https://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/中华人民共和国刑法_(1979年).
[66] Chapter One in the PRC Criminal Law. See Shizhou Wang, "On Development of Criminal Law in the People's Republic of China," *Verfassung Und Recht in Übersee / Law and Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* 43, no. 3 (January 1, 2010): 292-303.
[67] The 1999 revision of the Constitution made the same alteration.

The official "*xiejiao*" list soon expanded to include more new religious movements of different backgrounds.[68] The most notable inclusion was Falun Gong in 1999.[69] Established by Li Hongzhi (1951-) in 1992, Falun Gong grew out of China's *qigong* fever as a national phenomenon in the 1980s. As the movement grew increasingly popular, Falun Gong's teaching became more exclusive and redemptive, surpassing the healing and body-exercising functions in typical qigong practices. In 1996, Falun Gong was facing attacks from multiple quarters. On the one hand, Falun Gong severed its ties with the qigong and Buddhist community; on the other, it started to receive criticism from official media for being superstitious and pseudo-scientific.[70] In 1998, the Ministry of Public Security launched a renewed investigation and declared that Falun Gong was a *xiejiao*.[71] On April 25, 1999, over 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners organized a peaceful petition in Beijing against unfair media coverage and violent arrests of members in the past three years. The petition was just outside Zhongnanhai, the central headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council. The April 25 petition, the largest demonstration assembly since the 1989 Tiananmen Square protest, demonstrated Falun Gong's ability to mobilize its members for a political cause. The PRC government thus saw the movement as a potential threat.[72] Unlike other religious groups labelled as *xiejiao*, Falun Gong members launched a lasting and conspicuous

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[68] From 1995 to 1997, the Public Security Bureau gradually announced five other religious groups to be xiejiao organizations: The Children of God (US), True Buddha School (Taiwan and US), Dami Mission (Korea), World Elijah Evangelical Mission (Korea) and the Unification Church (US and East Asia).

[69] For more scholarly research on the Falun Gong, see David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and David Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). A collection of more critical views can be found in James R. Lewis and Huang Chao ed., *Enlightened Martyrdom: The Hidden Side of Falun Gong* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2019).

[70] Palmer, *Qigong Fever,* 219-240

[71] The same ministry had conducted two investigations previously, both finding no trace of harm in Falun Gong. These conflicting investigations indicated that there were different opinions toward Falun Gong within the government. See Ibid, 219-240.

[72] Stephen Noakes and Caylan Ford, "Managing Political Opposition Groups in China: Explaining the Continuing Anti-Falun Gong Campaign," *The China Quarterly,* no. 223 (2015): 658-79.

international political campaign against the Chinese Communist Party and its religious policy, raising broad concern about the human rights issues in China.[73]

Beginning in 1999, the PRC government aggressively expanded and legalized its suppression of *xiejiaos*. In October of that year, the Supreme People's Court provided a statutory interpretation of Article 300. For the first time, it defined the *xiejiao* organization as an illegal organization that acts under cover of "religion, *qigong*, or other illicit forms." Following the legislative move was the establishment of the semi-official China Anti-cult Association, a flurry of official propaganda condemning *xiejiaos*, and government-organized academic symposiums discussing *xiejiaos* as a global threat.[74] These symposiums invited foreign experts like the leaders in Western countercult organizations and introduced their literature.[75] With their help, the government gradually adopted the psychological and sociological approach to differentiate normal religions and cults.[76] Destructive mental influence and disruptive social behaviors, rather than unorthodox or heretical teachings, became the universal parameter for *xiejiaos*. For Chinese scholars, there is a political incentive to argue that contemporary *xiejiaos* were fundamentally different from heterodox

[73] For examples, see Junpeng Li, "The Religion of the Non-religious and the Politics of the Apolitical: The Transformation of Falun Gong from Healing Practice to Political Movement." *Politics and Religion* 7, no. 1 (2014): 177–208; Weihsuan Lin, "A China Without the Chinese Communist Party: The Geopolitics of the Falun Gong," *Geopolitics* 27, no. 2 (2022): 501-525. Liang Zheng, "We Are More Chinese Than You," *The Journal of International Communication* 17, no. 2 (2011): 163-177.
[74] Palmer, "Heretical doctrines," 128-132.
[75] For example, Herbert Rosedale, president of the American Family Foundation, visited China and presented in Beijing to the China Anti-Cult Association in 2001. He published his presentation as "Perspectives on Cults as Affected by the September 11 Tragedy" *Cultic Studies Review* 2 no. 1 (2003): 64-74. Rosedale's paper strongly criticized the media's allegedly one-sided treatment of the Falun Gong controversy. Its accounts of "persecution" combined with its failure to expose the sinister cult and neither praised nor criticized the extreme measures pursued by the Chinese state.
[76] Bryan Edelman and James T. Richardson also noticed this borrowing of discourse in their legal analysis of China's management of xiejiao. See Edelman and Richardson, "Imposed Limitations on Freedom of Religion in China and the Margin of Appreciation Doctrine: A Legal Analysis of the Crackdown on the Falun Gong and Other 'Evil Cults'," *Journal of Church and State* 47, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 243–67.

groups in imperial times. In the mainstream historical view of revolution, popular religions and secret societies often played a positive role in fomenting peasant rebellion against feudalism and imperialism. There was no merit for the authorities to compare Falun Gong's protest with the Eight Trigrams uprising (1813) or the Taiping rebellion (1850-1864) against the Qing dynasty; both events were precursors of the glorious revolutions led by the Chinese people. These factors aided the government's transition to a new paradigm of regulating religion. The center of this paradigm was the dichotomy of "*xiejiao*" vs normal religious activity; it relied more on social-scientific methods than socialist revolution theory.[77]

In the subsequent development of this new paradigm, underground Christians, including the Local Church, continued to be a factor. In 2001, Public Security in Fuqing County arrested a Hong Kong merchant, Lai Kwong Keung (1964-), after he smuggled 33,000 Bibles into China. Because these Bibles included the annotations of Witness Lee, the local prosecutor cited Article 300 to charge Lai with *xiejiao* crimes. It was suspicious that, one month after Lai's arrest, the Supreme People's Court stipulated a new statutory interpretation. This statutory interpretation included a detailed list regulating how many *xiejiao* propaganda materials an accused person would need to "produce, print, or distribute" to constitute a violation of Article 300.[78] Fearing that Lai might be sentenced to death like in other recent cases citing Article 300, his family in Hong Kong decided to publicize the issue

[77] For Chinese scholars' struggles with different labels, see Palmer, "Heretical Doctrines," n74.
[78] According to this interpretation, one commits the crime when producing or distributing evil propaganda materials: handouts, pictures, slogans, and newspapers in more than 300 copies, or books, CDs, video and audio tapes in more than 100 copies. Five times more than these amounts constitute a "particularly serious" violation, and the sentence increases from 3-7 years to 7 years to life imprisonment. A 2017 revision adjusted the threshold and included digital publication and online activities like messaging, online chatrooms, websites, etc. See Supreme People's Court and Supreme People's Prosecutor Office, "Guanyu banli zuzhi he liyong xiejiao zuzhi fanzui anjian juti yingyong falu ruogan wenti de jieshi" [Interpretation on issues related to applying the law on the cases of organizing and utilizing evil cult organizations to commit crimes]. Published on June 4, 2001, and January 25, 2017.

and request political intervention. In January 2002, Lai's case made international headlines after George W. Bush, the president of the United States and a self-identified evangelical Christian, expressed a "personal concern" about the case.[79] The timing was highly political because President Bush was about to visit China the following month. During this visit, Lai's case became part of the Bush administration's agenda to express concerns about China's human rights issues. The same month, the court trial declared Lai guilty of "illegal business" instead of any crime related to *xiejiaos*.[80] He received a sentence of two years in prison and was granted a compassionate release. Lai's was a vivid case illustrating how the underground Christians continued to be a factor influencing China's religious policy and how China's anti-cult campaign was never isolated from global entanglement.[81]

Lai Kwong Keung's case, however, did not prevent the public security forces from continuing to arrest and charge Local Church members who distributed or held religious publications authored by Watchman Nee or Witness Lee. There have been numerous cases in the two decades since Lai's case in 2002, and the latest can be found in 2021. Instead of publicly protesting this treatment, the Local Church's approach was to conduct conversation and negotiation on various levels. In 2005, three Local Church members visited K. H. Ting in Nanjing. After one hour of talk, Ting recognized that the Local Church was also "a version of Chinese Christianity" and that he and other Communist cadres had "made mistakes" about Witness Lee.[82] In 2005 and 2007, there were two articles in the official outlet of TSPM, *Tianfeng,* that discussed *xiejiaos* in China without mentioning the name of the "shouters" or

[79] "US Expresses Concern over Bible Smuggler," January 29, 2002, BBC news.
[80] "China Releases Bible Smuggler from Prison," Feb. 10, 2002, The New York Times.
[81] Nathan Faries, *The "Inscrutably Chinese" Church: How Narratives and Nationalism continues to Divide Christianity* (New York: Lexington Press, 2010), 34-37.
[82] According to interview transcription by Ting's office. Copy in DCP archive in Anaheim, CA.

Witness Lee.[83] In 2014, the footage of the McDonald's cult murder case in Zhaoyuan County, Shandong, shocked China and the whole world. According to police reports, six members of the Eastern Lightning or Church of Almighty God beat the victim to death because she rejected their recruit.[84] A later report from the Anti-Cult Association indicated that the Church of Almighty God was inspired by the shouters and mentioned the name of Witness Lee and Taiwan Gospel Book Room. In a rare gesture, the Local Church published a strong disclaimer titled "We are Local Church, not the so-called Shouters" and rejected this connection.[85] This statement argued that, following the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, the Local Church was a group of orthodox, lawful, and moral Christians. The Local Church condemned the wrongdoings of a "minority group," whose superficial understanding of Lee's teaching led to a wretched attitude toward society and the state. In this strategic move, the Local Church disallowed the connection to the derogatory name and rendered the "shouters" almost a straw man today.

Conclusion and A Comparison of the American and Chinese Anti-Cult Campaigns

This chapter reviewed the process of how the Local Church and its effort to reconnect with China influenced the formation of new religious policy in the Reform and Opening period. This process began with the attempt to import Bibles and Witness Lee's writings. Between 1979 and 1983, the Local Church established a supply chain to transport books,

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[83] Xiaoli, "Tigao xintu bianbie yiduan xieshuo de nengli" [Elevating the believer's ability of distinguishing heresy and heterodox] *Tianfeng* (January 2005): 28; Chang Lewen, "Dongfang shandian zai poxi" [Reassessing the Eastern Lightning] *Tianfeng* (March 2007): 30.

[84] The Church of Almighty God rejected the accusation and claimed that the criminals were not active church members. Massimo Introvigne, "'Cruel Killing, Brutal Killing, Kill the Beast': Investigating the 2014 McDonald's 'Cult Murder' in Zhaoyuan," *The Journal of CESNUR* vol. 1, no. 1 (September-October 2017): 61-73.

[85] The Church in Taipei and Taiwan Gospel Book Room jointly made the statement during the Cross-Strait Christian Symposium (2014) in Taiwan and released it to the press on June 10, 2014. The full text can be found on https://cftfc.com/not-shouters/ Accessed June 5, 2024.

pamphlets, and audio tapes into China. The supply chain successfully introduced Witness Lee's teaching to many remaining members. At the same time, the CCP government was monitoring the border for possible infiltration of dangerous ideologies, including foreign religions. Experimenting with economic reforms, the government was nevertheless concerned not to let anyone endanger its social stability after ten years of political chaos.

The clash between a few Local Church members in Dongyang and Yiwu counties and the local TSPM/RAB officials in February 1982 was under the context of growing local administration rules. In their respective narratives, the authorities alleged that this incident exposed the "shouters" as politically subversive. At the same time, overseas Christian media rehearsed the tale of religious persecution under an authoritarian regime. Later, former Local Church coworker Tang Shoulin introduced a new discourse into official propaganda. He borrowed the accusations found in American anti-cult literature to condemn Witness Lee and his followers. This discourse gradually fed into a new dichotomous model– "*xiejiao*" vs normal religious activities– of the religion and state relationship in China.

Since the first crackdown, the Local Church members underwent several suppression campaigns and became living evidence of the transition of Chinese religious policies and legal framework. In the wake of the international fear of *xiejiaos* as a threat to public order, the Chinese government enlisted the "shouters" as the first and foremost *xiejiao* in 1995. In China's own anti-cult campaign, the "*xiejiao*" category was infused with a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, it was the "traditional notions of heretical doctrines… that borrows from imperial Chinese ideology a concept of orthodoxy based on notions of order and social harmony"; on the other hand, it was combined with "Western elements derived from

Christian apologetics, psychology, and the social sciences…, [in] a universalist approach."[86] This chapter focused on the Western source of inspiration for this paradigm and emphasized the role of the Local Church as a vector through which Western countercult discourse came into contact with Chinese socialist theory for the management of religion.

It is meaningful, therefore, to compare the Chinese anti-cult campaign and the countercult movement in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. One similarity was that both campaigns established their public support upon a xenophobic mentality in the context of the Cold War. Inspired by reports and literature about the Korean War, the popular imagination and fear of brainwashing and personality change in American society profoundly influenced the public response to cultic groups.[87] In China, the first suppression campaign merged with the anti-spiritual pollution campaign in which the authorities fought the infiltration of Western ideas of liberalism and humanism. Both campaigns emphasized the foreign element of their targeted groups and the possible collusion with a political nemesis. In the case of the Local Church, the American ant-cult movement grouped it with Eastern mysticism, and the Chinese one assigned its origin as American. During the suppression campaign, many charges cited meeting with representatives and holding literature from overseas as evidence of counter-revolutionary crimes. Antagonism toward a cultural other seemed to be the catalyst in the battle against cultic groups.

The significant difference between the two campaigns, which led to their variance in success and duration, was the role of the government and the legalization of war against cults. Even with the assistance of many sympathetic politicians, the American countercultists

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[86] Palmer, "Heretical doctrines," 133.
[87] Matthew W. Dunne, *A Cold War State of Mind: Brainwashing and Postwar American Society* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

couldn't pass the legislation to ban their target groups because it would violate constitutional freedom. In China, the party and government officials took the lead in the anti-cult campaign, while religious leaders in patriotic organizations were in the backseat. Finding legal grounds to suppress the cults was never difficult for Chinese authorities. They cited counter-revolutionary crime (before 1997) and *xiejiao* crime (after 1997) from the Criminal Law. Some legal scholars questioned how these laws did not conflict with the religious freedom of the Chinese people, which was guaranteed in the Constitution.[88] The judicial definition in 1999 helped to narrow the concept of *xiejiaos* and reduce the abuse of power; however, that definition was still loaded with vague and ideological terms like "spreading superstitious fallacy."[89]

The "*xiejiao*/normal religious activities" paradigm has many problems. The term "cult" gradually picked up derogatory connotation and is technically forsaken by academia. Also, the grey area between the two poles of normal religious activities and *xiejiaos* is extensive.[90] Many popular forms of religion neither follow the registration policy nor appear on the *xiejiao* list. In these cases, government officials and religious leaders must negotiate their public space on a daily basis. This is the case with the Local Church in China today. The government scrutinizes most of their activities, especially large gatherings. Many overseas coworkers experienced travel prohibitions when they tried to enter China and visit the churches. Youth and Campus ministry, training for full-time workers, and attending overseas conferences are sensitive topics; failing to gain approval from the authorities in advance may

[88] Zhang Qianfan and Zhu Yingping, "Religious Freedom and Its Legal Restrictions in China," *Brigham Young University Law Review*, 3 (2011), 783-818.
[89] See note 57.
[90] Fenggang Yang, "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China," *The Sociological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2006): 93-122.

lead to detention and possibly arrest. When there is a charge, the authorities often cite Article 300 and use the possession of *xiejiao* publications as evidence. This situation remained the same after the leaders in the local churches clearly rejected any connection with the "shouters".

Conclusion: The Accidental Cult, Global Encounters, and Chinese Christianity

In mid-seventeenth century Britain, there was a public horror about the "ranters." A lot of cheaply produced popular literature or "yellow press" appeared, accusing this group of religious fanatics as antinomian in teachings and libertine in lifestyle. The evidence convinced many historians until J. C. Davis' *Fear, Myth, and History: The Ranters and the Historians* (1986).[1] According to Davis, the alleged leaders of the ranters never shared doctrines or coordinated their activities, and all the reports about the horrific acts of the rank-and-file members were sporadic hearsay coming from hostile sources. Davis argues that a group called "ranters" likely never existed; what existed were reports of isolated people and events collected by outsiders as a tool to control and discipline their groups.

I believe the case of the ranters as a historians' myth lends light to interpreting the history of the Local Church, particularly concerning its development in China after the 1980s. During this time, some Local Church members were derogatorily and arbitrarily labelled as "shouters." Just like "ranters," fellow Christians coined this label based on unreliable, malicious sources and at once used more as an umbrella term for an imagined other.[2] The difference was how the Chinese state put an official stamp on this body of discourse and utilized it for governance. The beginning of the Reform and Opening period was a time of redefinition. In this transitional period, economic development replaced Maoism as the standard of truth, and many social affairs required new ways of regulation. By

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[1] Some of these other historians included Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972) and A.L. Morton's *World of the Ranters* (1979). According to E. P. Thompson's defense of his peers in the Communist Party Historians Group, they already questioned the sources and declared that the Ranters were never an organized sect. See Thompson, "On the Rant," *London Review of Books* 9 no. 13 (July 1987). https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v09/n13/e.p.-thompson/on-the-rant.

[2] Another example in Chinese history is the label of "White Lotus". See Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 1992).

introducing the category of "*xiejiaos*," the official TSPM church, RAB, and other government departments found a replacement for the revolutionary language used during the high socialism period. The existing literature favoured a continuity interpretation that compares the suppression campaign of *xiejiaos* to the imperial practice of differentiating orthodox/heterodox religions. However, my study shifts the emphasis to the American countercult literature introduced through the investigation of the Dongyang-Yiwu incident. From the subsequent measures of establishing legal frameworks, encouraging sociological research on destructive cults, and conducting dialogue with American countercultists, the paradigm is leaning even more into global influences.

I also consider the paradigm part of a longer modernization process of assigning religious and secular spheres for China. Talal Asad argued that "the concept of secular today is part of a doctrine of secularism."[3] Imperial China had its tradition of coopting religion for politics; in the twentieth century, Chinese states adopted secularism as a political doctrine from the West. From confiscating temples for schools in the 1910s to cutting foreign communications in the name of patriotism in the 1950s, the suppression of the "xiejiao" in the 1980s is yet another way to subordinate religious activities under secular governance. The paradigm became particularly useful when Falun Gong emerged as a political threat in 1998. The Chinese government did not stop importing and employing new discursive categories to penetrate public and private spaces usually roofed by religious freedom. One recent example is the use of "terrorism" in the governance of Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists.[4]

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[3] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular,* 191.
[4] Michael E. Clarke, *Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism in China: Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Pablo A Rodríguez-Merino, *Violence, Discourse and Politics in China's Uyghur Region: The Terroristization of Xinjiang* (New York: Routledge, 2023); Avinash Godbole,

This dissertation has tracked the history of the Local Church from its beginning to the end of the twentieth century. Its most novel contribution is tracing how the TSPM leadership and the American countercultists collaborated to reinforce their campaigns against the Local Church and how the introduction of countercult discourse influenced Chinese religious policy. Chapters four and five studied the origin of this discourse and the appreciation and rejection the Local Church received in the United States. How did the Local Church establish its foothold as a "reverse mission?" And how did it experience the "cult" accusation in just over a decade? I believe the answer lies in the United States' social context in the 1960s and 1970s, especially the shifting religious market and cold-war xenophobia. As the American people navigated an era of post-Christendom and religious pluralism, there were at the same time calls for fresh spirituality and anxieties with foreign sources of influence. Watchman Nee's unique church model attracted the earliest Local Church adherents in the US, and these evangelical Protestants became persuaded by Witness Lee's relay of this vision, especially after seeing the congregations in East Asia. The practices of calling upon the Lord's name and prayer-reading were examples of the transnational church life and the grassroots responses to Lee's reflections on the spiritual needs of this age. Until this day, Lee's "reverse mission" in the 1960s has not received much scholarly attention. The Local Church gathered around 5,000 American believers in the early 1980s; there is no other known example in Asian American Christianity that occurred this early.

The Local Church's spiritual teachings and practices, although not without precedents in church history, eventually caught the attention of the American countercultists. During this

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"Stability in the Xi Era: Trends in Ethnic Policy in Xinjiang and Tibet Since 2012" *India Quarterly*, *75* no. 2 (2019): 228-244.

period, a series of tragic events triggered a wide-spreading fear of cults in US society. I argue that Witness Lee's immigrant Chinese identity provoked Oriental imagination and racial mistreatment from the countercultists and their audiences. Later, the US courts ruled that the two most influential countercult books about the Local Church were defamatory. A remarkable development is that the Chinese anti-cultists closely followed the pattern of their American associates. They emphasized the vocal practices by creating the pejorative name "shouters" and played the foreigner card by highlighting the US origin.

Chapters three and two focused on another stage: China and Taiwan under Second Sino-Japanese War and the Cold War in the 1940s and 50s. I explored the tensions within the Local Church and between the Local Church and outsiders. The Local Church has had an uneasy relationship with other Christians since its beginnings in Fuzhou in 1922. Many blamed the Local Church's "sectarian" spirit as the source of bitterness. On most occasions, Local Church members would passionately reject the categorization of "sect" or "denomination;" both terms have negative connotations of division in Local Church teachings. However, the Local Church also embraces the role of an awakened minority, destined to "recover" crucial aspects of a genuine Christianity that is lost to most.[5] This self-identity is similar to a scholarly understanding of a sect. Sociologists of religion had problematized the "church-denomination-sect-cult" ideal types that Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch developed. They replaced the ideal types with a spectrum of varying tension with one's socio-economic environment. The fact that people have applied all four categories to the Local Church in different periods seems to prove the theory's validity.

[5] Witness Lee insisted on "maintaining a gap between us and Christianity" throughout his life, but also expressed a public repentance in his late age about "offending the Body of Christ by negligence in receiving people according to God." See CWWL 1973-1974 1:95; CWWL 1994-1997 5:514-515.

Chapter three used this renewed church-sect theory to interpret the schism in Taiwan. The 1965 schism was about Watchman Nee's legacy and doctrinal autonomy but also about adapting to a new role in a new environment. Between 1949 and 1955, the Local Church became one of the most populous Christian groups on the island, expanding rapidly among exiled mainlanders. The dislocation and relocation experiences and a stimulating mix of successor options complicated the challenge of replacing the charismatic founder in Watchman Nee. T. Austin-Sparks and Witness Lee had different persuasions in their charisma, doctrinal preferences, and racial dynamics. Lee's success in the United States eventually settled the debate and cemented the identity of the "Local Church." The decision enshrined the local ground of oneness as an immutable truth, and the expansion among Chinese refugees in the early 1950s and among American believers in the late 1960s merged as one narrative of universal success.

The tension between the Local Church and the PRC began as early as the establishment of the state in 1949. The first round of failed cooptation sowed the seeds of mutual distrust. Even though Watchman Nee and his remaining coworkers suffered the same fate of arrest and imprisonment in 1956, their response toward the Three-self Patriotic movement was diverse. Nee was reluctant to decide, Ruth Lee was adamant about withdrawing the membership, and others cooperated after intensive struggles. Chapter two discussed how the Local Church became locally independent. Watchman Nee's remarks in *Concerning Our Mission* (1937) provided a critical theoretical basis. According to Nee's model, notable leaders survived and thrived autonomously during wartime isolation. In the tumultuous decades of the 1940s and 1950s, these coworkers disagreed with Watchman Nee on his business practices and political decisions while holding fast to his spiritual teachings. I argue

that the existing literature about this movement is biased by an imbalanced reliance on Watchman Nee's biographical materials and writings. The independent agency of the coworkers was a sign of maturity not only for this movement but also for indigenous Chinese Christianity.

Indigenization was a key term for Chinese Christianity during the foundational decade of the Local Church in the 1920s. Under the influence of anti-imperialism, many Chinese Christians eagerly requested more autonomy from mission board control or formed their own churches. The Local Church was one of the success stories as it grew into a national phenomenon in the mid-1930s. Part of the success lies in the Local Church's continual dialogue with prominent trends in global Christianity while maintaining equal independence from its Western peers. The glocalization or hybridization process in the Local Church is manifest in the lasting Western impression of fundamentalism, Keswick spirituality, and Pentecostalism, and how Nee and others adopted these trends for the context of a modernizing and war-torn China. In comparison, Chinese cultural idioms have had minimal influence on this movement despite the ongoing presumption of this link. The Local Church was one of the most fascinating native movements of Chinese Christianity in the early twentieth century; this makes the question of why the contemporary Chinese state would condemn it as foreign and heterodox more intriguing.

The encounter between the Local Church and the PRC state left perpetual traces in Chinese religious policy, government institutions, and legal frameworks, as well as in the lives and memories of many Local Church members in China. Even today, Local Church members are still dealing with the political realities shaped by this conflict. This impactful encounter, however, was shaped by many previous cross-cultural experiences the Local

Church had been through. Andrew F. Walls and Lamin Sanneh used to argue that the "principle of translation" lies at the heart of the Christian faith and was the key to the religion's expansion across many cultural and geographical boundaries.[6] The principle is that all translations must use existing terms and idioms to make a new message comprehensible. The act of translation dynamically changes the text and context, source and target languages, and creates new meanings on both sides. From the starting point of Republican China, refugee Chinese communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asia, evangelical US Protestants in the 1960s, to Communist China in the Reformed and Opening period, the multiple journeys and destinations offered fresh challenges to the original vision of the Local Church while stimulating innovations. Everywhere they go, the Local Church and its people carry new identities and create new significance for their teachings and practices. The environment, in turn, responds in a fresh way and sometimes adjusts radically, bringing vast impacts.

While the PRC state suppressed the Local Church in the 1980s, the movement's expansion reached all five continents in the same decade (and Russia in the next). According to a 1981 survey, the movement boasted 457 churches beyond mainland China, compared to only 15 before 1949.[7] The cross-cultural translation continues, and the Local Church is now a global phenomenon. In a sense, the translation equals the "recovery" in the Local Church vocabulary. The recovery is how Watchman Nee and Witness Lee define the purpose of this

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[6] This idea begins with a theological idea that the "translation" starts with the incarnation when God became human in Jesus Christ to be understood and received by human beings. See Andrew F. Walls, "The Translation Principle in Christian History," in Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 26-42; Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

[7] "Number of Local Churches (as Reported in November 1981)." Handout in the Service Training of the Churches in Asia, November 2-30, 1981. Taiwan Gospel Book Room Archive.

movement. It is not only a study of the Christian Bible itself but also a study against a particular *backdrop*. This backdrop is the alleged degradation of Christianity according to a standard established by selected traditions, but it is perceived locally and temporally. Wherever it goes, the Local Church distinguishes itself as the upholder of certain aspects of a genuine Christianity that no one else possesses. However, it can only highlight certain recoveries that translate to the immediate context. Some of the more impactful recoveries include the local ground of oneness, normalizing meetings in members' residences, conducting missions by faith, expansion through migration, uplifting member participation, and inspiring spirituality by pray-reading the Bible and calling upon the name of the Lord. Many of these inventions bear the characteristics of being simple, fluid, and resilient. They were born in challenging situations; therefore, they can be applied to challenging situations. The people of the Local Church and their practices experienced wars and dislocation, schisms and lives of diaspora, racism and colonial pressure, and suppression from the state. It is certain that they will continue to navigate more different geographical and cultural contexts, and the pursuit of recoveries will continue.

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