



## Out of Space

### Christian Deterritorialization and Space Production in Yunnan

This article is an attempt to examine an apparent contradiction in state policy and rhetoric in China regarding Protestant Christianity. According to Chinese law, churches not affiliated with the officially sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement are formally illegal. Indeed, churches who fail to comply with regulations are periodically demolished. At the same time, the large house church movement is often tolerated, particularly in peripheral regions like Yunnan. This article explains these contradictory policies through an analysis of the spatial practices employed by Evangelical Christians in Yunnan. Based on Henri Lefebvre's theory of space production, I discuss contemporary Evangelical attitudes toward sacred space and the physical construction of churches, arguing that Evangelical religiosity is focused on individuals and abstract faith and remains uninterested and often hostile to physical expressions of holiness. Thus, the production of space is resigned to the state and its modernization project resulting in relative tolerance on the side of local authorities.

KEYWORDS: space production—house church movement—spiritual geography—Sanjiang Church—Evangelical Christianity

Since the beginning of the reform era (1979–present), China has witnessed the resurgence of a large variety of religious practices. According to Fenggang Yang, “China may have become one of the most religious countries in the world. All kinds of religions, old and new, conventional and eccentric, are thriving” (F. Yang 2004, 101. See also: Kipnis 2001; M. Yang 2004; Ostrov 2005). The growth of Protestant Christianity is particularly significant in this respect: Daniel Bays has claimed that there are more Christians in church on a given Sunday in China than anywhere else on the globe (Bays 2003, 488). Much has been written in recent years about the dramatic growth of Christianity in contemporary China, considered to be one of the largest Evangelical expansions of the recent era (Hunter and Chan 1993; Lambert 1999; Madsen 2000; Dunch 2001; Hattaway 2003; F. Yang 2005; Lee 2007; Xi 2010; Lim 2013). For the most part, the scholars mentioned above focus on the efforts made by indigenous Chinese churches to spread Christianity. However, the dissemination of Christianity is also being carried out by a non-Chinese, primarily Western missionary community, which has received relatively little scholarly attention.

Missionary presence is particularly strong in the peripheral province of Yunnan, in the far southwestern corner of China (Forney 2001; Chan and Yamamori 2002, 52; Rosenbaum 2004, 20). Missionaries were active in Yunnan prior to the 1949 revolution, where they had considerable success among a number of minority peoples. They were forced to leave the country in the early 1950s when missionary work was declared by the Peoples Republic of China to be strictly illegal (Spiegel 2004, 45; F. Yang 2006, 101). Officially, this is still the case. However, despite the illegality of missionary activity in today’s China, beginning in the 1980s missionaries have returned to Yunnan in increasing numbers. The existence of a large missionary community in Yunnan and an expanding church are difficult facts to reconcile with official Chinese state policy and rhetoric regarding the illegality of missionary work.

In this article I argue that state tolerance of missionary activity is not merely a reflection of state weakness in the global era, as some scholars have written (Madsen 2000, 271; Kindopp 2004, 139). Nor can it be attributed mainly to the state’s lack of confidence in its ability to control and contain religion (Tu 1999, 87; Spiegel 2004, 41). Rather, I claim that missionary activity is allowed to exist primarily because it serves to promote state goals in Yunnan in a number of different ways.

More specifically, in this article I focus on the way local authorities, members of the non-official house churches, and foreign missionaries regard the use and production of space. My central argument is that an analysis of contemporary Evangelical attitudes toward sacred space and the physical construction of churches suggests that an unspoken and unofficial agreement has emerged according to which the monopoly over spatial production remains entirely in the hands of state authorities, while Evangelical Christians willingly confine themselves to the non-spatial and non-physical realm. The emergence of a working balance between Chinese authorities and the foreign and local Evangelical community regarding the use and appropriation of space is of particular importance in the context of ethnic Yunnan, where a number of minorities have been engaged in the reconstruction of pre-revolutionary systems of sacred geography, practices that pose a potential threat both to state sovereignty and to the spread of the gospel.

As others have noted, Evangelical Christianity is a religion of the transient and rootless, a movement highly compatible with the deterritorial nature of the global era (Poewa 1994, 247–49; Meyer 1999, 151–76; Juergensmeyer 2007, 144–58). Its global and non-territorial character make it easily transmittable and highly adaptable in different cultural contexts. In the words of Richard Madsen: “It travels widely because it travels light” (Madsen 2000, 276). Likewise, Philip Jenkins has argued with regard to the routes of the Pentecostal movement, mass immigration from the countryside to the cities has resulted in the severing of ties with locally based religious and social institutions and the creation of alternative, extremely mobile communities of meaning and “a potent theology for a world of migrants and wanderers, those who define their identity in terms not of roots but of routes” (Jenkins 2011, 116). The process of migration and the formation of such “routes” identities are particularly significant in the context of reform-era China, the arena of the largest human migration movement in history, possibly numbering up to 340 million migrants (Chan 2012, 81). Thus, Christianity has spread widely among those who have been uprooted by the process of modernization—farmers who work as migrant workers in cities, businessmen on the move and laborers in foreign countries (Chen and Huang 2004; Cao 2008; Kalir 2009).

Writing about the nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries to China, Eric Reinders has argued that the deterritorial nature of Protestantism has traditionally included a deep suspicion of sacred places and ritual territoriality, as well as holy language and mantras viewed as a form of deception—a mask of culture that must be torn off, before faith can be revealed (Reinders 2004, 97). Indeed, the deterritorial nature of Evangelical Christianity is both ideological and pragmatic. While expanding rapidly among migrants and transient workers, Christianity has encountered the greatest barriers to its expansion in communities with a strong tradition of ritual territoriality (Covell 1995, 269). Significantly, Evangelical concepts of space stand in contrast with current trends among many minority groups who have attempted to recreate a spiritual geography lost in the Maoist era (Mueggler 2001; Davis 2003; M. Yang 2004; McCarthy 2009).

Rather than offer an alternative territoriality based on a single sacred center, Evangelical missionaries tend to emphasize a religiosity based on faith alone, unrelated

and intentionally detached from the physical and spatial aspects of reality. Thus, by focusing on the inner self and the individual as the major arenas of faith and conversion, Evangelical Christianity serves as a globalizing force, echoing Oliver Roy's description of religion in the global era: "globalization has blurred the connection between a religion, a pristine culture, a specific society and a territory" (Roy 2004, 24). Moreover, Christian hostility toward ethnic ritual territoriality, including earth gods, sacred mountains, and traditional burial rites, helps weaken the connection between ethnic identity and a specific locality and enhance the authority of the state to relegate and define space according to its own needs and vision.

Taking into account the centrality of globalism and the crossing and obscuring of national and ethnic boundaries described above, one might conclude that the deterritorial nature of Evangelical Christianity poses a threat to the Chinese state and its spatial sovereignty. Thus, former head of the Religious Affairs Bureau Ye Xiaowen has identified the internationalization of Christianity as a threat and has called for the preservation of Chinese Christianity's "patriotic" nature (Chan 2004, 69). Thus, control over the geographic spread of religious activity is a central element in state policy on religion. As noted by David Schak, this principle is expressed in "Document 19," the document published by the central committee in 1982 to express the religious policy that would guide the reform era. According to Schak, the document "restricts religious activities to approved locations, requires that they be conducted by approved clergy and limits their scope to the geographic sphere in which a given member of the clergy is permitted to practice" (Schak 2011, 72). It is interesting to note in this context that the official registration of a church is dependent on having a set name and location (Australian Government 2013, 6).

Accordingly, Colin Mackerras has argued that globalization, in the form of contact between minorities and the ethnic groups residing beyond the borders of China, serves to weaken the state. More specifically, Mackerras brings the example of the Uyghurs of Xinjiang and their contacts with their Central Asian kin and quotes Gong Xuezheng, a professor of religious studies at the CCP's Central Party School, who views the infiltration of foreign religions as a way of "using religion to destroy the unity of the motherland and of its nationalities" (Mackerras 2003, 115–16). Likewise, Mark Juergensmeyer notes that global deterritorial religions like Christianity experience success "precisely because they do not have traditional religious centers...many new religious movements are seen almost like rogue states, potentially dangerous in part because they are so hard to pin down geographically" (Juergensmeyer 2007, 144).

In contrast, I argue that the example of Xinjiang does not apply to all contacts between China's ethnic minorities and the outside world. Moreover, I claim that the contact between Yunnan's minorities and the world of deterritorialized Evangelical Christianity serves to weaken the territoriality of local ethno-religions and in turn to strengthen state control. The global and fluid nature of Evangelical Christianity is accommodated by the state, because it is marked by an acceptance on the side of missionaries and local Christians of the separation between the material-geographic realm of the state and the moral-spiritual role of religion. As such, it may be seen as an expression of the Protestant adherence to the separation

of church and state and a fulfillment of the New Testament instruction to “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” (Mathew 22:21).

This article is divided into three sections. I begin with a description of state space production in the context of Yunnan, based on the thinking of Henri Lefebvre and Mayfair Yang, followed by an examination of Evangelical theology regarding sacred space. The second section includes a presentation of three places of Christian worship, beginning with the recently demolished Sanjiang church in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province (Johnson 2014). I refer to the destruction of the Wenzhou church to illustrate the contrast between traditional, officially sanctioned Chinese Christianity and the newer Evangelical foreign-led or -inspired Christianity. The contrast reveals a paradox in church–state relations in China—that non-official and seemingly suspect church communities who make no claims on spatial production may at times encounter greater tolerance than officially sanctioned churches who are actively pursuing space production through prominent structures in key urban areas.

The story of the Wenzhou church is contrasted with a description of an international fellowship for foreign Christians living in Kunming and a Chinese house church in Kunming. Here I attempt to illustrate the ways in which both places reflect the abstract and non-territorial nature of contemporary Evangelical theology. Unlike the Sanjiang church, these unofficial church communities make no attempt to acquire permanent structures and are tolerated by the authorities despite their non-official status. In the third section I continue my analysis of Christian space by examining the barriers to Christian expansion posed by ethno-spiritual territoriality, focusing on a description of a visit made by the missionary Simon to a Bouyei village and on Evangelical attitudes to spatial and bodily practices such as burial rites and qigong.

#### STATE SPACE AND RITUAL TERRITORIALITY IN YUNNAN

“The production of space,” according to Lefebvre, is a reference to the way different societies deploy and represent space to serve their ideological, social, and financial needs. According to Lefebvre, modern capitalist states attempt to create standardized, functional, and commoditized space. In particular, Lefebvre coined the phrase “abstract space” as an alternative to “historical space” arising with the spread of capitalism:

Abstract space functions “objectally”, as a set of things/signs and their formal relationships: glass and stone, concrete and steel, angles and curves, full and empty. Formal and quantitative, it erases distinctions, as much those which derive from nature and (historical) time as those which originate in the body (age, sex, ethnicity). (Lefebvre 1991, 49)

A similar argument has been made by Zygmunt Bauman, who defined the actions of the modern state as the “monopolization of cartographic rights” (Bauman 1998, 40). According to Bauman, modern cities are planned by modern states

to destroy all “historical accidents,” by replacing the old chaotic city with one that is uniform and perfect, to create “a site never polluted by history” (ibid., 37–38).

Unlike the drive of capitalist states to reorganize space mainly through commodification, the socialist version of abstract space production was focused on centralization and control, a process described with regard to China in the following words: “Socialist space was produced through the tightening of administrative lines that extended across the country into local communities, lines that created a hierarchy of administrative spaces and connected far flung places back to the center in Beijing” (M. Yang 2004, 722).

Thus, prior to the 1949 revolution, the Chinese landscape was home to elaborate systems of “ritual territoriality”:

Village communities, kinship groups and deity cult followers gave geographical form to their common identities and community life by performing their collective rituals in local deity temples, ancestor halls and at tombs...Collective rituals...ritually demarcated the land into a patchwork of community territories that often did not correspond to state administrative boundaries.

(M. Yang 2004, 723)

This system was methodically dismantled under Maoism. Yang describes the state’s “compulsion for destruction” in the following term: “Spirits, deities, and ancestors were generally anchored to local places and were tutelary guardians of local ritual jurisdictions; thus, their sovereignty must be displaced” (M. Yang 2004, 722). The process came to a climax with the radical policies of the Great Leap Forward when “virtually all space became enfolded within the single space of the state, a space devoted to production, ideological inculcation and surveillance” (ibid.).

In Yunnan, the production of socialist state space bears a distinctly ethnic character, the nature of which can be ascertained through examination of official posters and staged pictures of minority people. Minorities, especially when representatives from all 55 recognized minorities appear together, are often portrayed revolving around a symbol of state power. The point is illustrated visually in a poster commemorating the 59th anniversary of the founding of the PRC. The poster depicts a group of traditionally dressed ethnic minorities under the title “Unity of Nationalities” (*minzu tuanjie*). Looming large behind them is the image of the state, appearing not as a person, but rather as a building: the Hall of Supreme Harmony in Beijing’s Forbidden City (see Nipic.com 2009). Thus, the Hall represents the geographic and symbolic center of power, the very core of the “central kingdom” standing behind the young and jubilant minority people—a distinctly territorial, spatially grounded presence. In the background of the poster, one can discern the ceiling of the Great Hall of the People, offering another spatial metaphor from the center of power in Beijing. A similar depiction of the Forbidden City is mentioned in Steven Harrell’s description of Nuoso Yi school books, presenting a drawing of the Forbidden City and the national flag with the following caption: “Beijing, Tian’anmen and the Five Star Red Flag are symbols of our country. Our elementary students from the time they are small should learn to love Beijing and love the motherland” (Harrell 1998, 65). The symbolic image of Beijing corresponds to what Lefebvre classifies as “representations of space,” that which is “tied to the

relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations” (Lefebvre 1991, 33).

These representations of space are discussed in Yang’s description of the restoration of an ancestor hall in Wenzhou—pre-revolutionary forms of ritual territoriality and attempts to “re-enchant space” have been returning to the Chinese landscape since the 1980s, efforts that have led to the appearance of “new forms of collective identities that diverge radically from the national and class identities that the state has stressed” (M. Yang 2004, 728). As a number of scholars have noted, the resurgence of old spatial practices is particularly pronounced in Yunnan where some ethnic minority groups have begun to reconstruct traditional and religious spatial systems. In this context it is worth noting Eric Mueggler’s (2001) work on the Nuoso Yi of Zhizuo country and their attempts to reconstruct old ritual systems, and Sara Davis’s (2003, 2006) writing on the creation of a symbolic ethno-geography focused on Theravada Buddhism among the Dai of Xishuangbanna. Often, such developments are promoted by local authorities as part of their attempts to promote the growing ethno-tourism industry (McCarthy 2004, 40–48).

While the majority of religious space in China was absorbed by the state during the radical years of the Maoist period, it would seem that in the long run, Protestant Christianity, with its abstract nature and non-dependence on material and geographic manifestations, has benefited from the process. As a number of scholars have argued, the prevalence of house churches can be traced back to the crisis created after the massive destruction of folk temples and shrines during the Cultural Revolution. In this vein, missionary scholar Paul Hattaway has written that the “removal of idolatry” through the destruction of temples and idols during the Cultural Revolution has created “a spiritual void in the hearts of millions” that has aided Christian expansion (Hattaway 2003, 12; for similar analyses see: Bays 2011, 186; Lambert 2013; Lim 2013, 5). The idea is summed up by Richard Madsen in the following way:

The rapid growth of popular Christianity was made possible by the destruction of local temple worship...With the traditional religious landscape stripped bare, religion became exclusively a private matter...the Christian God was seen as especially connected with the private sphere, because he did not need to be worshiped in elaborate temples. (Madsen 2013, 25)

Indeed, the unofficial house church movement, strongly supported by foreign missionaries and often presented by Evangelicals as the home of true Chinese Christianity (Hattaway 2003, 14–15), can be said to exemplify a principled territorial detachment. Accordingly, house churches can be found anywhere: in warehouses, schools, and private homes—any indoor or outdoor space available for worship (Liu 2011). This may be seen as a largely technical issue, reflecting the legal or financial abilities and constraints of congregants with regard to constructing new church buildings. However, Evangelical Christians often clearly voice their disinterest in creating spatial representations like churches, a sentiment expressed poignantly by Paul Hattaway: “We are not interested in erecting any church buildings. We don’t believe the world needs another single church building” (Hattaway 2003,

108; for similar views held by Pentecostals, see Coleman 2000, 18). Thus, missionaries offer a religiosity devoid of spatial and geographical attachments and hostile to traditional spiritual territoriality, which is often associated with the spirit world. As such they enable the state to retain its monopoly on the way space is deployed.

The contrast between Christianity and local religious traditions in this regard is evident in Yang's interview with Wenzhou officials in the aftermath of a temple destruction campaign. Yang asked why it was that in China modernization had to imply the violent destruction of religious sites, while in the West modernization was achieved without the actual dismantling of churches. She records the response to her question in the following way:

One official, Mr. Tan, replied: "It is different with Christianity, which respects science, and science is even an outgrowth of Christianity. It's different with our own religion. It's backward and teaches people to believe in superstitions, magic and devils. It tells people that this and that is bad luck. And, religion is used by people as a pretext for making money (*pianqian*). It's the bad segment of religion that we have to attack. (M. Yang 2004, 745-46).

Thus, according to Mr. Tan, the spatial struggles revolving around the ancestral hall are not part of the negotiation between the state and contemporary Protestant Christianity. However, as recent events in Wenzhou described below reveal, Christianity and state modernization are not always compatible.

## CHRISTIAN SPACES

### *Sanjiang*

On April 28, 2014, local authorities in Wenzhou demolished the Sanjiang church, described by Ian Johnson as "the pride of the city's growing Christian population" (Johnson 2014). The demolition of the church was part of a larger campaign in which Zhejiang authorities targeted churches with high visibility, including a ten-story mega church in Ningbo. The campaign focused specifically on the display of crosses; according to Johnson "at least a dozen other churches across Zhejiang Province have been told to remove their crosses or have received demolition orders," adding that "The government has defended its actions, saying the churches violated zoning restrictions." Johnson also quotes a leaked state document articulating the goal of the campaign in the following way: "The priority is to remove crosses at religious activity sites on both sides of expressways, national highways and provincial highways" (Johnson 2014).

The demolition came as a surprise to many congregation members, particularly because the church belonged to the Three Self Movement, the officially sanctioned organization of Protestant Christianity in China, set up by the PRC in the 1950s as part of the attempt to sever the connection between Protestant churches in China and the missionary organization in the West. Congregants of the Sanjiang church were adamantly opposed to the demolition and staged a two-week campaign including prayer vigils and a large sit-in to try and stop the destruction plan (Hui 2014). In addition, major theologians associated with official

Protestant seminaries expressed their criticism of the aggressive and uncompromising way authorities have handled the issue. According to the *South China Morning Post*, congregants explained the government actions as a reaction to the size of the church; eight stories high and covering over 1000 square meters, Sanjiang church boasted a 55-meter spire and was a central feature in the city's skyline. Furthermore, the church was located in an area designated to be Wenzhou's central economic district. Accordingly, Johnson has suggested that "local officials just thought 'this is not the symbol that we want for our new economic zone'" (Johnson 2014).

Lawrence Reardon has argued that "to avoid international criticism provincial officials cited the 'violation of zoning, building codes and other legal artifice' as a way to justify the demolition of the churches" (Reardon 2015, 39). However, I suggest that rather than serving as a mere façade for the authorities' real motives, the use of such regulations is significant. Thus, the physical prominence of Christianity, expressed in large churches and crosses, was apparently perceived by local authorities as an infringement on the state's spatial sovereignty, particularly as it appeared in spaces associated with the modernization project such as highways and economic districts. Accordingly, the destruction may be seen as an attempt to convey the message that Christians are requested to confine themselves to the spiritual realm and refrain from visibility within the space of state modernity. The precedence of state modernization over religious expression is evidenced in the slogan chosen to promote the church destruction campaign: in the aftermath of the demolition, signs in Wenzhou were put up with the inscription: "make space for development" (Makinen, 2014).

The demolition of Sanjiang is noteworthy as Wenzhou is home to a large and extremely prosperous Christian community. The city's Christians have become symbols of the Christian-capitalist connection and are well known for their financial abilities (Chen and Huang 2004, 183-84; Cao 2008). As avid supporters of the free market system and the state's economic policies, Christians in town have been allowed to practice their religion quite freely and have enjoyed good relations with local authorities. Nanlai Cao notes that in recent years Wenzhou Christians have been building large churches and engaging in "a massive reappropriation of sacred space" (Cao 2008, 79). Clearly the construction of Sanjiang church was perceived by the state as a red line crossed—an unacceptable attempt to remold the image of the urban landscape of Wenzhou in a way the authorities found threatening. Johnson further notes that "The destruction of the church in Wenzhou has given rise to a debate over the physical and ideological space that religions in China are allowed to take" (Johnson 2014). In contrast with the story of the Sanjiang church, I turn now to a very different model of space production, as expressed in two unofficial churches in Kunming.

### *The Northern Fellowship*

During my fieldwork in Kunming in the spring of 2010, I decided to visit the foreign church in which many of my informants worshiped regularly. The church was usually referred to as "The Northern Fellowship" to distinguish it from the other foreign Fellowship located in the west of the city. It should be noted that

the Fellowships do not serve the entire foreign Christian community of Kunming. Many of the missionaries I met choose not to attend them, preferring rather to worship in their private homes, with a small group of friends or alone. To cite only one example, William, the owner of a well-known Christian café and NGO, told me on one opportunity that he holds services and a Sunday study group with some friends in his home. The Fellowship nearby, catering to the foreign Christians in the west of the city, was, in his opinion, rather conservative and generally “too professional,” noting that the music on Sundays was too polished and devoid of the rough and rudimentary emotion he was looking for. The Fellowship in the north on the other hand was, in his opinion “a bit too crazy” (interview, May 10, 2010).<sup>1</sup> William’s position illustrates the place the Fellowship holds within the missionary community. To William and many others, attendance is a matter of personal choice and style. Many of those who do attend the Fellowship explain their attendance by stressing the importance of community. Prayer conducted within the space of the Fellowship was never presented to me as more meaningful, religiously valid, effective, or holy.

Moreover, the choice to worship in the Fellowship and the willingness to accept its transient and makeshift nature does not reflect a lack of possibilities for foreign Christians. In addition to the option of worshiping at home, Kunming is home to the Trinity International Protestant Church, locally known as the *Sanyi*, an official church open to Kunming’s foreign Protestants. The large European-style church was built in 1903 and can seat over 2,000 people (Yu 2014). According to Sean, an American Christian living in town, the church regularly hosts foreign preachers (interview, October 10, 2012). Thus, the choice to attend the Fellowship, rather than the more formal, official church is one of personal preference, favoring a particular style of prayer and community, one that is disassociated from the physical markers of Western Christianity. As Daniel Bays has noted, it is somewhat ironic that the Three Self churches, created with the explicit goal of disassociating Christianity and the West, retain “much of the appearance and tone of the old missionary churches” (Bays 2003, 493).

That week I was invited to the Fellowship by my schoolmate Yan, a young European missionary who had recently married a Chinese Christian. This particular Sunday was of personal significance for the young couple; following their marriage, Yan’s bride was now officially allowed to attend a non-Chinese church. This would be the first time they were permitted to worship publicly together. Earlier in the year, Yan and I had discussed the option of me accompanying him to Sunday prayer. He asked whether or not I was permitted to do so, and I reluctantly shared with him that it was in fact somewhat problematic from an Orthodox Jewish point of view. Yan’s response at the time was enigmatic. He said: “It’s actually not really a church—it’s a Fellowship” (interview, October 14, 2009). The statement puzzled me. Was this just a matter of terminology or was there really a difference?

That Sunday morning, I met Yan and his wife at the bus station and we walked together to a mostly residential area with a scattering of shops and businesses. The Fellowship was located on the third floor of a somewhat run-down building that seemed to be used mostly for commercial purposes. With the

wave of rapid development in Kunming, it occurred to me that this relatively old area would probably be demolished within a few years. On the ground floor was a restaurant and at the entrance stood a security guard whose official job was to check passports and make sure that those attending were non-Chinese citizens only. As we entered, the guard seemed clearly uninterested in checking our documents and took no notice of the people walking upstairs. Arriving at the Fellowship, I was gestured toward a table with coffee and tea.

The room itself was not at all reminiscent of official churches I had seen in Yunnan or elsewhere—it was remarkably stark and utterly functional. A simple, ground-level pulpit stood in the front with a large screen behind it. Along the walls on three sides of the large rectangular room were rows of benches. To the left, closer to the entrance, four smaller rooms held activities for babies, young kids, and teens, with the last room serving as a library. The walls were completely bare. The only decorations in the room were hanging from the ceiling and consisted of multiple national flags, representing the many home states of the participant members and emphasizing the international nature of the community.

The emphasis on the international nature of the missionary community may be seen simply as a reflection of reality: the missionary community does indeed include nationals of many countries. Although heavily North American, the Christian community of Kunming is home to Europeans, South Americans, and a number of Africans as well as many Asians from Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, and Korea. However, I would argue that the international nature of the Fellowship, the missionary community, and Chinese Evangelical Christianity, contains a distinctly ideological element. As mentioned in part two, globalism stands at the center of what Oliver Roy has called “pristine religion”—religion based on personal faith and placed above all cultural difference. As such, the ability to adapt to any cultural context is often celebrated as evidence of the validity of Christianity. Furthermore, the use of the terms “global” and “international” confirm the way missionaries display confidence in the global nature and appeal of the gospel they spread. In the words of Hudson Taylor, the nineteenth-century founder of the China Inland Mission, the goal of the missionary was “to be all things to all men” (Jenkins 2011, 36). Indeed, according to Tien Ju K’ang, the trans-ethnic and international element of Christianity has been a central feature of the missionary endeavor in Yunnan since the early twentieth century. Early Hua Miao converts are reported to have engaged in prayer for poverty-stricken Han and even contributed money for the purpose of conducting missionary work in Brazil (Tien 1993, 52).

The services began with a few routine notices: A young member of the community would be giving a piano concert at the Nordica (a cultural center run by Scandinavian Christians), some community members were leaving town, and a guest preacher had come in from Chicago. It was also announced that the Fellowship was moving to another location as the area was indeed being redeveloped. A map of the exact location and the way to get there was projected on the wall and members of the community were asked to volunteer to assist with moving equipment: a stereo system, speakers, etc. The move was reported briefly and concisely before the service and not referred to again. Looking around at the congregants, I could

not detect any particular emotion regarding the news of the Fellowship's upcoming relocation. The casual way the move was referred to and the general indifference with which the news was received by community members strengthened the feeling that the space of the Fellowship was viewed by worshipers as purely functional. It held no intrinsic religious or emotional value.

I now understood what my friend Yan had meant, months earlier when we discussed my own religious restrictions. Previously, the decision to refrain from the use of the term "church" was usually explained to me in light of the effort to distance the community from being associated with traditional Christianity and with the old pre-1949 missionary legacy. It was also an attempt to distance community members from the older Christian production of space, through large, overbearing European-style buildings such as the old Trinity church in Kunming's city center. Interestingly, the attempt to avoid the use of Christian terminology has been part of Christian-Chinese history from the days of Matteo Ricci in the 17th century. Ricci made a point of calling the institution he opened a "preaching house," a place dedicated to discussion of the classics, rather than a church, a term with clear religious connotations (Gernet 1985, 17).

However, the term "Fellowship" also held a direct and literal meaning: it was a place of companionship where individual believers worshiped together. As such, it held no religious value beyond its congregants. The term seemed to correlate with the sentiment expressed by Hattaway and mentioned earlier, that church buildings were entirely unnecessary (Hattaway 2003, 108). Thus, from an Evangelical perspective, space used for prayer did not become embodied or enchanted. Rather, space occupied for collective worship is simply a place to meet and "have fellowship." By saying it was not really a "Church," but rather a "Fellowship," Yan was implying that the space occupied is of no essential importance. It is not sacred to those who worship there any more than it would be to me.

#### *The language school house church*

The layout of the Fellowship was highly reminiscent of an all-Chinese house church located in a language school I had visited some time earlier, run by James, a half-Yi, half-Han Christian, and his Han wife, Cathy.<sup>2</sup> James converted to Christianity in 1998, after a friend introduced him to a house church. Later he and his wife belonged to a community run by an Australian missionary. As a result, James maintains close relationships with many of the foreign Christians in town. In recent years, his Yi mother had also converted and his father, a government official and an atheist, was "slowly changing" (James, interview, May 6, 2010). James tended to be quite critical of the official Three Self churches, particularly disliking the intervention of the state in church affairs. According to James, a Three Self pastor who wished to baptize someone must receive official authorization from the government to do so, a procedure James was deeply opposed to. In contrast, he baptized whomever he wanted. Much like the members of the International Fellowship, James too refrained from using the word church (*jiao hui*), a term he associates with the large and formal buildings of the Three Self Movement, always referring to the prayer gathering simply as a "meeting" (*hui yi*).

Services and Bible study lessons were held on weekends in the language school, on the second floor of an ordinary building in the center of town. As house church activity is officially illegal, the double purpose of the school structure was not publicized—even the student who introduced me to James and Cathy was unaware of the weekend services. The place used for prayer was the school lobby—the space between the classrooms where on weekdays students usually spend their recess time. This small community (ten people including eight women and two men participated in the Sunday service that I attended) was in fact one of two groups belonging to the house church. On Saturdays a larger group of approximately 20 people met for prayer and discussion. The Sunday group was smaller and more intense, dedicated to training people who would eventually lead communities of their own. The congregants were mostly in their 20s or 30s and were fairly recent converts, with their personal Christian history ranging from twelve years to only six months. None of them had come from Christian families.

The prayer itself was fairly short, lasting only about half an hour. Much like the Fellowship, the language school house church members worshiped with simple and catchy Christian pop songs, rather than traditional Christian hymns that can sometimes be heard in official churches.<sup>3</sup> The words for the songs were printed on sheets of paper and pasted on to the whitewashed wall and the congregants sang, accompanied by James, who played the guitar. While singing, the congregants clapped and excitedly waved their hands in the air. Much like the service in the Fellowship, the prayer seemed relaxed, unofficial, and intimate. Like the congregants in the Fellowship, the attendants dressed in an everyday manner. The casual intimacy of prayer was even evident in the words of the songs; many of the songs referred to God not by the Biblical *Shangdi* but rather with the familial term “Heavenly Father” (*tianfu*), or with the even more surprising Hebrew word, *Aba*, meaning simply “father.” The combination of casual dress, popular Western-style music, and everyday speech created a feeling of the church as modern, contemporary, and international in style. After singing, communion was offered and the members of the community embraced each other. When the service ended, the printed songs were taken off the wall and we sat down to have a cup of tea before entering the class for the lesson. Sitting on the sofas in the hallways, I felt we were really on class break. Apart from the guitar in James’s hand, no evidence of the service that had just taken place could be seen.

Both the house church and the International Fellowship are temporary, improvised institutions that could be set up anywhere. The emotional intensity of the prayer and music in both places contrasted sharply with the functional and emotionally neutral nature of the space in which they were conducted. In fact, the similarity is not surprising. Both Chinese and non-Chinese communities are overwhelmingly made up of converts—people whose religious identity is based on personal choice rather than tradition or ethnicity. The personal, choice-based nature of faith produced a religious expression tightly associated with the individual’s inner world of meaning and largely disassociated from the physical space of worship. Thus, both sites can be seen as spaces serving communities of rootless, landless, and transient believers, occupying a random, functional space.

Both the Fellowship and James's house church/school correspond to Lefebvre's description of a modern "abstract space," the major feature of modern capitalist global spread (but also applicable to the socialist state). According to Maifair Yang, the struggle between locals and officials regarding the construction of the cultural hall/sacred shrine to the goddess Chen Jinggu can be seen as a battle against modern, statist abstraction of space and an attempt to carve out a spatial domain for the divine. The two Christian institutions I described embody an opposite vision of space, one that is largely compatible with state modernity. Their spatial projection is practical, functional, and easily interchangeable, leaving the "strategic deployment of space" (M. Yang 2004, 721) in the hands of the state. The casual attitude toward the relocation of the fellowship is also instructive: while similar projects of demolishing places of worship could potentially generate distress and protest among believers, as with the Sanjiang church in Wenzhou, no such voices were heard from the Fellowship community of Kunming. The rapid modernization of the city remains a state affair, unrelated to the core issue of faith and redemption.

Comparing the Yunnanese house church and Fellowship to the Sanjiang church in Wenzhou, the importance the state attributes to space production and representation is evident. In contrast with the attempt made by Wenzhou Christians to construct a physical expression of the power of their faith, the foreign and local house-church Christians of Kunming attempt to distance themselves from spatial representations. They do so by refraining from the use of the term "church," by utilizing any space available, and by emphasizing the centrality of prayer, community, and fellowship rather than physical buildings. In contrast, congregants of Sanjiang invested large sums of money to create a large prominent church structure, thus attempting to embody the rising power of Christianity in Wenzhou. Likewise, Sanjiang members were extremely distraught and actively opposed to the demolition of their church.

Accordingly, while the churches in Zhejiang were demolished, the globalized and abstract churches discussed above have so far been tolerated, despite their association with foreign missionaries and the illegal house church movement. The contrast underlines the advantages of Evangelical Christianity from a state perspective as a religion with a strong deterritorial ideology. However, Evangelical attitudes toward spatial production and their compatibility with the state go beyond the issue of ideology. As elaborated below, they are equally a reflection of the need to remove ritual territoriality as a prerequisite for Christian expansion among China's Southwestern minorities.

#### UNHOLY SPACES: SPATIAL AND SPIRITUAL OBSTACLES TO CHRISTIAN EXPANSION

In an article on Christian space production based on fieldwork in Haiti, Elizabeth McAlister (2005) explores the ways in which the Christian cataloging of ethnicities, such as the "Joshua Project,"<sup>4</sup> works as an ethnic and moral mapping of the world, dividing peoples into categories of "reached" and "unreached." McAlister shows how the Evangelical preachers in Haiti use a common set of methods and

language in their attempts to “win” the territory previously ruled by Voodoo spirits for Jesus. They do so by encouraging converts to move away from locally contextualized religiosity and replace it with a trans-ethnic, global Christian identity. By becoming part of a “Christian global order,” territorial and national sentiments are diminished, making way for an international and transnational identity.

McAlister argues that by “winning Haiti for Jesus” and vanquishing the local deities, Evangelical Christians engage in their own production of space on a global level (McAlister 2005, 253). McAlister’s theory of Christian space production is reminiscent of the missionary scholar Ralph Covell’s attempts to explain success and failure in the mission field. Covell makes the claim that “the most resistant [to conversion] areas of the world are controlled by demonic beings,” implying these spiritual beings are territorial in nature. He continues by suggesting that missionaries must become acquainted with these local demons, with their names and attributes and devise specific prayers and actions to defeat them (Covell 1995, 267).

Missionaries in Yunnan make similar claims, particularly with regard to Tibetan Buddhist areas. To cite one example, Simon, a European missionary, mentioned a friend who worked as a missionary in the Tibetan areas of Yunnan but had to leave “because it was too heavy” (interview, May 25, 2010). Simon explained the “heaviness” of the region as the result of local deity worship, creating a space of spiritual oppression. The situation was such that Simon’s friend’s son became mentally unstable. In contrast, Simon mentioned another friend who had been able to persevere in the same region, having a particularly hardy character. To Simon it was the land itself, no less than the religion of its inhabitants, that posed a problem for the spread of Christianity, being a space of heaviness and ungodliness, a spiritual-geographic zone controlled by demonic beings.

A similar assessment of Tibetan Buddhism and its “dark spirituality” was made by Mark, an American Christian who had been living in Yunnan for over a decade. Remarking on a trip made to the Tibetan areas of Sichuan, Mark described to me how the demonic became physically evident in these areas, saying: “If you didn’t believe in demons before, you have them there like a bunch of flies on a pile of garbage” (interview, March 3, 2010). Likewise, a female missionary working among the Jingpo in the south of Yunnan conveyed her experience that many of the new converts in her region ended up “backsliding” into their old lives as non-believers. She ascribed the high rates of dropping out of faith to the evil spirits present in the Jingpo villages, claiming that “it’s very dark down there” (Tom, interview, November 18, 2009).

This approach is reflected in the page dedicated to Yunnan in the Christian website “prayforchina.com” (see [prayforchina.com](http://prayforchina.com), n.d.). The website encourages Christians to pray for numerous issues, including the spread of Christianity in different locations and among different minorities, help for persecuted Christians, and a prayer “that the governor of Yunnan, Xu Rongkai, would recognize the positive contributions being made to China’s development by Christians.” Of particular relevance here are the prayer points concerned with the demonic influence of religious sites, as in the following examples:

Pray against the demonic influence of the Daoist Baohua Monastery in Gejiu.  
Pray for China's Daoists to see that only the Lord Jesus is the Way, the Truth and  
the Life (John 14:6).

Pray against the demonic forces of superstition and idolatry at the Yuantong  
Temple, Kunming's largest Buddhist temple (Eph. 1:21–22).

Pray against the demonic forces at Yunnan's Mount Jizu, one of the four  
sacred mountains for Buddhists (2 Kings 18:4).

Interestingly, while Covell, Simon, and Mark all refer to the dark and unholy areas, they made no reference to spaces of the opposite quality or to regions marked as holy and spiritually clean. In light of the analysis above I suggest that the lack of symmetry between holy and unholy spaces in missionary rhetoric can be explained as a negation of the connection between spirituality and space. As such, I would argue that, in contrast to McAlister's view of Evangelical Christian activity in Haiti as space production, it could more accurately be referred to as the deconstruction of space. Thus, the emphasis of missionary activity is on the breaking of the spiritual–physical bond and replacing it not with a similar, physically based construct but rather with a deterritorial religiosity unrelated to, and transcendent from, the physical world. In fact, as Simon Coleman has noted, from an Evangelical perspective the confluence of space and spirituality contains spiritual danger:

More evangelical forms of Protestantism have often tended to exhibit worries over the role of 'place' in religion. Attachment to locality can, it is argued, move into idolatry, a tendency to see more of God in one location than another, or at least an unwillingness to display the mobility required in a true servant of God, prepared to move where the Spirit listeth. (Coleman 2009, 34)

Thus, the struggle against the dark and unclean includes the breaking of a connection between a given space and its spiritual significance.

A story relayed to me by Simon helps illustrate the barrier of spiritual territoriality for Christian dissemination. Two years after leaving Yunnan, I returned to follow up on my fieldwork and met Simon again. One afternoon we took a walk together down a dirt road leading to the Dianchi Lake. As we were walking past a small Buddhist shrine, Simon expressed his dissatisfaction at seeing the idolatry he deeply disliked, saying: "It's terrible; everything here is based on fear" (conversation, October 11, 2012). He then began telling me about a trip he had recently made to a Guizhou village to visit some Bouyei converts who had previously resided in Kunming. Throughout his time there he felt overwhelmed by the ambiance of "heaviness, fear, and oppression." Simon was not referring to state oppression. Rather his feeling was the result of the prevalence of spirit worship and the constant need to correctly appease local deities. In some cases, Christians came under great social pressure, particularly when funeral rites were concerned. Christians preferred to conduct a Christian burial or at the very least one that did not involve the worship and honoring of local spirits. However, for the other villagers, a burial ceremony that does not take local deities into account is unacceptable as the performance of such a ceremony would be harmful for the entire community.

Much like in Erik Mueggler's account of the Nuosu Yi (Mueggler 2001, 193), the Bouyei felt strongly that spirits and deities that are not appeased would inevitably take their vengeance on the village. As Mueggler has shown, spirits among the animist peoples of Southwest China are often territorial in nature. Like the earth gods (*Tudi gong*) and kitchen gods (*Zaojun*) of Chinese folk religion, they belong to particular valleys, mountains, and fields, or even to specific parts of the house. In both Mueggler's and Simon's accounts, and in stark contradiction to Evangelical territorial detachment and individualism, Bouyei and Nuosu religious life is collective and spatially based and the village is perceived as a single body intimately related to specific local spirits.

In the article by You Bin, Wang Aiguo, and Gong Yukuan, a similar clash between Christianity and local territorial traditions is described:

For example in some Hani villages there is a tree which is thought to be the tree spirit protecting the village and every March there are sacrificial rites for the tree spirit, praying for blessings and peace. But Christians see these activities as devil worship and refuse to take part. This does not accord with the ethnic customs and the elders and non-Christians of the village will blame the Christians, which may cause head-on clashes. (You, Wang, and Gong 2004, 117)

The example of the Hani's sacred tree and the story related to Simon in Guizhou reveal the way in which a traditional conceptualization of space is maintained. They also show how Christians find themselves in contradiction with adherents of local religions on the issue of ritual territoriality. Significantly, when local Christians face issues regarding the connection between ritual and space, they tend to negate any connection between the two, reflecting attitudes similar to those expressed by the state. Accordingly, the reemergence of ethnic spiritual territoriality poses a challenge both to the state's organization of space and to the spread of the gospel.

The efforts to re-enchant space described above may be seen in light of Lefebvre's view of abstract space as standing in contrast with the space produced by the sensory concreteness of the body. Accordingly, Lefebvre calls for "an uprising of the body...against the sign of the non-body" (Lefebvre 1991, 201). In the case described above, the concreteness of the body is expressed through the rituals of death and burial. Thus, the Bouyei described by Simon are adamant about traditional burial rites and Mueggler's Nuoso are heavily invested in burial services held to put the wild ghosts at peace. Likewise, the people of Wenzhou described by Yang struggled with the authorities against a campaign to eliminate the "feudal custom" of ground burials in the surrounding countryside (M. Yang 2004, 733–35). In contrast, rejecting bodily rituals has been a central feature of the missionary project in China since the nineteenth century (Reinders 2004, 100). Likewise, James, the leader of the house church mentioned above, was particularly adamant in his condemnation of *taiqi* (tai chi) and qigong as well as the festival of grave sweeping (*Qingmingjie*), an event closely related to traditional familial space and bodily ritual (interview, May 6, 2010). In fact, Evangelical Christians I interviewed tended to view Christianity's own bodily practice of baptism as insignificant compared to the process of inner change (Dave, interview, December 30, 2009; Mei, interview, January 6, 2010). Thus, the non-physical nature of faith advocated by

Evangelical Christians is largely compatible with the state's symbolic order and spatial practices, an order based on a distinct partition between the physical and the spiritual, the abstract and the concrete.

## CONCLUSION

As I have attempted to show in this article, the global era poses significant dangers for the PRC in the realm of space production. It is a time in which old methods of control are no longer effective, while new and renewed local identities and the revival of old forms of ritual territoriality pose a danger to state sovereignty as they work to undermine the image of the single unified state space. As the case of the Sanjiang church and the spatial struggles described by Yang reveal, state authorities will occasionally act when spatial production is challenged. Thus, Christianity can be conceived of as part of the problem—a transnational identity unrelated to China, its territory, and nation. In this work I argue for the contrary view: that the process of territorial detachment offered by Evangelical Christianity is in tune with the state's own interests in the realm of religion.

In the case of Yunnan, Christian deterritoriality is of specific importance as it coincides with the local state's attempt to encourage de-contextualized ethnic identities and to weaken the connection between ethno-religious identities and specific locations. However, it would seem that the sensitivity of ethnic relations is such that the harsh policies practiced in Wenzhou are considered unsuitable for Yunnan. As McCarthy, Mueggler, and Davis have written, in the past few decades attempts have been made by a number of minority groups to recreate ethnic ritual territoriality. These changes are often viewed as a form of compensation for past discrimination as well as a means to promote the growing tourist industry, help facilitate cross-border trade, and advance China's position in the Southeast Asian region. Nevertheless, while ethnicity in Yunnan is much less explosive than in Tibet or Xinjiang, the power of ethnic identity politics in Yunnan should not be overlooked, especially as some of the groups have a history of struggle with the Han and their state (most famously the Miao, who have fought numerous wars with the Han, and the Hui, who established a rebellious Muslim sultanate centered in Dali in the mid-nineteenth century).

Accordingly, the potential for encouraging the creation of entities or spatial division beyond the reach of the state must be addressed. This is done, routinely, by celebrating ethnicity as the marginal outline, emphasizing the power nesting at the center, portrayed in posters and pictures of structures and symbols such as the Hall of Supreme Harmony in Beijing or the national flag. It can also be achieved with the aid of a globalizing, de-ethnicizing force such as Evangelical Christianity.

The question that remains is, after using religion to contain and neutralize ethnicity, whether the position of illegal missionary activity can be maintained. In recent years some scholars have voiced their concern regarding the pace of Christian expansion and the potential for foreign involvement in China's internal affairs (Sun 2013). Indeed, some of the Christian literature may be seen as an open challenge to the state, such as David Aikman's claim that Christians can be trusted to

be forgiving and magnanimous toward China's former leadership once the country becomes entirely Christian (Aikman 2003, 303). Christian activists are well aware of the delicate balance between themselves and the authorities and the need to refrain from anti-state rhetoric. Thus, mission workers like Simon speak of the ability to act in Yunnan, noting that "you have to know not to cross the line" (interview, October 11, 2012). For the time being, it would seem that an operating *modus vivendi* has emerged between the proponents of state control and missionary activists—an unwritten agreement regarding the borders of action and the nature of ethnicity and space.

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#### NOTES

1. Due to the sensitivity of the issues discussed and to protect informants, all names given here are pseudonyms.
2. Despite being Chinese, James and Cathy introduced themselves with their English names, hence my choice to use non-Chinese pseudonyms.
3. I heard old English-style hymn singing in a large Yi church in Sanyingpan, north of Kunming. The singing had clearly been imported by missionaries prior to 1949 and is still in use today.
4. The Joshua Project is an Evangelical website dedicated to the worldwide mapping of Christianity among ethnic groups (see Joshua Project, n.d.).

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