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Citation for published version:

McLeister, M 2018, 'Minimalised Mobility: Urbanising Protestant Congregations in Contemporary China', Chinese Religions in the Age of Massive Urbanization, Gottingen, Germany, 6/06/18 - 7/06/18.

Link:

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Minimalist Mobility: Urbanising Protestant Congregations in Contemporary China

Mark McLeister

Abstract: While the growing literature on Christianity in contemporary China is beginning to expand our understanding of Protestantism in an urban context, there is a dearth of analysis on the urbanising context and how congregations respond to it. This paper attempts to begin to address some of these issues by analysing Protestant congregations in a mid-sized Chinese city (Huanghaicheng). This paper argues that in an urbanised context, a more formal official religious regulatory framework is established. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, this paper identifies local factors as well as factors from beyond Huanghaicheng which help to shape Protestant perceptions of the regulatory framework. Further, this paper argues that religious specialists and lay believers alike are compelled to develop new strategies in order to negotiate this regulatory framework. One of the patterns emerging from this negotiation process is a more minimalist and mobile approach to officially-recognised sites for religious activity (*zongjiao huodong changsuo*).

Keywords: urbanisation; religious activities venues; politics of space; church-state interactions; Protestantism

On a return trip to Huanghaicheng¹ in the summer of 2014, I arranged to meet up with Pastor Liu (Liu *mushi*), the main leader of a Three-Self-affiliated church located in Baisong Village on the edge of the city. Baisong Church, which he had led since the 1990s is the only officially-designated “church” in Moushan District, although there are multiple “meeting points” (*juhuidian* 聚会点) and “small groups” (*xiaozu* 小组) dotted throughout the district.² On previous visits, I had always taken local buses to Baisong Church where Pastor Liu lived. However, on this occasion, Pastor Liu insisted on picking me up. I assumed that he had arranged for one of the “brothers” or “sisters” (*dixiongzimei* 弟兄姊妹) to do the pickup so I was surprised when Pastor Liu himself arrived, driving a car. On the way back to Baisong Church, Pastor Liu explained that he had learned to drive to save time and was now even busier than before because Baisong church had established (*jianli* 建立) a new church in the district. He would show me after lunch, he said.

After lunch at Baisong Church, and joined by ‘Pastor’s wife’ (*shimu* 师母) we headed to see where the new congregation was located. The new site was a mere ten-minute drive from Baisong Church but this part of the district was very different than it had been several years previously – and very different from Baisong village. What had been fields and collections of ramshackle single-storey houses was now newly-laid roads which intersected row upon row of recently-constructed apartment block complexes. Although these apartment buildings were uniform, there were plenty signs of life in them: cars were parked up awkwardly on the wide pavements; grandparents were pushing grandchildren around in pushchairs; bedding was being aired in the afternoon sun on the balconies of the apartment blocks; small kiosks selling newspapers, cigarettes and bottled drinks were dotted near the entrances to the different complexes.

We took a left turn along a road which marked the outer limits of these new housing complexes. On the right-hand side of the road were apartment blocks. On the left-hand side of the road were fields and a few factory buildings. We pulled off the road along a rough track and stopped outside a three-storey L-shaped industrial building. There was no one around in the early afternoon heat and instead of the sound of factory machines, all I could hear was the rhythmic sound of cicadas. The building itself was bland and unremarkable, especially in contrast to the neatly-built new apartments across the road. The concrete walls

¹ All place names and people names associated with my fieldsite are pseudonyms, unless otherwise indicated.

² There are about thirty in total, both registered and unregistered.

of this factory had been painted grey, but the paint had started to crack and was peeling off in places. A row of air-conditioner outlet fans on the outside wall of the second floor was the only indication that this building was used for anything other than a factory – no small-scale factory owner in Huanghaicheng was likely to provide air conditioning for workers! “Do you like our new church?” asked Pastor Liu, smiling. The large industrial door was open and we walked through it, passing boxes of stacked building materials and machine parts, and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

At the top of the stairs was a thin partition wall, the top half of which was glass. Pastor Liu opened the door into a hallway and through a second internal doorway, we could see the church hall (*dating* 大厅). It had a uniformly-tiled floor and white walls. The design was plain and simple and meticulously clean, but the space was instantly recognisable as a Protestant meeting place. At the far end of the hall was a low platform, and on the back wall above it were written the characters, “God loves the people of the world,” (*shen ai shiren* 神爱世人) in the middle of which was a red cross. In front of the platform were two lecterns – one slightly taller than the other – both of which were also emblazoned with a red cross. To the left in front of the platform was a piano (the least movable object there) and to the far left of the hall was a small glass-panelled room – the “book room” – where attendees could buy bibles or other Christian literature. In front of the book room was tiered seating for the “choir” (*changshiban* 唱诗班). This seating was comprised of boxes which could be used for storage. Along both side walls were large but portable air-conditioning units. Several portable speakers had also been added along these walls to help relay what was being said from the front.

Despite this being July, tinsel and other Christmas decorations were still wrapped around the thin support pillars in the middle of the hall. Unlike all the other Three-Self-affiliated churches in Huanghaicheng, the seating was not comprised of wooden benches but individual cushioned chairs each of which had a collapsible table at the back so that those sitting behind would have somewhere to lay a bible or hymnbook. These chairs were clearly built for “church” purposes. “We imported these chairs from South Korea,” exclaimed Pastor Liu, smiling. “They’re really good quality, and they’re collapsible, so we can move them quickly and easily if we need to,” he explained. They did indeed look like substantial chairs and they were much more comfortable to sit on than the wooden bench seating used in other churches and meeting points. “We can use this space for as long as we need it,” said Pastor Liu.

“And, did you see our signs?” he enquired. In the hallway were some freestanding signs. It was clear that some thought had gone into their design. The signs were fairly large and comprised of a sturdy metal frame and feet, over which was placed a sign made from synthetic material, making it durable but lightweight. A white cross dominated the red background, and at the bottom were some simple directions to the “church” (*jiaotang* 教堂). The clever design made them portable – an ongoing theme in this new setup – and the material could easily be replaced if changes needed to be made to the text. These signs were placed out on the edge of the new roads before church gatherings, to help advertise the location of the congregation for the residents in the newly-built apartments.

Pastor Liu seemed very pleased with this new development for the district’s Protestant community. Within less than a year there were 300 people regularly worshipping at this church. The contrast between the features of this “church” (which did not have a proper name) and Baisong Church were stark. Baisong Church, located in a village on the edge of the city, traced its history back to the “missionary era” but the original church building (built by local Protestants) was confiscated by the state after land reform was initiated. Some believers continued to meet in small groups throughout the 1950s and up until the start of the Cultural Revolution. Born in the 1950s, Pastor Liu became a Protestant in 1981 through the influence of a relative. In 1983 more converts began to meet together regularly to worship. By 1990 there were 50-60 Protestants meeting together in people’s homes in various villages in the area. It was at this point that Pastor Liu made a connection with the Huanghaicheng *lianghui* and received one year of “theological” training in a Three-Self seminary.³ After this, he made a successful application to the city-level Religious Affairs Bureau to “revive an existing church” (*futang* 复堂), which provided the growing congregation with formal permission to meet (although they did so in homes because they had no building). The remains of the original church building, were demolished to make way for housing in 1999. However, through protracted negotiations with the local state Pastor Liu was able to secure permission to build a new church building, the land for which was also provided by the village committee which was supposed to serve as compensation for the original demolished church building.

³ I heard many stories of how Liu *mushi* would cycle the fifteen-or-so kilometres to Desheng Church in the city centre some Sundays to worship, carrying ‘Pastor’s wife’ and their son on the back of his bicycle.

The Baisong Church building was purpose-built in a gated compound with a central courtyard. At the front of the main church building is an apex-roofed two-storey tower, on top of which is a large, stainless steel cross, making it instantly recognisable as a church building and visible from some distance away. On the front of this tower are the characters “Protestant Church” (*jidujiaotang* 基督教堂). A large arched doorway leads into the main church hall which has a cement floor and provides seating for over 300 people on hard wooden pews. There is a large stage at the front of the hall, above which are the characters for “God loves the people of the world,” intersected by a sizable red cross. This, and a piano, are really the only points of similarity between Baisong Church and the new building. At the other end of the hall are the characters “Holiness to the Lord” (*gui yehesua wei sheng* 归耶和華為聖). There are a few ceiling fans to circulate the air in the summer and an old air conditioning unit in one corner at the back which is only ever used during the hottest of the summer weather.

In addition to providing ample meeting space for a growing congregation, there is an office for Pastor Liu and the other church leaders, a formal meeting room and living space for Pastor Liu and his family. A sizeable kitchen means that the endless stream of church members and other visitors who drop by the church for training, pastoral care or to take part in smaller church gatherings during the week can be fed. On the countless occasions I have visited Baisong Church, Pastor Liu and his family have never been on their own for breakfast, lunch or an evening meal. This space has provided for the establishment of a very tightly-knit congregational community, allowing Pastor Liu to train new leaders, including a significant number of young people who have been successful in applying for seminary training and have come back to Huanghaicheng to help lead this church or other congregations.

My description here of this newly-established “religious activities venue” (*zongjiao huodong changsuo* 宗教活动场所) perhaps seems somewhat mundane at first. But the establishment of this new congregation in Huanghaicheng is only part of a broader story of Pastor Liu and Baisong Church’s engagement with the expanding city and the changes which this process has brought. In order to highlight some of the challenges which Pastor Liu has encountered and how he is negotiating them, we will analyse why Pastor Liu chose to launch this new congregation and why he chose a model of “minimalist mobility” for the meeting space. We will discuss the significance of this particular religious space within its religio-political

context, touching on the state's approach to religious sites ("religious activities venues") and the relevant regulatory framework.

In this paper, I am drawing on ethnographic data generated on a number of field trips to Huanghaicheng, a city in the northern half of the Huadong region, beginning in 2009 (including a twelve-month field visit in 2009-2010 (see McLeister 2013)). The focus of my research is popular Christianity⁴ in Huanghaicheng's Three-Self-affiliated congregations and the interactions between these congregations and the local state. The congregations are registered with the local state through the city "lianghui" (两会), comprised of the two committees of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (基督教三自爱国运动委员会) and the Christian Council (基督教协会). As we will see below, Protestant congregations are required to register at a particular site in order to receive legal protection as legitimate (*zhengchang* 正常) religious entities. Churches are important religious spaces because they serve not only as ritual space but as symbols of the presence of the Protestant community and bases for reaching into the city with the Protestant message (see also Cao 2011, 77). Before we discuss our case study, however, it will be helpful if we place our discussion in the broader context of urbanisation and Protestant Christianity in the contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC). Following this, we will briefly introduce Huanghaicheng before considering the concept of religious activities venues and the Pastor Liu's new church as a model of minimalist mobility.

Urbanisation and Christianity in the PRC

It hardly needs to be said that many parts of China have been undergoing aggressive urbanisation since the start of market reforms in 1978. In 1949, when the Communist Party of China (CPC) came to power there were 58 cities in China, comprising about 10.6% of the population (Campanella 2008, 174). By 1978, China's urban population made up about 20% of the total population and by 2010, that figure had reached 50% (Ren 2013 xii). As of 2017, China had over 100 cities with populations of one million or more (Guardian 2017). It is not only that Chinese cities have been expanding in size since the late 1970s, they are also being redeveloped and remodelled on a massive scale (Abramson 2006). Large-scale new

⁴ See Raj and Dempsey (2002) for a general outline of popular Christianity.

neighbourhoods are replacing old and dilapidated housing from the previous century, and there is an emphasis on uniformity and “politically charged forms of standardization in China” when it comes to urbanisation (Abramson 2011, 69).⁵ Urban space itself has become commercialised in the reform era and accentuated for economic purposes (Gaubatz 2008, 75a).

In relation to urbanisation and religion, a number of scholars have highlighted the dearth of research on religion and urban studies (Van der Veer 2015, 6) and on the nexus between religion and urban space (Wu 2015, 243a). It is important here to establish a number of key points regarding the PRC state’s approach to religion which are relevant to our discussion. CPC policy on religion borrowed heavily from the Republican-era approaches to religion, adopting a modernist and secularist stance which allowed for limited space for religion as long as it supported CPC aims (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). The secular state adheres to a policy of guaranteeing “freedom of religious belief” (*zongjiao xinyang ziyou* 宗教信仰自由) which ultimately means that religion is private and should have no engagement with the public realm (see Madsen 2009). There is, therefore, a politics of space at the heart of the state’s policy on religion: the state protects “legitimate” (*zhengchang* 正常) religious practices so long as they take place in spaces set aside for this purpose.⁶ The logical outcome of this is an attempt by the central state to create cities and urban spaces which are inherently secular and where the influence and visibility of religion and religious space is kept to a minimum (although local officials often make exceptions to this when revenue is to be made from religion for the local economy). At the same time, however, the CPC also has a united front strategy to shore up support for the Party from across society, and since the early 1950s, it has recognised the importance of providing some space for religion in an attempt to manage and shape it, while at the same time displaying the principle of “freedom of religious belief.”⁷

Despite a re-adjustment of official CPC policy on religion in the early 1980s which acknowledged that religion would be a long-term phenomenon in Chinese society, it still

⁵ See Scott (1998) for a wider treatment of “authoritarian high modernism” and its emphasis on uniformity and standardisation in urban space as a means to bring about conformity in human behaviour. State socialism in China produced homogenous space in urban centres (see Yang 2004, 727).

⁶ Legislation also prevents church clergy from operating outside the administrative area in which they are registered without permission from the RAB. This is another element of policy on religion which has a spatial element, but I will not explore this particular aspect in this paper.

⁷ See Kong (1993) for a parallel example of this in Singapore.

holds to secularisation theory, positing that religion will eventually disappear⁸ (CPC Central Committee 1982, Chapter 1). However, religion has not only not “disappeared” but has revived, been reinvented, and taken on new and vigorous forms throughout the reform era. There has arguably been a degree of relaxation in terms of state attempts at control of religion and at the same time the state’s overall policy on containing religion has failed, at least to some degree.

Rapid urbanisation is undoubtedly impacting Protestant Christianity (and other religious traditions!) across China and Protestant Christianity is also having an impact on the urban environment (Chambon 2017). As a religion which was predominantly rural-based in the 1980s and early 1990s, Protestant Christianity expanded extensively in urban areas in the 1990s and into the new millennium. During this time, we have seen the rapid development of a wide range of different forms of Protestant Christianity across the country, giving rise to many different congregation types.⁹ Large Three-Self-affiliated “megachurches” can be found in cities across the eastern provinces. For example, Chongyi Church 崇一堂 in Hangzhou (total floorspace 12,480 square metres, seating for 5,000+) has over 2,000 volunteer lay workers (*yigong* 义工) serving across more than twenty different church programmes (Chongyi Church, undated).¹⁰ These building projects are often (at least) partially funded by the state, in part to showcase the idea of “freedom of religious belief” which is an important element of official policy on religion as we saw above.

But it is not just congregations affiliated with the TSPM which have increased in number and size alongside rapid urbanisation. Congregations and networks of congregations which have chosen not to affiliate with the TSPM (for a variety of reasons) have also expanded rapidly in urban areas in the last two decades – more so, in fact, than those which are Three-Self-

⁸ “在人类历史上，宗教终究是要消亡的，但是只有经过社会主义、共产主义的长期发展，在一切客观条件具备的时候，才会自然消亡。”

⁹ Some notable scholarship which has captured some of the field of urban Christianity in recent years includes work done by Wu Ziming et al (2005), Wu Ziming et al (2009), Cao Nanlai on the “Wenzhou church” (2011), Gerda Wielander (2013), Karrie J. Koesel (2014), Kang Jie (2016), Carsten Vala (2018). Several other significant (but less scholarly) works include Brent Fulton (2015) and Ma Li and Li Jin. (2018).

¹⁰ Other notable examples include Haidian Church 海淀堂 in Beijing (floorspace of 4,000+ square metres), and a congregation of 10,000+ in 2011 (Haidian Church 2013; Wenzel-Teuber 2013, 23); Huaxiang Church 花巷堂 in Fuzhou, which stands in the centre of the city (total floorspace of 4,546.8 square meters), and a congregation of 6,500 in 2015, including 1,000 volunteer lay workers (ChinaSource Team 2016); The recently-completed Tianhe Church 天河堂 in Guangzhou (floorspace of 2,493 metres and seating for 3,000+) was the first new church to be built in the city since 1949 (Yang 2016); Beimen Church 北门堂 in Zhangzhou, Fujian, (total floorspace of 10,594 square meters) and seating for 5,000+ (Zhi 2017).

affiliated, at least in terms of overall numbers. Some of these congregations are more traditional “house churches,” often with a simple leadership structure and either small enough in terms of numbers to fit into a modest venue or operating along a “cell” structure of small-groups. Besides the house churches, the last fifteen years, or so, has seen the emergence of much more robust “independent” urban congregations which seek to engage with the local state with regards to their operations, distinct in their identity, and with a sizeable membership; for example, Shouwang Church (守望教会) in Beijing, which had a membership of about 1,000 in 2009 (Liu 2013; Vala 2018).¹¹ It is within this broader context that we now return to our case study in Huanghaicheng to examine the interplay between urbanisation and the local Protestant community.

Huanghaicheng and Religious Activities Venues

Huanghaicheng city is comprised of four city districts (*shiqu* 市区) and an Economic and Technological Development Zone (*jingji jishu kaifagu* 经济技术开发区). One of the city districts is a newly-designated district and is still largely rural, with its own town, so I have not included it in my analysis since it is not part of the urbanised area of Huanghaicheng city. The three districts of Jinping, Moushan, and Xicheng and the development zone Jinghai (pseudonyms) are the main focus of my research. It is in these three districts and the development zone that we find the Three-Self churches which are the focus of this study. The oldest part of the city is largely based in the area which is now Jinping and was designated as a city district in 1983. This district is still the hub of the city, generally referred to as ‘downtown’ 市里 and is the core Central Business District for Huanghaicheng as well as the centre for retail and transport links (long-distance coach, train and ferry). Jinghai was established in 1984 as a development zone and was carved out of Xicheng which was originally a separate county but was made a district of Huanghaicheng city in 1983. Xicheng has developed more slowly than the other city districts but is now catching up fast. Large areas that were predominantly farmland several years ago are now occupied by new and very modern apartment complexes, restaurants and department stores. Moushan is a relatively new

¹¹ Several other notable examples include Shanghai All Nations Missionary Church (*Shanghai wanbang xuanjiao jiaohui* 上海万邦宣教教会) with a membership of 1,500 in 2009 (Vala 2018); and Early Rain Covenant Church (*Chunyu shengyue jiaohui* 秋雨圣约教会) in Chengdu (Johnson 2017).

district – designated as such in 1994 – having been carved out of an adjacent county, but most of the city government offices and housing were relocated here after 2008 and so its importance for the city is significant. It is in Moushan where we find several large universities and newly-built, high-end apartment complexes with plans for many more.

Protestantism expanded with the rapid urbanisation of Huanghaicheng. After the initial re-opening of several churches closed down in the 1950s and 1960s, new congregations developed. The TSPM was revived and the city *lianghui* was established. In the 2000s, district-level TSPM committees were set up, with Moushan finally forming one in 2012. The institutional framework of state management of religion expanded and “professionalised.” The city-level RAB was divided into “sections” for dealing with different religious groups and further religious affairs “sections” were established in district-level governments. In the late 2000s, there was a renewed drive to better train Religious Affairs officials. In urban areas, RAB/RAS officials were more likely to visit churches and meeting points. In addition, the Public Security Bureau and Urban Management were also more active in monitoring religious activity. In 2010, there was something of a revival in the importance of sub-district offices (*jiedao banshi chu* 街道办事处) in Huanghaicheng and these organs were increasingly being used as channels for specific campaigns. This suggests that there is the potential for more scrutiny from the state in terms of religious activity in urban areas. Clearer procedures have been developed for registering religious organisations and establishing religious activities venues, much of this based on the national and provincial regulations which changed markedly in the 2000s.

As is the case with other locations in China, and for other religious groups, in order for Huanghaicheng’s Protestants to adhere to the state’s policy on religion, the standard requirement is that religious activities take place within an officially-designated religious activities venue (*zongjiao huodong changsuo* 宗教活动场所). A religious activities venue is a site which is registered with the state for religious purposes and holds a valid “Religious Activities Venue Registration Certificate”¹² (*zongjiao huodong changsuo dengji zheng* 宗教活动场所登记证) issued by the Religious Affairs Bureau. In principle, the local state essentially has the power to define where religious space can be located (see also Kong 2001). The procedures for the establishment of a religious activities venue are set out in

¹² These certificates are displayed publicly in the churches and serve as a form of cultural capital, legitimating these sites as state-approved places for legitimate religious activities.

national and provincial legislation. According to the *Measures for the Approval of the Establishment and Registration of Religious Activity Venues*¹³ (hereafter, *Measures*), the process of registering religious activities sites involves two stages: the application to set up a religious activities venue (*shenqing sheli* 申请设立) and, once approved, the application to register (*shenqing dengji* 申请登记). The RAB and RAS oversee this process.

The normative model for the development of small congregations (or “meeting points”) into churches in Huanghaicheng in the reform era has been to start small, register as a meeting point and then expand further in terms of numbers. Churches are usually linked to multiple meeting points and small groups which serve as a somewhat diffused network which focus on pastoral care and evangelism to varying degrees. Once congregations reach several hundred, then they usually start planning to build or purchase a building. This requires negotiations with a range of local state organs and is time-consuming for church leaders to pursue. There is a huge expense involved since both land and real estate are scarce resources in Huanghaicheng. But it is not simply a matter of congregations registering with the state and then applying to build a church. The state at all levels is cautious about unbridled church building. According to many of the church leaders in Huanghaicheng, 2008 was something of a watershed year for the issuance of Religious Activities Venue Registration Certificate. Beginning in 2008, it had become “very difficult” (*hennan* 很难) for Protestant groups to obtain a certificate and that this change was introduced from “the top” (上面 *shangmian*); that is, from the central state.¹⁴ In addition, the local state had been seeking several congregations to converge into one larger congregation when it came to church-building projects or when meeting points were looking for larger premises.¹⁵ Furthermore, the local state was seeking to push these church-building projects to the edge of the city, despite earlier promises about securing land in a central area. For example, Preacher Zhang, leader of a

¹³ “*zongjiao huodong changsuo sheli shenpi he dengji banfa* 宗教活动场所设立审批和登记办法.”

¹⁴ Participants claimed that this was part of a national drive to limit new certificates. However, I have not been able to find any evidence of this as a directive or policy from any CPC or government organ. In 2008, a Protestant meeting point in Xicheng had its certificate revoked without warning by the head of the Religious Affairs Section and was re-issued to a previously unregistered congregation. The matter was resolved when the daughter of the elderly couple who led the meeting point visited the head of the RAS, and, after refusing to sit down, “lectured” him about his actions for several hours. As a result, the license was returned to XX meeting point and the matter was quietly dropped. There were rumours at the time and which were still circulating in 2009 when I began my fieldwork in Huanghaicheng that the main leader of the unregistered group had offered bribes including cash and a car to the head of the RAS. Other scholars have noted policies of the local state discontinuing the registration of new temples and churches; for example, Yang (2004, 744) notes that there were such restrictions in Wenzhou in the 1990s.

¹⁵ The fact that Moushan District was now a key location for government offices and housing also made it a more sensitive place for religious activity.

vibrant meeting point in the Jinghai development zone had been negotiating for a number of years with the district government for land for a church building and a sizeable sum of money had already been raised for the project (over ¥5 million). But by 2014, pressure was starting to come from the RAS to combine Zhang's congregation with a smaller meeting point in Jinghai and to build the church in a village at the edge of the district to replace the original village church building which the congregation had outgrown and which was in need of expansive repairs. The bus ride from Jinghai's CBD to the proposed village site took over forty minutes, clearly an inconvenience for the 300 or more members of Zhang's congregation if they had to travel that distance to attend church. Although Zhang was managing to resist the pressure to agree to this, it also meant that the plan to build a church in the centre of the district would most likely remain unrealised.

There is much which we could say about the contents of the relevant legislation on religious activities venues but here we will focus on several important points which are directly related to our discussion. The national-level *Regulations on Religious Affairs*¹⁶ (RRA), which came into effect in 2005,¹⁷ reiterates the principle from Document 19 that collective religious activities should normally be conducted within religious activities venues (Chapter 3, Article 12).¹⁸ This provides space for religious activity but keeps it separate from the wider public. The idea that religious activities venues should be "fixed" (*guding* 固定) is also central to their establishment. (This emphasis on a fixed location is also echoed in the *Measures* in Articles 2 and 13 and in provincial-level regulations on religious affairs¹⁹). Certainly, without explanation, the notion of what constitutes "fixed" is open to some degree of interpretation, a point we will return to below. Further to this, in the RRA (Article 14) there are five requirements for the establishment of religious activities venues, including the idea that there

¹⁶ "zongjiao shiwu tiaoli 宗教事务条例."

¹⁷ I am fully aware that extensive revisions have been made to these regulations which came into effect in February 2018. However, I will not analyse these revised regulations because they are not relevant to the time period I am discussing here.

¹⁸ "信教公民的集体宗教活动，一般应当在经登记的宗教活动场所(寺院、宫观、清真寺、教堂以及其他固定宗教活动处所)内举行。"

¹⁹ In 2011, the 2004 XX Province *Regulations on the Management of Religious Affairs* (XXsheng zongjiao shiwu guanli tiaoli XX省宗教事务管理条例) were replaced by the XX Province *Regulations on Religious Affairs* (XXsheng zongjiao shiwu tiaoli XX省宗教事务条例). The new provincial-level regulations went into effect on January 1, 2012 and many of the articles are now in line with the RRA. Prior to this, however, the 2004 regulations (Article 9) outlined six requirements for the setting up of religious activities venues, the first being a "fixed location and name" (*you guding de chusuo he mingcheng* 有固定的处所和名称). While these stipulations were not included in the revised regulations, there is a degree of hangover in the thinking of local officials and it often takes a degree of persuasion and negotiation on the behalf of church leaders to get things done.

should be pre-existing religious converts who have the need to conduct collective religious activities regularly.²⁰ This requirement makes it much more difficult for Protestants to set up a religious activities venue for the purposes of proselytising in a location where there are currently no Christians or in newly-urbanised areas where there are no pre-existing groups. But it is important to point out that there is clearly a degree of flexibility exercised by the RAB in terms of implementing these measures. There is some level of recognition by officials that regulations do not provide for every eventuality and that sometimes, not all requirements can always be met. For example, there is clearly a degree of flexibility exercised by the RAB in terms of implementing the regulations since groups in Huanghaicheng, such as Preacher Zhang's meeting point, were able to register without meeting all the requirements in provincial and national legislation.

The minimalist mobility model and *linshi zhengce*

The main principle behind the new model of minimalist mobility in Huanghaicheng is to establish a congregational meeting space which requires little investment and no long-term commitment in terms of place. These two principles allow the congregation to avoid having to raise large amounts of capital and preclude the need for lengthy negotiations with the state over land, church building design, and so on and so forth. It also provides latitude for flexibility as congregations expand and shrink. The model allows congregations to establish religious activities venues to be located in "strategic" parts of the city; for example, near new or future housing developments, as we have seen in this case study. This intentional location of religious activities venues helps to limit distances participants have to travel to attend congregational activities. Renting a factory building provided enough potential space for a new congregation, whereas renting even a large apartment would be restrictive.²¹ In order to add further flexibility to this approach, the contents of the building should be portable, as far as possible, so that minimal effort and cost are required if the congregation moves to a new space. The aim is a minimal footprint on the building, and yet there is a clear desire for the interior space to be recognisable as a (Protestant) Christian worship place and there is a

²⁰ “(二)当地信教公民有经常进行集体宗教活动的需要。”

²¹ Even if they were able to rent several large apartment buildings, the space would be divided up, and this was something Pastor Liu wished to avoid. Trying to position a church inside an apartment complex also had the potential to create tension with residents and the authorities. Small groups and meeting points in residential apartments managed to operate without conflict due to the smaller numbers of people attending their gatherings.

focussed effort on comfort which is not found in the established Three-Self-affiliated churches in Huanghaicheng. The cushioned chairs were a big change from the hard, wooden pews found elsewhere in Huanghaicheng churches. The air conditioning cooler-heater units help keep the hall at an ambient temperature.

The mobile signage was Pastor Liu's answer to several issues. In the 2004 provincial RMRA (Chapter Five, Article 33), there was a clear prohibition on outside "religious markers" (*zongjiao biaozhifu* 宗教标志物) in public areas, and although this article was dropped in the 2011 provincial RRA, the congregation was not allowed to place permanent signage on the roads near the church.²² In addition, they were requested not to place a red cross or any written text on the outside of the building by the factory owner. It is understandable that the owner would not want a tenant to add signage to the outside of the building. In response, and in light of what he perceived as a renewed effort to marginalise churches in the city, Pastor Liu decided that a lack of "Christian markers" on the building was not necessarily a bad thing. The idea of mobile signage, borrowed from a preacher in another congregation,²³ and developed a bit further so that the wordage on the signs was inexpensive to change. Of course, these signs were only ever a temporary indicator of the location of the church, but they were better than nothing and prevented potential conflict with the factory owner or the authorities.

The new church set up by Pastor Liu was not a formally-registered Religious Activities Venue but rather a locally-recognised religious site.²⁴ When I asked Pastor Liu about this, he explained the setting up of the church was based on a "temporary policy" (*linshi zhengce* 临时政策) negotiated with the RAB. This "temporary policy" was aimed at filling spaces in the legislation and this new congregation was framed as an "experiment," and as a result, did not require the formal registration of the church.²⁵ As Abramson (2006, 211) tells us, planning in urban areas is "subject to informal arrangements between central agencies, local governments, and citizens as they are to formal institutions of governance." Much of

²² Despite this prohibition, most of the Three-Self-affiliated churches in Huanghaicheng placed signage on the streets to "advertise" their presence. Some of this signage was quite elaborate and emblazoned with Bible verses. However, these were, at times, subject to removal by the Urban Management (*chengguan* 城管) and costly to replace.

²³ See McLeister (2013) for a fuller explanation of Preacher Zhang's congregation.

²⁴ Some officials identify more closely with "local and trans-local agendas" (Abramson 2011, 77).

²⁵ Although, obviously, this arrangement still provides for the RAB/RAS to monitor the congregation. It is in the interest of the state to discourage congregations from leaving the sphere of influence of the Three-Self system. This had already happened to two congregations in Huanghaicheng.

religious space in urban areas is negotiated, so this is hardly a surprise. There is, also, some precedence of negotiation with the local RAB/RAS and other state organs in terms of temporary measures.²⁶ In 2010, a congregation, “temporary registration” (*linshi dengji* 临时登记) was granted to a Korean church in Moushan District. Initially, the RAB had been unwilling to register another Korean church since two already existed in the city, but after Pastor Liu discussed it with the district-level RAS, temporary registration was granted. organs.

The model allows Pastor Liu and his congregation to react quickly to change and to focus resources on other things without getting caught up in processes of saving money for a building²⁷ and negotiating for land, the design of the building,²⁸ and so on and so forth. The new religious space is perceived as a strategic position for the purposes of evangelism.²⁹ Pastor Liu also considered it a wise move to downplay the spatial visibility of the church – rather than advertise it – to reduce the possibility of conflict with the state.³⁰ In theory, the model should allow the congregation to move, for the purpose of either upsizing or downsizing, as necessary. Being able to change location without the usual bureaucratic procedures involved is certainly welcomed by Pastor Liu, and the local RAS officials, I am sure, and allows both parties to get around the restrictions on the granting of new *Religious Activities Venue Registration Certificate*.

However, there are clearly a number of limitations and or potential issues with this current arrangement. Much of the good will and trust between Pastor Liu and the local RAS officials on which this arrangement is based can only be transitory as officials are promoted. Officials may feel pressured to renege on this agreement should the political environment change. In that scenario, officials could approach the landlord to raise the rent or not renew a rental contract to force the congregation to move on. But in the short term, there are congregational and pastoral concerns. Congregations need stability in order to develop and expand. Moving location tends to result in the loss of part of the congregation, as Preacher Zhang found

²⁶ The degree of flexibility in the implementation of religious policy has been highlighted in a number of studies, notably Chau (2006).

²⁷ Buying existing real estate or constructing a new building both require significant investment.

²⁸ One rural church in Huanghaicheng was asked to change the design of the building after officials discovered that the steepled roof would be taller than a nearby monument to PLA soldiers.

²⁹ Woods’ (2013, 1066) analysis of house churches in Sri Lanka talks about “bringing the church to the people” – this is exactly what Pastor Liu is seeking to do.

³⁰ This is something which traditional house churches in China have done in the reform era, and something which congregations do in other contexts when there is the potential for conflict with the state and or wider society (see Woods 2013).

through his experience with Enlin Church when they moved a number of times as the congregation expanded. With the current building, there is not the same flexibility for the leaders and lay believers to hang out at the church, as they do frequently at Baisong Church. In Pastor Liu's eyes, this is not good for community, but he also concedes that younger urbanites have less time, anyway, so this may be a moot point.

Motivations behind the minimalist mobility model

There are a number of reasons why Pastor Liu had a desire to set up a new congregation in this way. These relate to both internal church factors and his perceptions of external political factors. Firstly, Moushan District did not yet have an urban church. (Pastor Liu had been in discussion with the RAB and district RAS about building a church near the two universities.³¹ These discussions had already been ongoing for a number of years but there was no signal that the idea would move forward, except for suggestions that a church could be built in a village where several people had already donated money for building a church. He did not wish to abandon these plans, and yet perceived that there was a need to set up a more urban church.) Believers from the small groups and meeting points in the city had to travel to Baisong Church for Sunday worship or at the very least, for communion.³² While the journey to the church was not far, the roads near the village were pot-holed and uneven and some people with cars resented the inconvenience of the condition of the roads. For those who travelled by local bus, the service was not always reliable and this meant people arrived late for gatherings. In addition, the interior of the church seemed outdated and was not a very comfortable environment, especially for younger people. The water and electricity were frequently cut off, adding to the inconvenience of attending the church.³³

But there were other important political factors or particular perceptions of the political climate which motivated Pastor Liu to set an urban congregation, but to set one up which did not require major investment. There was a growing sense that the state (*guojia*) at the national, provincial and local levels was actively supporting other religious traditions against

³¹ Pastor Liu, and his son, also a preacher, had been in contact with a number of Protestant student groups operating on or around these university campuses. With more housing development in the areas surrounding the universities, he felt that it would be a strategic place to build a church.

³² Communion can only be administered by elders and pastors in many Three-Self-affiliated churches.

³³ Perhaps Pastor Liu was also a bit embarrassed about the facilities and how, at least to some degree, it fulfilled some of the stereotypes of rural living.

Christianity, particularly Protestantism. This perception was based on a number of factors. Part of this perception was based on rumours that Xi Jinping himself was a Buddhist, or was at least sympathetic to Buddhism. The rebuilding of a large Buddhist temple complex in the suburbs of Huanghaicheng and the increase in number of Buddhist religious paraphernalia stores across the city signalled direct support for Buddhism from provincial and local officials involved in the management of religion. Similarly, a number of other projects on religious sites in the city suggested that the local state was actively supporting what some would claim are more traditionally Chinese. A Daoist temple in the city which had been a tourist attraction for many years but was not a functioning temple, its management had been taken over by the Folk Culture Office (*Minsuwenhua bumen* 民俗文化部门), and despite the fact that it was not a registered religious activities venue, Daoist priests were permitted to perform rituals there. Similarly, the transformation of a former Mazu temple in the centre of the city from a “cultural palace” (*wenhuagong* 文化宫) into a properly functioning temple after extensive (and costly) renovations. God of Wealth (*Caishen* 财神) shrines were also being revitalized at some of these sites. In addition, on the hills dotted around the city ancestral halls (祠堂) have been renovated or rebuilt. There were also more public displays of practices which had previously been regarded as “superstitious” by the state such as burning paper money on the streets at *Qingmingjie*, which was coordinated by the local state to some extent to prevent hill fires spreading as paper money was burned at graves on the hills surrounding the city. Lastly, the “Qufu Church incident” (*Qufu jiaotang shijian* 曲阜教堂事件) in Shandong in which plans to build a sizeable Protestant church building in the city of Qufu met with resistance from Confucian scholars and the planned building project was abandoned (see Ai 2016; Beech 2016; Li 2016). This led to feelings of resentment and added to the perception that state support for Protestantism was waning. This sense of reduced support motivated Pastor Liu to establish a new congregation rather than wait on the outcome of discussions connected to the planned church building.

Secondly, there were growing feelings that the RAB at the provincial and local levels had no power to actually stand up for or represent the interests of Protestantism against other state organs or interests. They were repeatedly characterised as “obeying orders” (*ting minglingde* 听命令的), despite the fact that Pastor Liu had a good relationship with the head of the RAS in Moushan. There were a number of reasons for a change in perception of the RAB, including the events surrounding the proposed demolition of a church building in

Huanghaicheng and the “Three Rectifications, One Demolition” campaign (*sangai yichai yundong* 三改一拆运动) in Zhejiang. In 2011, news emerged of the possibility that Desheng Church, one of the historical church buildings located in Jinping District, could be demolished to make way for a major development which had begun in 2009 as part of a wider plan to remodel a major section of the downtown area. Despite the fact that the RAB claimed that the congregation would be given land in another part of the city – most likely in an “undeveloped” area of the suburbs – a great deal of trust was lost between some of the church leaders and RAB officials. When I discussed this incident in 2015, some of the Desheng Church leadership complained that the RAB had done little in terms of negotiations and that they had to do much of the “running around” (*paolai paoqu* 跑来跑去), in order to liaise with different state organs in an attempt to secure the building’s future. Eventually, a change in city mayor³⁴ ended the dispute decisively. He pushed for the church building to be saved and while all the surrounding buildings were demolished, Desheng Church was not. The hard work of the church leaders paid off as the matter “went up to the province” (*nao dao shangmian qule* 闹到上面去了) and Desheng Church and another old building in Jinping District were awarded “City-level Protected Cultural Site” status (*shiji wenwu baohu danwei* 市级文物保护单位), significantly reducing any future threats to these buildings. Pastor Liu was fully aware that the Baisong Church building would never enjoy such protection.

The “Three Rectifications, One Demolition” campaign in Zhejiang which started in 2013 had a significant impact on the Huanghaicheng Protestant community as I have demonstrated elsewhere (McLeister 2018). The campaign was perceived widely as a clear signal that the state was manoeuvring against Christianity, particularly Protestant forms, especially since there was no intervention by the central state. Further, it was believed that the official registration process did not guarantee that congregations would remain free from interference from the state and did not protect church buildings. The Sanjiang Church demolition was an important case in point. As a Three-Self-affiliated church, which had been praised as a model engineering project by officials, was demolished in its entirety, despite being registered with the state (Tiezzi 2014). The campaign has widely been interpreted as a move to reduce the visible presence of Christianity across urban and rural areas – a “de-Christianisation of the skyline” (Tracy 2014). Reflecting on the campaign, Pastor Liu and other church leaders concluded that too much emphasis on church buildings was not a good thing. This

³⁴ City mayors, apparently, have a fair degree of clout when it comes to urban development (Smith 2008, 277).

combination of factors encouraged Pastor Liu to think about what investment the Protestant community should be making in the district in relation to a church. The motivations behind Pastor Liu's setting up of this new church were therefore complex. Some factors were clearly internal but perceptions of the wider political context were also important.

Concluding comments

In this paper, I have sought to demonstrate some of the motivations for Pastor Liu, leader of a village church on the edge of Huanghaicheng, to set up a new church in a newly-urbanised part of the city. Based on perceived or actual pressures from the state at various levels, Pastor Liu made conscious choices about the spatial elements of the new church location and building. This model of church – minimalist mobility – involves little financial investment and focuses less on the fabric of the building than more established churches. The motivation behind this model is flexibility in changing location, downsizing, or upsizing, according to the needs of the congregation. At the same time, Pastor Liu considered the levels of comfort needed for the urban congregation.

It is important to reflect on the fact that there are different agendas in the establishment of this religious space for Pastor Liu and the local state. The local state views this new church as a space for containing religious activities and limiting their influence on the wider public space. Pastor Liu views the church as a space not only for Protestant ritual practices but also for launching the church's mission into new apartment complexes. The religious space is also a symbol of the Protestant community and an embodiment of its physical presence and yet Pastor Liu's strategy is to downplay the exterior of the building as a church so as to avoid any undesired attention from officials in what was perceived to be a more sensitive climate for religious activity and bold displays of religiosity. At the same time, the establishment of the church shows a degree of dissonance between agendas of the state at the province and above and the support for Liu by local officials. We cannot, therefore, make absolute claims about churches being marginalised in Huanghaicheng.

With the revised Regulations on Religious Affairs, which came into effect in February 2018, it would seem that there is an attempt by the central state to limit the space for religion – arguably unregistered forms of Protestantism and Catholicism in particular – in a number of areas relating to registration. It is also not clear what the outcome will be of the State

Administration for Religious Affairs' absorption into the United Front Work Department or how or when this may begin to impact at the local level. Pastor Liu and the rest of the church leadership will learn from the experience of setting up this congregation whether or not it is a success in the long term. This experience will serve them well for when the city engulfs Baisong Village and Baisong Church's future changes once more.

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