"Serving the Lord": Christianity, Work, and Social Engagement in China

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Abstract: This study examines how Chinese evangelical Protestant employees view work and the workplace, through the lens of their religion, and how they seek to influence the broader society, in a highly restrictive religious domain in China. Using the concept of everyday religion, I examined how these employees seek to integrate faith into their work and the workplace, and the issues and challenges they face in the process. While existing China-focused studies have mainly looked at the experience of the business elite and Christian bosses, I inquired into the experience of the employees, specifically the professional class. It was found that they did not see a clear boundary between the 'religious' and the 'secular' in the workplace. At the same time, they discursively constructed a distinction between their own Christian work ethos and that of their non-Christian colleagues. This discursive self-othering was double-edged. While it enabled the Christian employees to construct a distinctive workplace and social identity, it risked resulting in them being perceived negatively by non-Christian colleagues, as belonging to a "different kind" (*linglei*), thus, accentuating the social gulf and tension that might have already existed between the Christian and the non-Christian employees. Most regard the workplace as an important arena for the concrete expressions of their Christian faith and values in everyday life. In doing so, they seek a moral transformation of the workplace, as a way to transform the wider society. I argue that their effort to influence their colleagues and transform the workplace culture is an important kind of unobtrusive social engagement, without open mobilization in civil society.

Keywords: China; Christianity; spirituality; work; workplace; social engagement

1. Introduction

"People Will See How You Walk Before They Believe What You Talk"

The above comment was made by Andy, an engineer working in a software company in Shenzhen, the economic powerhouse in Southern China. When Andy lost his job in the United States, he had the opportunity to relocate to China to work in a foreign software company. This also offered Andy a chance to evangelize in his country of origin. "And that's why I realized that the Lord has prepared me all these years, for me to go back to China", Andy said, during our interview in a Christian theological college in Singapore, where he was studying. "It was over the years that I began to see how God had actually prepared me for Shenzhen, because it is right next to Hong Kong, so I would go to Hong Kong to do bible study". Andy's experience reveals how important the workplace is for evangelism, among Chinese Christians. Many strive to be role models for the faith in their respective workplaces, as they interact with non-Christian colleagues and engage in workplace evangelism. At the same time, Chinese Christians like Andy, are constantly negotiating the institutionally imposed boundaries that separate religion from other social domains, and face challenges in expressing their faith in the workplace. While the rapid rise of Christianity in China, over the past two decades, has prompted many research into various aspects related to the phenomenon, comparatively fewer studies have

been conducted on how Chinese Christian employees view their work and workplace, the impact of religion on their relationship with non-Christian colleagues, and the challenges of integrating faith into the work domain.

The economic reforms over the last four decades in China have unleashed a torrent of market forces in China. This has resulted in the phenomenal rise in the standards of living for many of the country's citizens. At the same time, new social problems and fault lines have emerged, such as rising income inequality, heightening social tensions, environmental degradation, rampant official corruption, forced expropriation of farmers' land, and mounting cases of food safety violations. Concerns over the state of the citizens' moral well-being had surfaced, even in the early days of the "reform era", with commentators asking whether the unleashing of the market forces in society, had negatively impacted on social relations and morality (e.g., Ci 2009; Hanafin 2002; Osburg 2013). Relatedly, the questions of, if and how, religion can contribute to the 'moral reconstruction' (*daode zaijianshe*) of contemporary China, has preoccupied many ordinary citizens, scholars, policymakers, and religious leaders, in recent years (Shue 2011; Liang 2014; Yan 2014; Fisher 2017). Over the years, a number of scholars have reflected and written on how Christianity might provide solutions to some of the pressing social and moral issues in contemporary China. These scholars include those who do not formally embrace the faith in confessional terms, but are nevertheless immensely concerned over Christianity's role in shaping China's future. Prominent among this group of "culture Christians" is He Guanghu, who draws on the work of Paul Tillich and John Hick for his writings, and is also a vocal public intellectual, who has demanded the Chinese government to show greater tolerance of human rights. Since the late 1990s, a group of public intellectuals have emerged for whom Christianity is both a personal faith and a source of their political ideals. Christian intellectuals, such as Wang Yi and Yu Jie, are prominent human rights activists, whose activities have been met with harsh responses from the authoritarian party-state. Others have looked to Calvinism for inspiration to engage with the state and society, by formulating a theology of constructive dialogue (Chow 2018, pp. 20–21).

On the Protestant theological front, Yang (2010, pp. 197–98) has argued that, for Christianity to establish itself even more firmly in the Chinese culture, a Chinese Christian theology has to be developed, based on the empirical work that details the Christian communities' contemporary interpretation of their faith. To this end, some leaders and theologians in the official Three-Self Patriotic Movement have reflected critically about the role of the church in a rapidly changing society fraught with tensions and faced with huge challenges. Some have proposed a "Theological Reconstruction" to enable the Christian church to maintain its relevance in society, through greater social awareness and engagement (Wang 2001; Wickeri 2007). In recent years, however, with the influx of intellectuals, highly educated professionals and city dwellers, the dominant Protestant evangelical tradition of religious piety and aversion to politics and social engagement has given way to a more variegated position toward social awareness and political activism (Yao 2011, p. 67). For example, some Christians have embraced human rights activism and regard the quest for social justice, religious freedom, and political reform, as integral to the practice of the Christian faith. Others have established strong connections with overseas churches and human rights organizations which share the same social and political agenda, and have often acted as spokespersons of China's house churches, in the international media (Yao 2011, pp. 67–68). On the other hand, some prominent political activists who have converted to Protestantism show a diminution of prior political activism. Being evangelical and fundamental in their beliefs, these former political activists have become more focused on proselytizing and on saving souls, and are much less concerned with calling for democratic political change (Wright and Zimmerman-Liu 2013). However, the majority of the house church congregations tend to take the middle approach of being more engaged in social issues, while refraining from political activism and direct confrontation with the party-state. Wielander (2009) has examined the activities of Christian intellectuals in house churches and their implications for China's democratization process. She finds that Christian public intellectuals, through their activities, could potentially serve as 'bridges' between theory and practice, rural and

urban divide, social class divisions, as well as China and the world. This would, in turn, contribute to a broader civil society activism that seeks deeper democratization in China.

In contrast to the above cited research that mostly focuses on Christian activism in civil society, in this paper, I explored how Chinese evangelical Protestant employees view work and the workplace through the lens of their religion, and how they seek to influence the broader society, in a highly restrictive religious domain in China. The respondents in this study wished to address the perceived moral problems prevalent in the society, through efforts to transform the workplace and their non-Christian colleagues. This paper is based on a larger research on Christian social engagement in contemporary China. In this project, my collaborator, Sng Bee Bee, and I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews, between 2013 and 2016, with 38, mainly evangelical Protestant professionals, from mainland China. There were 23 female and 15 male respondents, aged between 24 to 47, comprising teachers, managers, engineers, business executives, and medical workers. Two focus groups interviews were conducted in Kunming (5 women and 4 men) and Wenzhou (2 women and 2 men). All respondents were recruited through a snowball sampling, via our pre-existing contacts among the Christian congregations in Chengdu, Kunming, Wenzhou, Shanghai, and Singapore. Questions asked in the semi-structured interviews inquired into whether religion is a private affair; if it should be separated from the social and political domains; and if it has shaped employees' view of work and work practices. Respondents were also probed on their views of Christian and non-Christian colleagues, and if there was anything in society that needed to be improved or changed. Another set of questions examined their use of the Internet and social networking sites, such as how important these communication tools were in their personal, religious, and work life, and what were the limitations and problems encountered in their usage.

Conceptually, I regard the practice of Christianity in China as a form of 'everyday' or 'lived' religion (McGuire 2008; Schielke and Debevec 2012; Ammerman 2007). This perspective looks at how religious practitioners express their faith and pursue religious activities in their everyday life. They do so without paying much attention to institutionally defined religious dogmas and orthodoxy. Some scholars have argued that for many religious practitioners, there are no sharp divisions between religion, public, and private lives (e.g., Cochran [1990] 2014; Hall 1997; Woodhead 2013). In their everyday practice of religion, people might ignore institutionally constructed boundaries that separate social life into different domains. The focus on everyday religion is a recognition of the embeddedness of religious actors in culture, and these actors are, at the same time, co-creators of the same culture.

Overwhelmingly, this study found that Christian employees did not see a clear boundary between the 'religious' and the 'secular', in the workplace. At the same time, they discursively constructed a distinction between their own Christian work ethos and that of their non-Christian colleagues. Most regarded the workplace to be an important arena for the concrete expressions of their Christian faith and values in everyday life. In doing so, they sought a moral transformation of the workplace, as a way to transform the wider society, with Christian values. In this regard, I argue that these Christians were engaging in a kind of religious social engagement. By religious social engagement, I mean the efforts by religious individuals and groups engaging with social issues and seeking to readdress these issues, by engaging in activities that might or might not involve widespread, coordinated mobilization efforts. In recent years there has been a growing scholarly attention on religious social engagement, through charity and philanthropy in China (e.g., McCarthy 2013; Liang 2014; Wu 2016; Weller et al. 2017). Such studies focused on the activities of formal religious organizations, in the civil society, and their interactions with the state. For example, pastors of some unregistered Pentecostal and charismatic churches exhort and encourage members to participate in patriotic prayers, public relations, and charitable and social work programs (Koesel 2014). This study suggests looking beyond the common approaches of examining religious organizations' philanthropic and charitable activities, and their mobilization in civil society. Some of these activities might be conducted in ways that are non-obtrusive and non-antagonistic in their interactions with controlling state institutions (e.g., Klandermans 1988; Katzenstein 1990). I would argue that by examining this kind of activities as social

engagement in everyday Christianity, in this case, in the workplace, we are able to better understand how Christianity can continue to experience a rapid growth in China, in the context of the deepening political authoritarianism, curtailment of an emerging civil society, and a tighter surveillance and control of Christianity by the Chinese authorities. By discursively construing work as service, Chinese evangelical Protestants seek to change what they regard as unethical behavior in the workplace, with the broader aim of addressing the perceived moral malaise inflicting the society at large.

2. Spirituality and Religion in the Workplace: An Overview

In the sociological literature, the relationship between religion, spirituality, and work was famously analyzed by Max Weber in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. As is well-known, Weber starts with a discussion of Luther's interpretation of the notion of vocation, or "calling" (*beruf*), as entailing a spiritualization of worldly activity (Frey 2008). Luther's interpretation of the calling, directly led to the Calvinist notion of inner-worldly asceticism, the key religious orientation that Weber identifies as the basis of the "spirit of capitalism". Contemporary advocacy on spirituality and religion in the workplace (SRW) can at least be traced to the Faith at Work movement that had first emerged in late 19th century, in Europe and the United states. Then, an increasing number of Christians tried to foster a closer integration of faith and work, in order to ensure that religion remained relevant in addressing the issues of the workplace and the wider society. Miller's (2007) historical study of the Faith at Work movement highlighted the influential role played by the Protestant clergyman, Walter Rauschenbusch, in articulating a social gospel and exhorting Christians to participate actively in, and to transform, the business domain. Rauschenbusch's key message was that through a transformation of the self, business, and the workplace, religion could continue to be a potent force in a rapidly secularizing society. The movement contributed to the rise of post-World War II Protestant ecumenical activity that emphasized the ministry of the laity, especially in their respective occupations. The insecurity, constant change, and intense pressure associated with many modern secular occupations, have ironically stimulated a quest among many workers to turn to spirituality and religion, to find meaning in their lives (Miller 2007).

In the Catholic Church, Pope Leo XIII in 1891 issued the encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (*The Condition of Labor*), urging a closer assimilation of religious values and actions, in all aspects of a Christian's life, including the work life. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), again, stressed the importance of the laity, in supporting the Church's evangelical mission, through the workplace. Many Christians have indeed aspired to adopt a 'holistic' approach in practicing their religion by rejecting the notion that spirituality and religion should be confined to one's 'private' domain and not be entangled with one's occupation. Popular books on business leadership and management, such as Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows*, advocated taking Jesus as a role model for business leaders. Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* is a good example of how Christian writers continue to advocate making religion directly relevant to everyday life and work, and how many lay Christians believe this to be immensely important to live a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Some past SRW research have looked at the creation of a favorable work culture and business leadership. For example, some research has shown that the cultivation of spirituality in organizations might enhance employees' well-being, instill positive attitude toward work, and create a more amiable workplace (Mitroff and Denton 1999; González-González 2018). Employees' spiritual well-being is found to have positive impacts on their morale, ability to cope with stress, motivation levels, and productivity at the workplace (Benefiel 2005; Sass 2000; Duchon and Plowman 2005; Fry et al. 2010; Chen and Yang 2012). In Sri Lanka, a study finds that when business leaders embrace spirituality in the workplace, they also strive towards self-actualization and are more concerned with ethical decision making (Fernando 2002). In view of the potential benefits of workers' integrating religion, spirituality, and work, Hicks (2003) argues that business leaders should create a pluralistic and supportive environment for employees to achieve faith integration at the workplace.

Some scholars adopting a more critical approach have highlighted instances of 'symbolic violence' being perpetuated on employees by the senior management, in the latter's effort towards integrating faith in the workplace. Drawing on Bourdieu's critical sociology, Kamoche (2012) argues that the top-down imposition of organizational spirituality is a new way for firms to manage and discipline their employees. In Malaysia, for example, the country's push to develop products for its Islamic economy, has resulted in the adoption of *sharia* (Islamic legal codes) by some companies, to shape their workplace culture (Sloane-White 2011). Executives in these firms seek to develop 'personnel sharia' that that govern employees' ethical values and moral principles, as well as 'corporate sharia', based on the Quran and the Hadith, for commercial and managerial activities. In such Islamic workplaces, piety and Islamic subjectivities are not just solely a matter of individual choice, but are also shaped, monitored, and enforced by a *sharia*-rized corporate culture. Other studies have investigated the relationship between the expression of religious identity and the risk for perceiving or experiencing discrimination at the workplace. For example, studies have overwhelmingly shown that Muslims and Jews are more likely to perceive discrimination at the workplace in the US and the UK, whether or not the issues of religion ever emerge at the workplace (Scheitle and Ecklund 2017; Ghumman and Jackson 2010; Mythen et al. 2009). This has prompted some believers, especially Muslims, to deemphasize or hide their religious identity, either at the workplace, or when seeking employment. Thus, while research has uncovered some benefits of incorporating religion and spirituality into the workplace culture, other studies have also shown that expressions of religiosity and spirituality could often lead to stigmatization, conflict, tension, distraction, and discrimination in the workplace (Gregory 2011).

Most studies on religion in the workplace are conducted in countries where governments are relatively tolerant of religion, and not in places where religion is tightly regulated, such as in China, former Soviet Union, and Vietnam (Tam and Quijada 2015). Thus, while some researchers have argued that businesses should promote a better integration of religion, spirituality, and work, this measure is difficult or even impossible to be implemented in certain countries with strict secularist policies (e.g., France) or with governments that are ideologically atheistic (e.g., in Communist party-states). Although China's constitution allows for religious freedom, religion in China is not a 'private" affair'—not in the liberal sense that, citizens have the freedom to engage in religious affairs free from state monitoring and coercion. The Chinese party-state, through its religious policies, has always sought to control and manage religion, with strict regulations on where religious practices might be conducted (Leung 2005; Laliberté 2011). In China, it is illegal for citizens to practice religion in the workplace. One of the aims of this paper is, hence, to examine how believers view work, and the possibility of bringing their religious faith to the workplace, where it might be a part of the religious 'gray market' (Yang 2006).

Scholars who have studied religion and work in China, mostly focused on the business elite or the Christian entrepreneurs. One earlier study examined how China's entry into the World Trade Organization has provided opportunities for the Chinese Christian entrepreneurs to exert their influence in both economic and spiritual affairs in China (Chan and Yamamori 2002). In recent years, many so-called 'Boss Christians' in Wenzhou also strived to shape the Chinese nation in both material and spiritual terms (Cao 2013). They hoped to exert a moral influence on society by letting Christian values guide their business activities, interpersonal relationships, and philanthropic projects, in effect, melding a form of elite Christianity with ideals of spiritual nationalism. Lee et al. (2012) found that conducting business in China has a negative impact on ethics among some Chinese Christian business leaders. Meanwhile, for the business leaders, a Christian corporate culture is highly conducive for sustaining Christian witness. In a study by Tong (2012) on overseas Chinese Christian businesspeople in Shanghai, personal piety was found serve as the foundation of business ethics and guide their dealings with Chinese officials, clients, business partners, and ordinary workers. In their study on trust among Protestant entrepreneurs, Tong and Yang (2016) found that Chinese Protestant entrepreneurs wanted to be more trustworthy and to be more trustful of others, after becoming Christians, and some of them thought that a major religion like Christianity would lead to better moral behavior.

The representative studies cited above, thus, underscored the importance of gaining in-depth understanding on how religion impacts the meaning of work, workplace behavior, and work ethics. In broad terms, therefore, this study examined how Chinese evangelical Protestants sought to integrate their faith in the workplace. In this paper, faith integration refers "to the attempt of Christians in the workplace to think, feel, and act in ways that reflect their identities in Christ" (Stansbury 2015, p. 23). With research on religion (especially Christianity), and work in China, mostly being focused on the business elite, this paper focuses on the experience of the Chinese Christian employees, who are in workplaces that were mostly established by non-Christians. In this paper, while my analytic focus is on the individual level, the analysis is contextualized in the relevant organizational and societal contexts. I examined the meaning that evangelical Protestant workers attribute to their work, from the viewpoint of religion, and how as individuals they seek to express their faith in environments that often prohibit the overt practice of religion or are even hostile to it. The question of how Christians belonging to the professional class view work and express their religiosity in the workplace deserves serious study, as the class as a whole, are economically, politically, and culturally influential in contemporary China. This is also the social class for which work or occupation is a crucial defining element of its members' personal and social identities (Bourdieu 1987; Lamont 1992; Bottero 2004). The findings of this research on believers' attitude towards their work and colleagues, and how they seek to influence the wider society, will thus, contribute to the scholarship on religion and social change in China.

3. Being Christians in the Workplace: Employees of a "Different Kind"

According to one estimate, Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) comprise around 5% of China's population (Pew Research Center 2012). With Christianity as a minority religion, this would mean that, unless they work in Christian organizations, most Chinese Christians are likely to work in an environment where most of their colleagues are non-Christians. This also means that the Christian employees' endeavor to integrate faith and work can potentially be fraught with tension and challenges. This is partly due to their small numbers, and partly because of a strong sense among Christian workers that their religious values distinguish them from the non-Christians. This is reflected in the experience of Linda from Wenzhou, currently enrolled in an independent seminary:

> After graduation, I did an internship as a customer service officer at a hotel. My job was to serve patrons, and how I mix my faith with my job is that I make sure that at the very least, my service attitude on the surface must be thoughtful and attentive. Often, there are people who use underhand means behind customers' backs. For instance, if a customer was being rude, the waiter might be revengeful and add stuff into the customer's food before serving. When I witnessed all these, I really pitied the customer. The job was pressurizing, because the customers are mostly rich people. However, if a Christian waiter is met with the same situation, he would not do the same, he would not do the same to you just because you have offended him.

Research from Australia has found that managers and professionals regard spiritual self-disclosure as a taboo and a stigma, and risk being perceived by their colleagues as "being on the outer"—marginalized from the social, cultural, and spiritual identity of the organization (Crossman 2015). Such sentiments are shared by many respondents who regard themselves as qualitatively different from their non-Christian colleagues. For them, religious self-disclosure and expressions in the workplace can be simultaneously uplifting and challenging. For Andy, the IT specialist, this sense of being different was supported by his Christian principles and "proper outlook". As he shares, "I feel that faith has allowed me to have a proper outlook of the world. I will have my principles and not drift about in the world. I know how to do the right things. For work, I feel the need to do things in a principled manner, and to put in my best effort".

According to Wang, a doctor based in Kunming, in his previous work in the hospital he sometimes felt his colleagues regarded him as a "different kind" (*linglei*), a term which might carry a deviant

undertone, because his behavior and values often differed from theirs. Thus, the boundary between the Christians and non-Christians seems to be drawn not just by the Christians but also by the non-believers, in the workplace. As Wang notes, this supposed difference might have both positive and negative implications for workplace relations:

> In the hospital I was the only Christian. From my actions and the things that I say, they would have guessed that I am different from them. Some were accepting and found nothing wrong with that. But some would hang out less with you, thinking that you are different from them. However, there were still some who felt that I was nice to hang out with as an individual, and sometimes felt a little curious which prompted them to interact with me more, to learn more about my religion. So there are differing attitudes from different groups of people.

When asked to elaborate on how being a Christian distinguished him from his colleagues, Wang emphasized that as much as possible he would make decisions "that are in accordance with Bible teachings". He was fortunate that his superior generally accepted his reasons for not doing things which contravened his religious principles. Wang gives an example whereby the hospital authorities directed the doctors to make fake diagnoses of patients and cases that did not exist, to improve the hospital's rankings by the health authorities. Wang explained to his supervisor that this contradicted his Christian values, but also indicated that he would contribute to the hospital in other ways. Fortunately, his superior saw that his attitude "was satisfactory" and "had trust in him", agreeing that he did not have to participate in the proposed scheme. This episode gave Wang the confidence "that there is power in religious belief". Anne, who works in the software industry in Shenzhen, partly attributes her positive work attitude to her faith, when encountering difficulties:

> When I face difficulties at work, I often consult the Bible. Before, I might not know how to solve the problems. After I started believing in the Jesus, I have become more demanding towards my work, because I feel that I cannot be the same as others.

According to Hui Wen, a sales executive, Christian workers tended to be more accommodating and understanding:

> Some non-Christians like to grumble and complain. For example, they might be dissatisfied when the boss gives the year-end bonus, saying that this year's bonus doesn't match last year's, or they will compare who gets more and less. But for us [Christians], we tend to be more understanding. I may feel that it's ok to have a bit less bonus, because business this year hasn't been good, and this is helpful for the boss's business. Or, when we encounter some minor problems, we will try to be more accommodating, and to touch others with our loving care. Some non-Christians have bad habits, after arriving they will first make coffee, surf the Internet, and start their work in the afternoon. We will focus on doing our job well first thing in the morning.

Thus, Christian employees often construct an identity boundary between themselves and non-Christian colleagues, via a moralistic discourse that portrays them as embodying "correct" and more "positive" values. At the same time, these were also the values that were deemed lacking in the workplace and the wider society. They believed that it was the difference in their work attitude and their values that allowed them to showcase their faith to their non-Christian colleagues, and to hopefully to create a work culture imbued with Christian ethics. For Christian workers who find themselves in a workplace with a predominantly Christian workforce, the sharing of a common religion is the single most important element that contributes to these workers' sense of workplace well-being. For Mary, who was previously working as an accountant in a state-owned enterprise before her current job teaching Chinese to foreigners in an international school, working in an environment where religion is taken seriously and openly expressed by colleagues, presents a huge contrast to her previous work

experience. It is not that the Christian workplace is devoid of problems. However, sharing a common religion contributes significantly to a strong sense of bonding between colleagues. It also provides moral resources for the management and ordinary employees, to face difficulties together, in a more consensual and supportive way:

> When you encounter difficult problems, you will be able to share them with sisters-in-Christ, and they will even join you in prayers as well. One will always encounter difficulties in life. Regardless of work or daily life, there are bounds to be trials that one must go through. I have been in this sector for about 10 years, there are many problems which we face every day. It does not mean that we as a Christian school do not encounter any problem. We too have our own problems, and some of them are not small either. But the biggest difference is that we will be able to find someone to share and to pray for you. The difficult thing is life is not about the obstacles we face, it is more about the support and encouragement that the people by your side provide.

Sharing a common religion might contribute to the building of trust, and hence facilitate the cultivation of socially and commercially beneficial relationships, with one's colleagues and business acquaintances. Hui Wen notes how her work performance has actually improved after she decided to focus more on her clients' needs instead on her sales figures. For her, this change in priority since becoming a Christian had unexpectedly improved her work performance. When clients experienced good and sincere service, many then introduced Hui Wen to their relatives and friends. To Simon, a Kunming-based teacher, Christians tend to be more trustworthy, compared to non-Christians. A Christian's ability to inspire trust (cf. Tong and Yang 2016) in others is good not only for sealing business deals but also for motivating workers and establishing collegial atmosphere in the workplace. When asked how important religious faith is in the workplace, Simon opines:

> It's very important. First, it's trust. Because you will realise that in general among business people, many are not trustworthy. There are also many who want to get close to you through the faith. But to me, I might not interact with them often on a daily basis, but in times of real trouble, we are willing to help others, including in business. Workers may judge whether the company's boss, if he is profit-minded or really cares for the workers. While a company seeks profits, it should also look after the workers . . . When one interacts with colleagues as a Christian, people will get along better, there is greater efficiency in discussing things.

A phrase that emerged constantly among Christian professionals is "witnessing for the faith" (*wei xinyang zuo jianzheng*) at the workplace. It is through the expression of faith in their daily life, in the workplace, that Christian employees often merge the 'religious' and the 'secular (*shishu*). Commenting on how Christians should not be just "Sunday Christians" but should be religious exemplars in the normal workaday, Andy argues that in this way Christians could evangelize to their colleagues:

> Your church life is different. But, it doesn't mean we have to separate them, to the point that your Monday through Saturday is different from your Sunday. Why do you do that? Shouldn't your faith be a consistent route? . . . But once more and more brothers and sisters realize that it is important to have faithful life even throughout the week, it would make such a difference in the sense that people began to look at our faith differently. They will not just think that you are the ones only do something special on Sundays, on all the other days you are the same as me. Maybe some of us are not as good as you. But now they see difference, they see these people they do live a different life. They don't try to please the boss, for example, they don't bribe others. And they come to work on time. They don't steal company's money, and they don't steal company's time. People normally may not steal money, but most people steal time. But these people [Christians] are solid. These people we need to respect. I think it would play a very significant role in evangelism, especially in Chinese culture.

Like many young Christian professionals based in the cities, Wang, the doctor, did not come from a Christian family and was introduced to Christianity while a student in the university. He got baptized after graduation, and shared that his religious faith has been important factor behind his career choices. After a stint as a junior doctor in the hospitals, Wang decided to work for a foreign NGO which partnered the local government in providing medical care to the needy in Yunnan rural areas. When asked if one's religion and one's occupation should have a clear dividing line, Wang said, "I personally feel that religion and occupation do not have any clear division. I said that because my own religious belief has played a large role in my career choice". Why do these Chinese professionals desire to integrate faith and work, or more generally, seek to dissolve the distinction between the so-called 'religious' (*zongjiao de*) and the 'secular' (*shisu de*)? To answer this, we have to consider their view on the meaning of work.

4. Transforming the Workplace, Transforming the Society: Work as "Service"

I feel that, compared to when I just graduated, I understand more what I actually want in life, and how to do better in my job. The faith has really been a profound influence on me, and such deep influence also affects my subordinates. Yes ... just as how Jesus has influenced me, I influence my subordinates and those around me. (Yaqiong, Shenzhen)

Conversion to a new religion often brings about a sense of radical break with the past. One respondent says that her "thinking has changed" (*sixiang gaibian le*), while another mentions that Christianity can "broaden one's horizon" (*shiye kaikuole*). Wenming, a marketing executive in Kunming, shares how becoming a Christian has motivated him to aspire towards sanctity in accordance with biblical teachings, thus, affecting in a profound discontinuity with his past behavior:

After becoming a Christian, I felt that the Lord's intention was for us to be kind or perfect, to aspire toward sanctity ... Because these are wonderful things, I aspire to achieve these ... The Bible tells us, we must love one another. Maybe there is too much lacking and imperfection in my life, I have this wish to cultivate sanctity in my life according to what the Bible proclaims.

Zhiqing, a teacher, shares that one big difference between being a Christian and her previous irreligious life is that "there is something in life to look forward to and that there is more hope in life". She further elaborates:

We were always sad and dull previously. We brood about having lousy parents, lousy jobs, we felt that there was no meaning in life. However, after becoming a Christian, I feel that life is more fulfilling and become more hopeful (*shenghuo geng you yiyi, geng you xiwang*). I was able to gain different perspectives (*buyiyang de quandian*). I feel that your working attitude will change because of your own character, you will also become more proactive.

This sentiment of rupture and change featured prominently among the Chinese professionals, when they shared their views towards their work. First, the trope that was frequently mentioned by respondents in relation to work was "to serve" (*shifeng*). For them, work is not just a source of livelihood, but more importantly, it provides an opportunity to serve God and the society at large. James, a software engineer in Shenzhen, describes this transformation:

Before, we thought that we only work for ourselves. However, two weeks ago, we went to a seminar, the teacher mentioned that actually we are working full-time. Because we are working, so we are employees. So if we work well, put in our best effort, to help others along as we work, we also serving the Lord ... I used to have the attitude of only doing the best for myself. When I was doing too many things and got irritated, my attitude would be quite negative. But if you believe in the Lord, even though this negativity could still be present to some degree, I feel I am uplifted. In the beginning you can't handle the pressure from work, but now, this limit of yours can increase a little, and you can endure.

Many respondents revealed how they, prior to embracing Christianity, usually viewed work as numbing, while often having to navigate poisonous workplace relations that sapped their morale and energy. Converting to Christianity has profoundly transformed their experience of work and the workplace. They shared about having acquired more positive attitude towards their work and their colleagues as they embraced a new outlook in life and made changes to their behavior. As Mary, the teacher, said, "it is the same when it comes to work, when you become more proactive, you will engage yourself to do more things. I feel that the biggest change is the attitude to dare to challenge things". This transformation of work attitude does not mean that there are no longer problems in the workplace for the Christian workers. For someone like Weixiong, who runs a private school, the conflict between one's work and religious principles often come to the fore in the conduct of business. Holding an executive position means he is concerned about his company's profit levels, for the "main goal of a business is profit, to make money". After becoming a Christian, Weixiong increasingly finds instances of conflict between his Christian values and business practices, and this conflict will not disappear. "Once you have this religious faith", he says, "you may encounter different tests and seductions, and you will use some Christian standards as basis of your judgement".

In fact, being a Christian in a predominantly non-religious or even atheistic environment can result in ostracization, marginalization, and attracting unwanted attention. As discussed before, Christian employees might feel that they are regarded by their non-Christian colleagues, sometimes negatively, as of a "different kind" (*linglei*). In a society where Christians still constitute a small minority, and where there is still a lingering view among some Chinese people that Christianity is a "Western" and "foreign" religion, Christian employees constantly face the dilemma between the desire to express more openly their religious identity in the workplace and the need to downplay, or even hide, their religious faith in a largely non-Christian environment. At the same time, Christian employees tend to interpret their desire to inspire a more positive mind-set among colleagues, as "providing witness" (*zuo jianzheng*) for their faith, and as "serving the Lord" (*shifeng zhu*). What does "service" and "to serve the Lord" entail? As James indicated above, service can involve helping one's colleagues and business acquaintances in need. More concretely, work as service entails bringing the right (i.e., Christian) values to the workplace. In a society where the cultivation of good personal relationship (*gao guanxi*), with one's superiors and acquaintances, is often essential for one's career advancement, Anne shares how she often emphasizes fairness, equality, and transparency in her work, while lamenting that these values are not usually found in the workplace:

> Before, I had to conduct inspection, and felt that there should not be favoritism, and should treat everyone the same (*yishi tongren*)! It doesn't matter if you are a superior or a normal worker. This is a small matter, but I felt everyone should receive equal treatment. I strove for fairness, justice, and transparency.

For the Christian employees, by expressing and integrating faith and work, couched in terms of "service", they hoped to transform people's values, the work culture, and ultimately embed Christian values in the wider society (cf. Wielander 2009). For these evangelical Protestants, the view of work as service dissolved the boundary between the secular work/workplace and religious life. Their desire to "provide witness for the faith" in the workplace was motivated by what they perceived as the main problem in the contemporary society—the decline of morality. With the rapid social transformations accompanying China's transition to a market-oriented society, personal, and public morality have suffered. Many of our respondents worried that people are now overwhelmingly obsessed with the pursuit of personal gains and wealth. Simon, the Kunming teacher, opined:

> After the reforms, people come to have differing views on many issues. But in general, people acknowledge the economy as the main driving force, and early on people were just focused on making money. But right now, even though people are generally more well-to-do and financially stable, their moral values have declined. From what I understand, young people nowadays also have some bad feelings about the society, and they do not have

strong values to guide them. This has resulted in immoral acts happening within their circle, affecting themselves, their family, their career, which is definitely a negative impact on the society. And I am worried about that. Therefore, when people with Christian faith stand up in society, this will have positive impact, and I believe that society will then experience positive development.

For Christian employees then, the everyday work environment is where China's moral crisis manifests in stark terms, and where they feel motivated to act in ways that might bring about a moral transformation, little by little, relying on religious values to guide their behavior. As Weixiong notes, "Because we can provide witness for the faith during work, and even to spread the gospel, so I feel that it's very good, to be able to do one's work and the Lord's work". China is suffering from a moral crisis, and religion—Christianity in particular—is seen as a font of ethical principles to tackle widespread social ills. Adopting the view of religion as everyday practice, the Christian workers' discourse of work as "service", entails both being "servants" of God in the workplace and engaging in efforts to transform the society, thus, dissolving the conceptual distinction between the 'secular' and the 'religious'.

"Subtle Infiltration": Social Media and Workplace Evangelism

I have discussed above about the Christian employees' desire to be a role model in the workplace, in order to influence their colleagues with Christian values, and to shape workplace culture. The study's respondents stressed that they would refrain from open evangelism and prefer to influence their non-Christian colleagues in subtle ways. Apart from striving to be ethical employees, many respondents consider the social media as another important means for evangelism and spreading Christian values in the workplace. One of the most remarkable social trends in China in recent years is the explosion of internet usage (Herold and Marolt 2011). According to the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2015, there were 620 million mobile internet users in China, with around 90% of internet users using mobile phones to access the internet. The Internet and social networking sites are rapidly penetrating into all domains of Chinese social, cultural, economic, and political life. A commentator has observed that "many Chinese netizens would not distinguish between social media and the internet itself", such that "the Internet is social media and vice versa" (Crampton 2012). The use of social networking sites has become an integral part of our respondents' lives, including their religious pursuits. A typical example is Wen, a woman in her early twenties, who shared her baptism experience:

> I posted my baptism pictures on QQ, and everyone was able to view them, as I did not set any restrictions. Many of my former classmates asked me, what are you doing, because there was a certificate. I told them that I was baptized. Then they asked me why I needed to be baptized? What is baptism? I told them that it's a procedure to becoming a Christian. They then asked me why I believe in Christianity, you are a Chinese and you still believe in it? Two days after I saw the comment, I told them that this is my choice and they have to respect that. After that one friend told me that she hoped that I could bring her to Christianity as well.

Anne, from Shenzhen, used the phrase, "subtle infiltration" (*shentou*) to describe the preferred method: "I will be subtle in WeChat [*Weixin*], not to proclaim that I am a Christian in an outright manner ... This kind of influence, it's a little by little, and slowly seeps into your consciousness. Then, you will ask me one day, you believe in this, right? And when you ask about the story of Jesus, I can then tell you loudly his story". This method of subtle evangelism is possible on social media like WeChat because one's "friends" on the app include non-Christians. When someone posts some Christian content on WeChat, some non-Christians may become interested and respond to the post. Lily, a teacher in Kunming, describes how this subtle evangelism works:

> There are also non-believers that are hidden somewhere in the group. One of them is actually a Buddhist. I feel that it is alright and it is actually very good. We can try to influence him

with what we are doing. He might be thinking, 'let's see how long you all can last with this, it might just be a one-time thing for a short whole.' But in fact, we are going to do this for 10 over years. I do not know when he will convert and believe in God, but I will pray for him.

James, from Shenzhen, observes:

When some people share some good things, I will share them in my other networks, or I will "like" and "support" on WeChat. I always do such things. Others may not know I am a Christian, but will ask, do you believe in this? I will then tell them indirectly.

Some respondents underscored the need to be subtle in their evangelism in social media, to avoid "scaring" others away. As one noted, "Actually you want to share with them but you are worried that your evangelism will create negative feelings in them. If I am too keen, they will be frightened, and will be unwilling to come for activities. So don't be too straightforward, show concern for them bit by bit in their daily life, you can't rush things". While many respondents view social media positively for its potential to facilitate evangelism in the workplace, some express a more cautious attitude and highlight its limitations. For Andy, social media like WeChat and QQ are regarded more as an effective tool for communicating with friends, colleagues and family members in an environment where mobile phone usage is very widespread. He said, "To me, [these social media] are just a tool. I usually don't intentionally use QQ or WeChat to tell others about the gospel. Very little".

Partly due to their awareness of the political sensitivity of religion in China and partly due to their own personal preference for privacy, some respondents are more ambivalent about using social media as a means for evangelism among colleagues. There were also concerns that a more enthusiastic evangelism among one's circle of colleagues who are on one's social networking sites might put strain on friendship. Wang, when asked if he used social media to share religious material among friends and colleagues, expressed his concerns and how he was still trying to negotiate the travails of social media:

If I do have some thoughts and feelings, I may put them in the private domain, and will not necessarily share them with others. I want to avoid putting pressure on my non-Christian friends, and not let them think that I am evangelizing openly through social media. I don't quite like to do this, and in any case I want to maintain our friendship. They do know me and actually many friends know that I am a Christian, and I really treasure maintaining our relationship. But at the same time, I also hope that they will get to know about the faith. So, I am still exploring what's the appropriate way".

While Christian employees recognize social media as important tools for religious communication and practice in the workplace, they serve to complement, and would not replace, face-to-face interactions. Meanwhile, Christian employees assiduously avoid online discussion of "sensitive" and "political" issues, due to widespread perception of the ruling Communist Party's online surveillance and intolerance of dissent.

5. Conclusions

This study had two main aims. First, to uncover the core meaning Chinese Christian professionals attribute to the domain of work, how they practice faith integration in the workplace and the challenges they face in doing so. And second, to examine the issue of religion and social change in China. The research data showed that evangelical Protestant employees tended to view the society as experiencing a moral decline. This view, in turn, reinforced their sense of being different and legitimized their effort in changing society, through influencing their colleagues and changing the workplace culture. The study's significance was twofold: First, theoretically grounded on the concept of everyday religion, it shed light on how Chinese evangelical Protestants are able to practice their faith in a highly restrictive political context, by seeking faith integration in the workplace, outside the state circumscribed religious domain and surveillance of religious sites. At the individual level, this study found that SRW allows these Christians to strive towards the ideal

of expressing their faith more holistically, and in turn, reinforces the religious values that form the basis of their ethical system (Giacolone and Jurkiewicz 2003). However, there are challenges. Chinese Christian employees' merging of religion, work, and other aspects of their daily life happens in a socio-political context, where Christians still constitute a small religious minority, and where Christianity can still be deemed a highly sensitive cultural and political issue, by many believers and non-believers alike. Given the current focus on Chinese Christian entrepreneurs in the scholarly literature, one of the questions the study sought to answer was whether the experiences of the Christian employees were similar to, or different from, that of the entrepreneurs. The study's findings suggest an important commonality—many, in both groups, strive to spread the gospel to non-Christians in the workplace and the wider society, and wish to express their religious faith more openly in their work life. This is not surprising, given that the two groups are broadly evangelical in their religious orientation and are embedded in similar political and societal context. There are, however, important differences. Compared to the Christian employees, the Chinese Christian bosses and entrepreneurs are much more capable of shaping the workplace culture to make it more "Christian". Many are also able to proselytize, to varying degree of success, among the employees who work for them. Additionally, some highly successful Christian entrepreneurs are able to rely on their wealth, influence, and high social status to work closely with government officials and agencies in their philanthropic, charitable, and "developmental" activities. However, this is not the case for Christian employees.

In relation to the broader scholarship on SRW in which some have argued for deeper integration of religion, spirituality, and the workplace, for its supposed benefits, this study's findings suggest that it is very unlikely to be implemented in China's political context. Evangelical Christian employees in China do not expect or demand their firms to create conducive environment for them to practice faith–work integration. Neither are they relying on the government to sympathize with, or accept, their strongly held view that religion should not be confined to a narrowly demarcated 'religious sphere' (*zongjiao jie*). These Christian professionals are not engaging in 'political merit-making' (Weller et al. 2017) by cultivating favorable ties with party-state officials, for their social engagement. Rather, they are both aware and wary of the wider socio-political context, as they seek to practice religion in their everyday life in a more encompassing manner, including in the workplace.

At the individual level, this study found that evangelical Protestant employees often discursively construct a boundary between themselves and the non-Christians, in the workplace, where they regard themselves as more motivated and understanding, having a more positive attitude toward work, and to be less corruptible. This discursive, self-othering is double-edged. On the one hand it enables the Christians to construct a distinctive workplace and social identity, one that is framed in religious terms. On the other hand, this risks resulting in their being negatively seen by non-Christian colleagues as belonging to a "different kind" (*linglei*), thus, accentuating the social gulf and tension that might have already existed between the Christian and the non-Christian employees. While Christian employees might strive to be role models in the workplace, many are also aware of the need to remain "subtle" in expressing and propagating their faith. One "subtle" way of doing so, is through the use of social media. In other words, in a broader restrictive political and cultural environment, they constantly experience a tension between their strong desire to express their faith more openly and the need to sometimes avoid explicit religious expressions in the workplace.

The second significant contribution of this study relates to the issue of religion and social change in China. In this study, I highlighted the need to examine religious social engagement outside the domain of civil society, to understand how religious actors might circumvent or ignore institutional boundaries and state regulations, while striving to make positive impacts on society. Social change, in the context of this study and as expressed by the respondents, entails the moral transformation of the society. For the respondents, this would involve the transformation of the workplace. Put in another way, they consider the transformation of the workplace to be a part of their effort to transform the society, in accordance with Christian values. From their evangelical standpoint, the ultimate aim is the Christianization of China.

Some might question whether the lack of a more direct effort to change social structures, or of a more explicitly expressed political vision on the part of the Christian employees, could be regarded as social change. My rejoinder is that one of the main aims of this paper was to broaden our conception of social change and social engagement. I have argued for the need to pay attention to what the literature describes as unobtrusive social engagement. The Christian employees' attempt to change the moral climate of the workplace and then that of the society represents an effort, in a relatively unobtrusive manner (especially in the political climate of China), to change society in the long run. This attempt is based on a religious vision, often without explicitly referencing the 'political' as commonly understood. One reason is that, for these Christians, the 'political' is already subsumed under or encompassed by their religious vision.

Unlike the intellectuals in the literature on 'culture Christians' who engaged in theological and theoretical debates over Christianity's role in China's social and moral transformation, these Chinese evangelical Protestant employees are engaging in unobtrusive social engagement, through the practice of Christianity as an everyday or lived religion, with the aim of effecting social change. As employees, how do Protestant Christians seek to transform workplace culture, and thence the larger society, in a social context where they are the minority, and in a political context with highly restrictive religious regulations and with Christianity often viewed with suspect? The study's respondents eschewed the overt Christian mobilization and activism in civil society, as documented in some existing studies. Their perception and experience of moral decline in society motivates them to seek moral and social transformation, not by open advocacy through civil society activism, but through influencing their colleagues and workplace culture. Many respondents consider their work to be a means for social transformation viewed in moral terms. For them, the workplace is an arena where Christian evangelism, the perceived moral decline of contemporary society, and the supposed solution to the crisis are entangled, allowing for a distinct narrative and practice of Christian social engagement to emerge in China. Chinese evangelical Protestant employees rationalize this effort in terms of work, as a form of "service"—to God, to colleagues, and to society.

An important difference between China and the Faith at Work movement in the West is that the latter had emerged and flourished in social, political, and cultural contexts which were relatively favorable to religion (especially Christianity). Within China, unlike the Christian entrepreneurs or Wenzhou 'Boss Christians' described in the literature, Christian employees in the country do not enjoy the relative freedom and authority to openly express their faith in the workplace. Neither are they able to demand their secular firms or appeal to the country's laws to support faith-work integration. In an authoritarian political context where civil society activism is curtailed, the workplace provides a relatively "safe" domain for Christian employees to engage in religious transformation of society, in less obtrusive and more subtle ways, outside the direct monitoring of the authorities. For these evangelical Protestant employees, the cultivation of personal piety and engaging in subtle proselytism in the workplace is not only a matter of saving souls, but also of transforming the moral fabric of society.

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