

## Newly rising urban churches in China and their relationship to the party state

A review of recent publications

Meiken Buchholz<sup>1</sup>

### **Surviving the State, Remaking the Church:**

A Sociological Portrait of Christians in Mainland China

Li Ma and Jin Li

*Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications (Studies in Chinese Christianity), 2017, 187 pp., ISBN 1532634609, US\$21.60 (paperback).*

### **Authoritarian Containment:**

Public Security Bureaus and Protestant House Churches in Urban China

Marie-Eve Reny

*New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 184 pp., ISBN 019069808X, US\$74.00 (hardcover).*

### **The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China:**

God above Party?

Carsten T. Vala

*London, New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis (Routledge research on the politics and sociology of China), 2019, x + 231 pp., ISBN 0367209284, GB£38.99 (paperback).*

Since early 2000, the growth of unregistered Protestant churches in urban milieus in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has attracted increasing attention among researchers in the sociology of religion as well as from theologians with special interest in China. Although these unregistered churches are illegal and exposed to repressive measures by the government, they do not conform to the common image of 'house churches' or 'underground churches'. These new churches share several characteristics, including a large membership (from several hundred to more than a thousand), public visibility and the claim to be good citizens who are doing nothing illegal. On the other hand, they insist on remaining independent from the

<sup>1</sup> Meiken Buchholz is an Associate Professor at Fjellhaug International University College and Giessen School of Theology (Freie Theologische Hochschule Giessen). She received her PhD in Theology from the School of Mission and Theology, Stavanger, now VID Specialized University. Article received: 13 July 2020; accepted: 30 September 2020. Email: buchholz@fthgiessen.de.

structures of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the network of churches under governmental control. Therefore, these churches represent a so called third way of church-government relations in China and are designated by the umbrella term “newly rising urban churches”.

Two earlier empirical studies have thoroughly described the self-understanding of urban churches and their pastors.<sup>2</sup> The relationship of these churches to the authoritarian Chinese government is the focus of three monographs, all published in 2018, that are the subject of the present review. All three investigations are based on empirical field studies and contain valuable insider information about prominent churches and leaders in the Christian urban milieu. In addition, they outline the historical development of Christianity’s relationship to the communist government since 1949, and they provide in-depth information on legal and administrative regulations and practices. Since each of the three publications includes an index, they can be easily used to find information about specific persons, churches and incidents.

In view of the rapid developments occurring in China, I must point out that the data referenced in these books were collected three to eight years before publication (in some cases, even earlier; see Vala: 215). In general, newer developments in the era of Xi Jinping are only rudimentarily taken into consideration and some topical documents published between 2015 and 2017 are not included.

For readers who are less acquainted with the situation in China, some background will be helpful. First, all governmental regulations and restrictions concerning Christian churches apply to all religions in general. Second, the particular use of the term “Christian” needs a short explanation. In the Chinese language, “Christianity” (*jidujiao*, or literally “teaching of Christ”) means “Protestantism” and is distinguished from the term “Catholicism” (*tianzhujiào*, literally “teaching of the Heavenly Lord”), which originates from the translation of “God” used in Catholic Bible translations.

## 1. One topic – three approaches

Whereas the empirical study by Ma and Li provides an easily readable, sociological narrative portrait of Chinese urban Christianity, Reny and Vala contribute to academic discourse in political science, based on elaborate methodology. I will briefly introduce each book, its methodological approach, and its particularities.

### 1.1 Ma and Li: The development of Christian social identity

Ma Li, a researcher in the sociology of religion, and Li Jin, a theologian, collected narrative material from Protestant Christians in the PRC, ranging from the 1950s to

<sup>2</sup> These books are Nanlai Cao, *Constructing China’s Jerusalem. Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011) and Jie Kang, *House Church Christianity in China. From Rural Preachers to City Pastors* (Basel: Springer International Publishing, 2016).

the present. Among the three publications, Ma and Li's fieldwork provides the most recent data. Their interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2015 in several major cities and offer vivid insights into the lives of individual Christians and the dynamics of Christian networks. The authors refer to developments up to 2017.

Ma and Li's 12 topical chapters correspond to different factors that have been at work in the development of Christian group identities over the course of six decades. Since the chapters are largely arranged in chronological order, the book can also be read as a contemporary history of the Protestant church in China. The authors' thesis, which pervades all the chapters with various degrees of prominence, is clearly stated in their conclusion. Ma and Li assume a "loss of collective memory" in China, which has been caused by the politicization of the national narrative and the lack of "freedom to discuss publicly past wounds". In such a context, the memories of Christians manifest the ability to heal and to reconcile "individuals and classes" (178). Because Chinese patriotic identity propagated by the government is so distant from daily communal life, Christian faith is experienced as a source of desperately needed moral identity (105).

### 1.2 Reny: "Authoritarian containment"

The question underlying the volume by Marie-Eve Reny (a political scientist at the Université de Montréal) concerns the apparent contradiction between restrictive religious policy by the Chinese government, on one hand, and *de facto* tolerance of illegal Christian activities by many local authorities, on the other hand.

According to Reny, the reason for this phenomenon is not simple arbitrariness but a deliberate strategy of "authoritarian containment," which she defines as "the conditional and bounded toleration of a group outside state-sanctioned institutions" (6), based on a tacit agreement between government agencies and groups without legal status. Reny seeks to show that unregistered churches benefit to a certain degree from this strategy of containment. However, since the conditions and limits of tolerance are dictated in a one-sided manner by the authoritarian regime, this form of tolerance is ultimately a means to enforce and stabilize the regime (14).

Reny's investigation draws on comprehensive data from her fieldwork in five cities, including more than 100 interviews. Besides representatives of registered and unregistered churches, Reny also interviewed local government officials.

To validate her findings, Reny applies the concept of authoritarian containment to how authoritarian regimes in Egypt and Jordan handled Muslim movements which were on the verge of legality. The reasons for choosing two regimes from the Middle East and two Muslim movements as objects of comparison are not identified. Therefore, this shorter, second part of the publication is of more limited value. However, this deficiency does not impair the value of Reny's discussion of the situation in China.

### 1.3 Vala: “Public transcript” and the balance between power and negotiation

Carsten Vala (Loyola University, Maryland, US) is a political scientist who has studied the Protestant church in China for many years. His book is based on 15 months of fieldwork in several Chinese cities between 2002 and 2014 (16). Besides the introduction and conclusion, the content is divided into seven topical chapters, each of which starts with a comprehensive research overview.

Vala begins by describing three factors that have shaped church-government relationships in China: weak implementation of religious policy by government agencies, the role of the TSPM leadership, and the affinity of Christians in registered and unregistered churches at the grassroots level (chapters 2 to 4). He then provides a comparative analysis of the growth, suppression, and resilience of newly rising urban churches based on empirical data. In his conclusion, Vala briefly discusses possible generalizations of his findings to other religious movements in China.

Although its scope is similar to Reny's, Vala's analysis goes further in two regards. First, in addition to investigating the reasons for tolerating illegal churches, Vala considers the limits of toleration. Second, Vala extends the bipolar juxtaposition of government authorities versus unregistered churches to examine the triangular relationship in which the TSPM is also an important player.

Vala rejects the popular thesis that the space of freedom allowing illegal groups to grow is created by “cracks” of authoritarian power. Instead, he explains this space of freedom by invoking James Scott's model of “public transcript.”<sup>3</sup> Vala uses this concept to refer to the government's expectations about how subordinates should display their submission to and confirm the legitimacy of the regime. Though these expectations stay unspoken, they are known by both sides (11-15).

## 2. Consistent traits within a multi-faceted picture

Though the three publications approach the topic in different ways, their findings are consistent in large part. All warn against a stereotyped view of church-state relationships in China and point to a complex interplay of several factors, which can be summarized as follows.

### 2.1 Historical and structural factors

The development of religious policy from the founding of the PRC by Mao in 1949 to the growth of informal Protestantism in the 1990s (Reny:45-46) can be described as a transition from a domination-resistance paradigm in the Mao era to the contemporary domination-negotiation paradigm (Vala:27-46).

<sup>3</sup> Vala refers to James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (London: Yale University Press, 1990).

Vala demonstrates how this change can be explained by the tension between the official Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ideology – which predicts the end of religion due to the blessings of socialism – on one hand and the actual handling of religious affairs by government agencies on the other hand. The authorities' main concern is no longer to oppress Christianity but to gain control over this rapidly growing movement (31-34). The ambiguous phrasing of religious regulations leaves much open to interpretation in the course of implementation. One important example of this kind of continuing ambiguity is the permission given to “normal religious activity” without any further clarification of “normal,” with regard to either content or form (35-36).

According to Vala, the persistent mismatch between policy governing religion and actual practice has reinforced the importance of informal arrangements – i.e. public transcripts – which give the authorities at least the appearance of being in control over religious life. Lack of manpower and competence on the part of local Religious Affairs Bureaus is an important yet often underestimated factor in the increasing discrepancy between the official agenda and the public transcript of religious policy (41). Subsequently, Vala analyses the growth of urban churches in terms of a negotiation about an enlarged public transcript, in which both unregistered and TSPM churches are involved.

For Reny as well, the discrepancy between the official purpose of government regulations on religious affairs and their local implementation is decisive for understanding the dynamics of church-state relations in China. By reference to document analysis and interviews, she provides instructive insight into official regulations and practices – and how they are evaded (56-67). She explains the often-overlooked fact that unregistered churches, because of their illegal status, are not subject to supervision by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, but by Public Security Bureaus (chapter 3), whose priority is political and social order (69).

Reny identifies three areas where local implementation often differs decisively from official regulations: obligatory registration of religious sites, the prohibition of religious activities outside registered religious sites or addressed to minors, and the obligation to report international contacts (56). Building on the theory of authoritarian containment, she concludes that unregistered churches are attracted by the possibility of informal toleration, because it gives them more liberties and benefits than are enjoyed even by TSPM churches (59-61). Reny points out some decisive factors that have led to the growth of unregistered churches since the 1990s: structural flexibility, active recruiting of members, focusing on strategic target groups, and their association with modernity (50-51).

Ma and Li, meanwhile, provide valuable insights into the rapidly emerging Christian campus fellowships that arose in the late 1990s (chapter 4). Interviews convey

the perspective of Chinese converts on these student fellowships, which were often launched by foreign Christian students or university staff. These groups of Chinese converts remained for a long time at the level of Bible groups and basic discipleship training, but they stayed disconnected from Christian churches and theological thinking. According to the authors, this left the emerging urban Christian congregations fragmented and vulnerable in their early stages. At the same time, it made Christians receptive to the rise of urban churches that emphasize a clear theological profile.

## **2.2 The role of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and its Theological Construction Movement**

As Vala elaborates, an appropriate understanding of the emergence of unregistered urban churches and their relationship to Chinese authorities must also take the TSPM's role into consideration.

Ambiguous regulations shift the practical responsibility for handling religious groups to local officials, who often lack competence and motivation. Therefore, according to Vala, the authorities rely on the TSPM and the closely connected China Christian Council for assistance in the implementation of government regulations at the local level. The TSPM thus obtains a key role in creating forms of public practice in line with the public agenda. This puts TSPM leaders in a position to negotiate on behalf of their own interests against state domination (chapter 3).

TSPM enacts a CCP-conforming public transcript in three arenas. First, TSPM leadership must express support for the CCP and the state in public settings. This includes the responsibility to impart the party's political agenda to the next generation of Christian leaders in theological seminaries (63-64). On the other hand, in its contact with foreigners, the TSPM is expected to impart a picture of China as a nation with religious freedom. The third arena is the most challenging one and concerns the implementation of government regulations at the grassroots level (66-71). Vala's fieldwork provides concrete insight concerning the mechanisms used to control local parishes in the TSPM, such as a centralization of the appointment of church workers and of financial administration, as well as rotating preaching assignments among pastors to prevent churches and pastors from building strong relationships with each other and no longer depending on the TSPM leadership structures (71-74).

However, Vala's comparative research in two cities reveals that the efficiency of these control mechanisms should not be overestimated (74-77). Even in places where TSPM leadership is strong, some TSPM churches and pastors still manage to act quite autonomously and assert their self-interest against official restrictions and control.

Using the example of the Theological Construction Movement (TCM), which was initiated with the aim of establishing a contextual theology for Chinese socialist society, Vala demonstrates that TSPM leadership failed to enforce a CCP-conforming public transcript at the grassroots level (chapter 4). It may be questioned whether Vala's short presentation does full justice to the actual concerns of TCM. It does present an accurate picture of later developments, particularly since this kind of "patriotic theology" is directly demanded by the communist government itself as a contribution by Protestant churches to a harmonious socialist society.<sup>4</sup>

Vala's finding that the TCM effort failed because of the conservative theological stance of Chinese Christians is nothing new. But he goes on to show that it actually backfired. It revealed the tension between the public transcript desired by the CCP and the values held at the grassroots level (85). Originally, the TCM was intended to abolish the dividing line between Christian and non-Christian society and to define a theological demarcation between "patriotic" registered churches and unregistered (and allegedly "unpatriotic") churches (87-89). However, because of its broad rejection at the TSPM's grassroots level, the TCM had the opposite effect. It helped to tone down the demarcation between Christians in registered churches and unregistered churches; in several cases it even led to cooperation between them (105). Ma and Li, too, emphasize the "blurry line" (169) between registered and unregistered churches. Through their interviews, they paint a picture of pastors who manoeuvre between both structures and of Christians who float back and forth, similar to the description given by Vala (Ma and Li:169-73; Vala:95-96).

Vala points out that unregistered churches particularly depend on good relations with TSPM pastors when they want to prove to the government that they are not heretical sects. To assess the theological "normality" of an independent Christian group, government officials rely on the evaluations provided by TSPM pastors. In actual practice, this means that TSPM pastors are given the responsibility to supervise those unregistered churches which they recommend (Vala:130-131).

### 2.3 The relationship of newly rising urban churches to the society and the party-state

According to Vala, the decreasing demarcation between Christians in registered and unregistered churches and a growing consciousness of shared theological values have been important preconditions for the emergence of a "third way" of church-

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the white paper "China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief," published by the Information Office of the State Council of China in April 2018, states explicitly that the "development of theological thinking" is the particular contribution of Protestant Christianity towards the establishment of a harmonious socialist society (paragraph IV.1.; for the English text, see <https://bit.ly/2NZS70H>).

government relationships, which characterizes the newly rising urban churches (95-103). He shows convincingly that the extent to which these new churches can operate in public can be explained only by the particular backgrounds of their pastors: Some are familiar with TSPM structures because they studied at TSPM seminaries or have worked in TSPM churches (133-140); others have personal relationships with high-level officials because of their former secular careers (141). This background gives them a “strategic capacity” in their negotiations with government authorities (133). Vala’s examples illustrate the astonishing self-confidence and skill of Christian leaders in unregistered churches who have established constructive, direct connections with government officials (137-142).

Like Reny (50), Vala also regards independence from TSPM structures as a strategic advance in comparison to TSPM churches: Because pastors of unregistered urban churches distance themselves from TSPM leadership and the TCM, Chinese Christians trust them as “true Christians” (94). Thereby, they also attract many members of registered churches who share the same theological and moral values. Close relationships among church members in newly rising urban churches, nourished in small-group gatherings, and strong affinity between the members and their pastor create a firm identity and provide social capital that facilitates stability and growth. This social capital becomes even stronger through shared experiences of repression (110-111).

By comparing the developmental paths of two prominent churches that became targets of government repression (Shanghai All Nations Missionary Church and Shouwang Church in Beijing), Vala analyses factors that make churches resilient in the face of oppression (chapters 7 and 8). Whereas Shouwang Church continues to exist, though with fewer members, All Nations Missionary Church dispersed into small groups. According to Vala’s analysis, the key factors sustaining Shouwang Church are leadership ability, including social networks and insights into political affairs, and stable organizational structures, created through theological education of its membership and well-established communication mechanisms. In addition, the local religious context must be considered. Since TSPM leadership in Shanghai is strong and most unregistered churches are rather small, Shanghai All Nations Missionary Church did not get the same level of support from local Christians as Shouwang Church received in Beijing.

With regard to moral values, the data confirm a broad consistency between Christians in TSPM and unregistered churches. They also share a cautious attitude towards the influence of foreign Christians (Vala:96-98) and a similar view of contemporary Chinese society, including harsh criticism of overall moral decline, dishonesty, loss of sexual morality, and unrestrained materialism (98-101). On the other hand, newly rising urban churches no longer correspond to the distorted pic-



ture of world-negating sectarians that is depicted by some TSPM leaders. Instead, they engage with the surrounding society and stress Christian civic ethics (103-105). Ma and Li dedicate their whole chapter 8 to the impressive wave of charity work initiated by Christians from unregistered churches in the wake of the Sichuan earthquake in 2008.

Ma and Li also elaborate on an influential theological factor that has shaped the attitude of many newly rising urban churches towards society and state: neo-Calvinism (chapter 9). Based on their interviews, they conclude that Calvinism in China is less about theological denominationalism and “more about Christian worldview” and an “empowering call for Christians to live out their faith in all spheres of life.” (124). The influence of Calvinism on urban Christian leaders has been the topic of several recent publications, but Ma and Li’s unique contribution is to convey the grassroots perspectives of church members and the multi-faceted currents within this theological movement. In general, the Calvinist influence leads to a stress on family ethics and education. Ma and Li offer unique insight into issues of daily life that concern modern Chinese urban Christians in chapters 10 (“Marriage”) and 11 (“Education”). It becomes obvious that the conflicts Christians in unregistered urban churches experience in their daily lives are caused mostly by opposing values and practices in society at large, rather than by direct political confrontations. Sources of potential political conflicts include the question of CCP membership and the kind of nationalism propagated by the government (Ma and Li: chapters 6 and 7).

According to Ma and Li, people in urban China have become accustomed to a pluralistic society and to living with plural, even conflicting identities. In this context, Ma and Li refer to a 2007 study that found that more than 80 percent of CCP members identified themselves as having religious beliefs, even though the party officially prohibits its members from following any kind of religion (89 and 91). Here, the authors should have added updated information, because more recently the CCP has worked actively to oppose religious belief among its members, announcing sanctions spanning from ideological education to exclusion from the party. Ma and Li make some remarkable critical comments regarding an unbalanced “China-centrism” within some unregistered Christian groups, which they regard to be a result of an uncritical adoption of political nationalism (103-104).

The freedom of space enjoyed by unregistered churches is determined by certain “red lines,” as Vala’s and Remy’s investigations show consistently. First, churches must keep a low profile and membership must be “fewer than a few dozen”; second, the organizational structure must remain local and not spread across provincial borders; and third, no cooperation with foreigners is allowed (Vala:132; cf. Remy:80-84, 88-90). In addition, churches must keep away from heretical teaching

and political issues – e.g. contacts with the democracy movement, talking about freedom of religion, or publicly criticizing the government (Reny:86-87, 97-99). Reny's interviews illustrate how Christian leaders work within these red lines in daily life (chapter 4). Pastors comply with the expectations of local government officials by informing them about their activities, through either personal conversations or comprehensive information on the churches' websites. At the same time, direct contact with officials helps pastors to assess their scope of movement. If they cross certain "red lines," authorities react immediately with an overt increase of surveillance and threats. Since leaders are held responsible for the group, they are particularly targeted (Vala:132). Yet the severity of government reaction depends on the local context (cf. the comparison of churches in Shanghai and Chengdu by Ma and Li: chapter 5) and the type of red line crossed. Particularly with regard to the size of membership, local authorities have been quite permissive (Vala:137; Reny:87).

Some newly rising urban churches tried to obtain legal status and considered registration with local authorities by making use of the 2005 Regulations on Religious Affairs (Vala:130-131). On one hand, these regulations facilitate government control over religious movements outside official structures and convey an impression of the rule of law. On the other hand, pastors of new urban churches manage to obtain a certain legality without losing their independence via personal contacts with the authorities (Vala:131-142). The author should have mentioned that the 2005 regulations were revised and significantly extended in August 2017.<sup>5</sup>

### **3. The different explanatory approaches: an evaluation**

On a descriptive level, the three books present consistent, complementary pictures of newly rising urban churches' relationship to the government. Whereas Ma and Li essentially restrict themselves to the interpretation of data, Reny and Vala propose two different conceptualizations drawn from the field of political science and derive general causal relations. To some degree, these lead to different assessments of the role of newly rising urban churches in relation to government authorities. As a consequence, the three publications conclude with different projections about future developments.

#### **3.1 Stakeholders and degree of agency**

The concept of authoritarian containment, by definition, focuses on government actions and applies only to groups outside state-sanctioned institutions. Accord-

<sup>5</sup> For the English text of the 2017 revision of the Regulation on Religious Affairs, see <http://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?id=26379&lib=law>.

ingly, Reny's interpretation of the data considers only the bipolar relations between unregistered churches and the authorities, and it presupposes that the conditions of their relationship are unilaterally determined by the government. She describes, for example, how the Public Security Bureaus choose those churches that qualify for conditional tolerance. On one hand, tolerated churches must be apolitical, keep away from heretical teaching, and keep a low profile. On the other hand, officials look for churches that, due to their size, have strong local influence and cannot simply be ignored (chapter 4). Church leaders can choose only between agreeing to conditional toleration and suffering oppression; they are not in a position to negotiate. Nevertheless, the offer of conditional tolerance is attractive for unregistered churches, because they obtain a certain degree of freedom and safety for their actions. However, according to Reny, by accepting this kind of informal, tacit agreement, they renounce the option to pursue formal legalization (29 and 106).

Reny presents Shouwang Church in Beijing as an example of how a church managed to transcend the limitations of authoritarian containment. This urban church started in the early 1990s and made full use of the space provided by the authorities' strategy of informal, conditional tolerance. It developed into a congregation with reflective viewpoints on theology and civic ethics. According to Reny's analysis, the church's self-interest changed in the course of this development, with the result that it is now willing to give up the benefits of informal toleration and has instead worked towards formal legalization as an independent organization within the framework of civil society. Reny paints an optimistic picture of Shouwang Church's success in "questioning the existing institutional status quo" (113). Yet, for the sake of a more complete picture, the author should have extended her presentation of Shouwang Church beyond the "early stage of conflict" when the government "kept a low profile" and did not use coercion, because the situation has changed dramatically since Reny's interviews in 2010 (cf. Vala: chapter 8).

The fact that the vast majority of newly rising urban churches did not follow the example of Shouwang Church proves to Reny the efficacy of the government's containment strategy. Most pastors of unregistered churches still assess the benefits of informal, conditional toleration as greater than its costs.

Reny concludes that a policy of authoritarian containment is crucial for maintaining the status quo with regard to the government's dealings with religious actors. Tolerated churches are discouraged from engaging in politically undesired behaviour because they have benefits to lose; moreover, tolerating some churches divides Christians on the issue of how to handle government relations,<sup>6</sup> and the

<sup>6</sup> Reny's evaluation should be reconsidered in the light of newer developments. In July 2018, a group of 34 unregistered churches in Beijing wrote an open letter to the government, claiming the legality of their activities under the constitution. At the end of August 2018, Early Rain Covenant Church pu-

authorities get convenient access to information about the tolerated congregations (38, 102-107). Reny's interpretation implies that churches never have real agency in their negotiations with the government. Though illegal churches ostensibly enjoy some security and freedom, this comes at the price of accepting self-censorship and abandoning any demand for religious rights or legalization.

Vala, in contrast, regards Christian leaders as agentic participants in the process of negotiation, who actually influence the dimensions of the space of freedom by strategically building and using social capital. Since the concept of a public transcript applies to registered and unregistered churches alike, Vala's analysis takes into account the multi-level interactions between unregistered churches and the TSPM. On one hand, the CCP assigns to the TSPM the lead role in maintaining a CCP-conforming public transcript, stressing clear-cut dissociation from any Christian activity outside governmental regulations. On the other hand, attempts by the TSPM leadership to put this kind of public transcript into practice, such as through the TCM, have failed because of theological opposition at the grassroots level. The decreasing demarcation between Christians in registered and unregistered churches and a growing consciousness of shared theological values have made a new public transcript necessary. Accordingly, Vala interprets the relationship between the authorities and newly rising urban churches in terms of the churches' striving for an enlarged public transcript. Well-equipped Christian leaders make use of their strategic capacity in direct negotiations with government authorities, who in turn benefit from direct communication because it helps them to avert public conflicts, troublesome surveillance, and having to write long reports to their superiors. In this way, according to Vala, government authorities and urban churches together have rewritten and significantly enlarged the public transcript. The documented severe harassment of some prominent urban churches by the authorities is explained in terms of the government's defence of certain "red lines" against attempts to push beyond the enlarged public transcript.

### 3.2 The future outlook

Vala concludes with three possible scenarios regarding future relations between the government and Protestant churches in the PRC. Most probably, he says, the combination of domination and negotiation that he describes will continue as long as neither the central government nor local authorities launch special campaigns against Christians at the grassroots level. Two other possible scenarios – systematic

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blished a declaration, protesting against the increasing harassment of unregistered churches by the government and interference in matters of faith, which has been signed by more than 270 leaders of churches. See K. Wenzel-Teuber et al., "Chronik zu Religion und Kirche in China 26. Juni bis 3. Oktober 2018," *China Heute* 37, no. 3 (2018):153-165.

suppression of all unregistered churches and official legalizing of churches outside the TSPM structure – would involve high costs for the government. The latter would require not only ideological change but also immense bureaucratic efforts. Systematic suppression of all churches refusing registration under TSPM structures would provoke resistance by many Christians and would destabilize society. Though Vala refers to the latest tightening of religious regulations under president Xi Jinping, he thinks a systematic implementation is unlikely to happen because local officials lack the needed resources.

Reny's reflections on future developments express the hope that China's government may liberalize its religious policy in conjunction with its impressive economic liberalization. This optimism is quite surprising in the light of the success of authoritarian containment in stabilizing the status quo, which stands out throughout her book. Sadly, new government regulations on religious affairs, mentioned by Reny herself (141-142), and their rigid implementation give little reason for Reny's hope.

When compared to the works of Reny and Vala, Ma and Li's outlook for religious politics in China is less optimistic but, in my opinion, most convincing and realistic. They describe the growing control and repression but are not overly pessimistic, especially since their field studies confirm the "life-changing effects" of the Christian message despite persecution, marginalization and "materialistic temptations" (178).

#### **4. Conclusion**

By depicting in detail the struggles of China's newly rising urban churches, these three publications convey a vivid impression of the multifaceted factors which Christian leaders in this context must manoeuvre. The investigations reveal why church-government relations are by far more complex and dynamic than the stereotypical notion of politically controlled churches on one hand and persecuted churches on the other hand. By letting Chinese Christians speak in their own words, the authors convey a picture of them that corresponds to their own self-understanding as skilfully negotiating the political space to promote their own interest. Thereby, the reader receives a realistic picture of Chinese Christians, instead of idealizing them as helpless victims or immaculate martyrs.

The concepts of authoritarian containment and public transcript help to interpret the apparent contradictions between the official agenda of religious policy and the actual practice of local officials. With regard to the role of TSPM churches in the negotiation process, public transcript proves to be the better analytical tool. It enables a convincing description of the dynamics in the triangular relationship between the government, the TSPM and unregistered churches. Both concepts describe the formation of a certain space of negotiation that exceeds the limitations stated in official regulations and is based on informal agreements. However, they lead to dif-

ferent evaluations regarding the degree of agency granted to unregistered churches. Vala's description of Christian leaders as self-determined participants in the process of negotiation seems to correspond better with the narrative portraits provided by Ma and Li. However, we must remember that all three authors' fieldwork took place prior to 2015. Because of rapid changes in religious policy in the era of Xi Jinping, some findings have already been overtaken by more recent events.

Beyond their focus on a specific group of churches in China, the three publications also impart general insights that can be useful for a better understanding of church-government relations in other restrictive contexts. Above all, the significance of informal negotiation processes and the self-perception of suppressed Christians as skilfully manoeuvring actors, not as helpless victims, can be relevant in similar political constellations. In any case, the publications impressively illustrate the multiplicity of aspects involved in government-church relations in authoritarian regimes and help to steer us away from simplifications and hasty evaluations.



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