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Religiously Inspired Charitable Organizations (RICOs) and Their Quest for Religious Authority and Recognition in Contemporary China

This article looks at the recent re-emergence of religiously inspired charitable organizations (RICOs) within Chinese society. Operating in an emergent religious marketplace, within a recently rehabilitated charitable sector, RICOs occupy a liminal position juxtaposed between the religious and secular. This article explores the ways in which the "Home" (a Buddhist RICO based in southwest China) and the "Center" (a Catholic RICO based in northeast China) make use of the ambiguity this provides to take on the role of what Hakan Yavuz calls "opportunity spaces," operating as "social sites and vehicles for activism and the dissemination of meaning, identity, and cultural codes" (Yavuz 2003, ix) within wider society. Specifically, this article explores the ways that they draw on the material—objects, space, the body, and sensory perception—as a means of identity formation and in asserting religious authority in their quest to gain recognition in contemporary Chinese society.

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Following years of being overlooked in both academic and development discourses, the work of faith-based organisations (FBOs) re-emerged as a focus of considerable research and policy interest after secular agencies "(re)discovered religion" (Deacon and Tomalin 2015, 68) in the 1990s. FBOs are now seen as having the potential to influence policy debates (see Deneulin and Bano 2009; Carbonnier 2013; Hefferan, Adkins, and Occhipinti 2009; Marshal and Keough 2005; and Jones and Petersen 2011), to contribute to the development of civil society (see Herbert 2003; Clarke and Jennings 2008), and to deliver a range of social welfare initiatives through their unparalleled access to local, grassroots communities and their ability to access large amounts of social capital (see Clarke and Ware 2015). As increasingly vocal and prominent players on the world scene, and as organizations that claim in some part to have a religious identity, FBOs face issues of "representational power" (Bourdieu 1989). Questions of who they seek to represent, and by what authority they hold that position, highlight an intertwining of secular and religious trends present in humanitarian, social welfare, and charitable work (Clarke and Jennings 2008).

In the Chinese context, religious organizations have only recently been permitted to re-engage in social welfare and charitable work. As such, questions around religion and authority are heightened not least because of the relatively young age of the sector but also because of the social and political context within which these organizations seek to operate. Chinese religious charities find themselves operating in a newly forged space, occupying a liminal position in two senses. Operating in a newly emerging religious marketplace, juxtaposed between the religious and secular, they also find themselves part of a wider "field of competition" in terms of both the religious nature of their work and the charitable side, where supporters, beneficiaries, volunteers, and funders can be "captured on the basis of strong public presence and seducing and convincing rhetoric, performance and imagery" (Davelaar et al. 2011, 117). Different historical experiences have affected the way in which religious charity has been understood and received by state agencies, religious communities, and the wider public. As a nascent sector, only recently permitted to re-establish itself within Chinese society, religious charities find they need to clearly articulate who they are, what they are doing, and who they represent. Just like their secular NGO counterparts, it is important that they show their potential to contribute positively to society if they wish to survive. They also need

to frame themselves and their work in religious terms, being careful to distinguish themselves from existing religious institutions, while also counteracting any negativity surrounding their desire to take religion into the public sphere.

I have chosen to use the term "religiously inspired charitable organization" (RICO) in this article rather than more commonly used term, FBO. The term RICO distinguishes these groups from the FBO sector outside China and situates them within the community of the five legally recognized religious traditions in China (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestant and Catholic Christianity) while identifying them as being distinct entities. I use the term "inspired" instead of "based" to reinforce the notion that these organizations can be religiously inspired (historically, for example) and yet have little formal base within that particular tradition today. Also, the term is less restrictive as it does not imply that members have their own personal "faith." The term "charitable organization" incorporates the explicit orientation of the work as being charitable in nature, even when the legal registration status may not reflect this. This resonates with the way in which the field is seen by practitioners, policy makers, end-users, and volunteers in China. The term "organization" is admittedly problematic in that not all organizations are able to register as such. "Religiously inspired initiatives" was considered as an alternative term, as it reflected the short-term nature of some of the work, but it lacked the sense of permanency that these and other groups are hoping to attain. The term is, therefore, recognized as being somewhat aspirational.

This article traces the emergence of RICOs in contemporary Chinese society as specific settings through which the materiality of religion and the aesthetic and sensory aspects of religious authority can be explored. Borrowing from David Morgan (2008, 228), I understand materiality to be "any aspect of . . . world-making activity that happens in material form." This includes things but also the "feelings, values, fears, and obsessions that inform one's understanding and use of things" (ibid.). To help analyze the findings, in this article I draw on Hakan Yavuz's concept of "opportunity spaces" to frame RICOs as "vehicles for activism and the dissemination of meaning, identity, and cultural codes" (Yavuz 2003, ix), as a means of exploring the themes of this special edition.

Setting the backdrop for the article, I begin by providing a broad outline of some of the major environmental influences on the RICO sector. I then move on to discuss the emergence of two specific RICOs, the Buddhist "Home," in Yunnan province, and the Catholic "Center," in Liaoning province, both of which are involved in work in HIV/AIDS prevention and care. The article charts the early stages of "becoming" a RICO, including factors leading to the decision to choose HIV/AIDS as a project focus, and specific challenges they face, such as selecting a name, registration, finding premises, and securing funding. Next, I move on to explore some of the ways in which they operationalize their work, particularly exploring the ways in which they use a range of objects and events to bring the sacred and the secular together, as a means of gaining wider acceptance for their work.

This article draws on data gathered over the course of two periods of fieldwork in China, the first of which took place between October–December 2009 and the second in January–March 2011. During both visits I was hosted by Renmin Uni-

versity in Beijing but also spent time traveling through China visiting a network of contacts that I had developed over a number of years. I visited offices, training programs, and project sites, meeting with a range of interlocuters including staff, volunteers, service users, and partner organizations (including state officials and secular NGOs). My data were acquired through observation (both participant and distant) and through a range of interviews with groups and individuals. Both periods of fieldwork were undertaken after official encouragement was given for the sector to develop but prior to the 2012 publication of the "Opinions about Encouraging and Standardizing the Participation of Religious Communities in Charitable Activities" (hereafter the "Opinions"), which sought to define "the forms, principles and preferential measures available for religious groups to carry out 'charitable' activities" (Carino 2016, 3). As such this article provides an interesting insight into the ways in which space and identity were negotiated by pioneers in the field, in what constituted a relatively undefined and unregulated space, creating an example for others to follow (and to critique) and effectively setting the groundwork for the more permanent space we now see emerging.

The re-emergence of ricos in contemporary Chinese society

Since 1949, official religious policy in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been guided by "the official interpretation of Marxism by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as China's centuries-old tradition of subordinating religion to the state" (Carino 2016, 1). The reform era heralded the start of a more open attitude to religion in society, and the following years saw a rapid expansion of religion (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). In the 1990s, this expansion led to fears of foreign infiltration and resulted in Jiang Zemin implementing a two-pronged approach to religious management, which first sought religion's "accommodation" to socialism and then promised the state's "rule by law" in return (Leung 2005, 908). At the turn of the millennium ongoing management of the religious field continued to influence and shape religious policy. According to Beatrice Leung (ibid.) any claims that the state was exhibiting increasing openness toward the religious sector needed to consider counter claims that this was merely a facet of policy that sought to mitigate risks and maintain control.

In December 2001, Jiang Zemin acknowledged that religion was a long-term phenomenon that should be mobilized to make a positive contribution to China's development, as a "stabilizing force in society" (Leung 2005, 910). The following year religious organizations were "given the green light to start social services directly and to engage in relief work" (Carino 2014, 2), but despite this encouragement, ongoing sensitivities surrounding religion's role in the public sphere and the absence of any legislative framework guiding the development of the sector prevented much of a response. These complexities were heightened because the charitable sphere was also deemed potentially problematic. This was because despite a long tradition of charity and philanthropy in China (Handlin Smith 2009), it was only in the mid-1990s that the Chinese Communist Party stopped seeing charity

as a vestige of feudal society and a critique on the state's ability to fulfil its social contract.[1] In 2004, under the umbrella of "Big Society, Small Government" the National Congress of the Communist Party of China encouraged citizen-led organizations to play a role in the "harmonious development of a socialist civilization." The newly promulgated Regulations on Religious Affairs from that year took up the call and broadened the definition of what constituted "normal" religious activities to include the provision of social services but offered little in the way of guidance as to how this could be undertaken (Tong 2006, 30). Four years later, in the face of growing social needs and the prospect of mounting social unrest, the Party's politburo again urged religious communities to look outward and "materialize . . . values through voluntary donations of time and money" (Weller et al. 2017, 3) by making an active contribution to China's economic and social development. It was not until 2012, however, and the publication of the "Opinions" that long-awaited public and legal recognition of religious charities was provided, indicating a new direction in CCP policy and presenting religious organizations with the same opportunities to engage in charitable work as their secular counterparts (Qiu 2014, v, in Wang 2017, 193).

"Becoming" a RICO

The Buddhist "Home" and the Catholic "Center" first came into being at a time when successful RICOs had to negotiate and appropriate space in the absence of any clear legislative framework. These two RICOs were selected for inclusion in this article for a number of reasons. Firstly, both organizations share a common focus on HIV/AIDS-related issues, providing an interesting basis for comparison.[2] At the time they were established the decision to focus on HIV/AIDS work was considered contentious, and so it also provides interesting insight into the ways in which the material—objects, space, the body, and sensory perception—has been used to establish religious authority to both undertake and sustain an otherwise controversial project. Secondly, as pioneering organizations, both establishments have subsequently served as models for others to emulate within the wider sector of religious charity. Although neither case study is representative of the entire RICO sector in China, as Buddhist and Christian organizations they nevertheless do reflect the dominant players in the sector. Thirdly, both organizations have been successful at gaining support from their religious communities in addition to securing support from a range of state and secular agencies. They have also successfully obtained funding from both international and national sources. This has ultimately led to them becoming mediators between networks of "industrialized philanthropy" (Weller et al. 2017, 2) including state, secular, and transnational partner organizations, again contributing to their model status.

Selecting a focus: The decision to work on HIV/AIDS

The ability for RICOs to become engaged in HIV/AIDS work was in part due to serendipity. Although the first cases of HIV in China were discovered in 1989, it

was not until 2001 that the government publicly acknowledged that HIV/AIDS had reached epidemic levels (Gill and Okie 2007, 1801). Following global condemnation after their mishandling of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) crisis in 2003, finding ways to effectively tackle the HIV/AIDS crisis had become a Chinese national priority, to be undertaken through a coordinated government response (ibid.). Estimates of the HIV prevalence rate in China at the time were notoriously imprecise, ranging from 430,000 to 1.5 million (Wang et al. 2010). Although reticent to allow unfettered access to non-governmental and civil society groups, the state nevertheless acknowledged that an effective response to the dangers posed by HIV/AIDS necessitated any response to include some form of civic participation. Humanitarian agencies outside of China and intergovernmental agencies such as the UN and WHO recognized the contribution that religious communities were making in the fight against AIDS globally and promoted their inclusion in Chinese efforts. FBOs were given unprecedented space and airtime at the 15th International AIDS Conference in Bangkok in 2004 (Dillon 2004). Representatives from the Catholic community in Liaoning and the Buddhist community in Yunnan were present at the conference, alongside government representatives including staff from the Center for Disease Control.[3]

In part due to their attendance at this conference but also due to the exposure key staff had already gained overseas, there was a considerable motivation among young religious personnel to engage in HIV/AIDS work. Overseas experience had opened their eyes to the potential dangers of HIV, the importance of an integrated response to the crisis, and the potential that religious communities could offer in the fight against HIV/AIDS. These overseas projects also framed work in the HIV/AIDS domain as being a form of religious work in its own right—touching on ethical issues, values, and moral discourses.

For religious clerics at the Center coming from a highly restrictive religious context where "normal" religious activities had ordinarily been defined as being work confined within government-sanctioned religious organizations or aimed at serving the local religious community rather than wider society, a broader interpretation of "religious work," which covered HIV/AIDS work, had a profound effect on their own sense of agency. Many of those involved in the initial set up of the RICOs had personal motivations for doing so. Working on HIV-related issues spoke to Catholic clerics' sense of personal vocation and said something about the face of Chinese Catholicism that they wished to portray to wider society. Working alongside those living with HIV/AIDS provided an opportunity to put into practice the Church's proclamation of a "preferential option for the poor." Many of the photos and images on display in the office and in training material used by the Center reflected this vision. A focus on HIV-related work provided an opportunity for priests and nuns to translate their own personal theoretical knowledge into practice by applying their learning to complex community settings and to real human lives and emotions. Moreover, it provided the wider Catholic community with an opportunity to take religion from the private sphere (their own homes or the confines of the church building) into the public sphere.

On the Buddhist side, an interview with one monk who was instrumental in the founding of the Home highlighted similar issues surrounding his decision to support the start of an HIV project. Having many years earlier been shocked to see "special" funerals taking place in temples in Thailand for those who had died from AIDS, and later seeing his own family impacted by an AIDS-related death, he strongly believed that Buddhism had the potential to contribute to both the prevention of the disease and the care of those living with HIV. Despite considerable stigma surrounding the epidemic, his experience and teaching led him to believe that as spiritual leaders in the community, monks had a duty to draw on Buddhist teachings to support those affected by HIV/AIDS.

Changes in government strategy provided an "opportunity space" not only to engage in a cause that they were personally passionate about but also to have the opportunity to expand the narrow definition of religious work that religious organizations had previously been constrained to. For those who had lived overseas, in cultures where religion had a more visible public role, they saw the potential for religion to be a positive force at work in the public sphere and to ultimately help toward China's development through positive example, dialog, and voluntary action. Such a role complemented state objectives and was also seen as a means of potentially restoring the somewhat-tarnished image of religion in the public's mindset. For the state, the option of working with religious organizations remained controversial, but ultimately the potential benefits that religious organizations could offer were recognized and seized upon. This included resources, such as national access to funds and the mobilization of personnel, but also their access to transnational networks, which could be drawn upon as channels through which capacity-building initiatives could be undertaken and best practice shared. It was the convergence of all these factors that provided both the impetus and the space for these two particular RICOs to emerge. However, despite the prospects offered by devolved governance and the emergence of a nonprofit sector, and the personal motivation of those seeking to undertake the work, they nevertheless were still faced with the arduous task of persuading their own religious communities that engagement in HIV/AIDS work was not only a legitimate form of religious work but was one that was worthy of their involvement.

Countering opposition from within

In the case of both the Home and the Center, the decision to focus on HIV/AIDS work was supported by the local religious leadership and by local government agencies. In both cases, however, it was not initially seen as a popular choice among members of their religious communities. HIV had, up until that point, largely been hidden in society and had predominantly been associated with foreigners or stigmatized lifestyles, such as those involving drug use and commercial sex (UNESCO 2002). HIV-related stigma and discrimination permeated all levels of society. The challenge of persuading their respective religious communities to support their endeavor, not just with words but potentially also through the reallocation of limited human resources and funds, became a priority. Positioning

the work in religious terms through the use of religious symbols, semantics, and space became a key factor in doing this.

As much of the stigmatization around HIV/AIDS was due to a lack of understanding about the disease, misconceptions about how HIV is transmitted, and a lack of knowledge about protecting oneself (Anderson et al. 2003, 179), both organizations initially turned their attention to educating their own religious communities. This was the first step in eradicating any culturally based, moral judgments leading to the belief that people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) somehow "deserved" their illness (Liu et al. 2006, 137) and resulting in a culture of silence surrounding HIV/AIDS. In their conversations with me, leaders from the RICOs shared their frustrations that their views, significantly shaped by their overseas experience, often contrasted sharply with many others from their religious communities.

In the case of both RICOs, drawing on their overseas networks for support was an important strategy to break down these barriers. These networks were initially drawn upon to provide training opportunities for their home communities. In the case of the Home, initial training was delivered by UNICEF staff based on lessons learned from Buddhist communities in Thailand (UNICEF 2009). This training emphasized how other Buddhist communities from Thailand and across the wider Mekong region were drawing on their own spiritual resources as a means of combatting HIV. The disease itself was positioned as having the potential to destroy communities—and Buddhism was positioned as having the ability to reach into those communities through their links and to rebuild them from the ground up, by drawing on core Buddhist values such as compassion and developing skills-based approaches to life based on the Four Noble Truths. Further training, based on a curriculum provided to the Buddhist communities of South East Asia by UNICEF through their Buddhist Leadership Initiative (UNICEF, 2006), was then delivered within the temple setting, in conjunction with the Buddhist Association and the provincial Center for Disease Control (CDC).

In stark contrast to other areas in China, where the policy is to restrict access to religious education for those under the age of eighteen, in Xishuangbanna a unique form of ethnic minority education sees Dai boys from the age of six or seven sent to the temple to study Buddhism for several years. For the Dai community, the practice is an important rite of passage. Although the relationship between temple and state education is contentious and has been since state education was officially established in Yunnan in the 1950s (Jing and Moore 2014, 139), temple education nevertheless continues to be an integral part of the fabric of society. Including HIV awareness and prevention activities in the curriculum for all young boys undertaking temple training ensured that monks and lay teachers could embed Buddhist teachings into HIV/AIDS awareness training. The longer-term nature of the temple-based study meant that time could also be spent discussing growing socio-economic issues and high-risk behaviors (such as alcoholism, drug use, and prostitution) and finding ways in which Buddhist thinking and teaching could be applied to everyday situations to help change these behaviors. Integrating the teaching into the temple education program not only meant that the Home could access and impact significant groups in society but also served to motivate and

equip a network of monks to respond to the crisis through the framework of their Buddhist teachings.

In contrast to the Home, which integrated training into existing structures for building up the local Buddhist community, in the case of the Center there was initially considerable concern, particularly among selected priests and members of the lay community, that HIV-related work would divert precious resources away from what they saw as "core" church work. As HIV/AIDS was not the only focus of the Center, concerns were also raised that suggested that taking a public stance in supporting PLWHA could potentially jeopardize future funding and the success of other projects run by the Center. Some even argued that it could further marginalize the position of the wider Catholic church in society. Despite having the backing of the bishop, an early priority for the Center staff was to find others working within the church who could act as champions for HIV and who could highlight its relevance for the Center. A small group of medically trained religious sisters had already become involved with the local HIV community through their work in a church-run medical clinic. They had begun to serve the community but had been struggling to find support for their work. Aware of their efforts in this area, overseas funding was secured for use in the diocese and an invitation was sent for those working on HIV/AIDS issues to make an exposure visit to Catholic church projects in east Africa. Through the funds a small staff group made up of religious sisters and priests were able to accept the invitation. The act of securing funding not only made the visit possible but also highlighted the importance of an integrated approach to HIV work, which included participation from both the nuns and the priests. It also stressed the importance given to HIV in the wider church family. This funding not only raised the profile of HIV-related work within the diocese but also raised the profile of the sisters within the church and the wider community. Having struggled for a long time to gain support, the funding and subsequent visit were interpreted by the sisters and by others in the wider church community as being confirmation of God's blessing on the HIV/AIDS work.

Those who had been present on that first overseas trip described it as providing "hands-on" work experience with children and parents, as part of a holistic program that addressed HIV/AIDS prevention and care, economic empowerment, nutrition, and education, with the aim of destigmatizing the disease. Practical experience and lessons learned from the trip were shared with other clerics within the wider diocesan community through events such as retreats and training sessions provided to seminarians, the idea being that once they had been persuaded of the merits of the work they would then take the message with them into the local parish. In one interview one of the religious sisters told me that prior to the visit she had always seen the church in China as being a small community with little strength or ability to bring about change in society. The work of the sisters had often been overlooked and was at risk of stopping for lack of funds. She had been profoundly moved by seeing firsthand how devastating the effects of HIV were in Africa, especially in terms of reinforcing cycles of poverty within the community. The experience of seeing the impact that her fellow African religious sisters were having in bringing comfort and relief to the sick and hope to the wider community

was particularly noteworthy. Two nuns recounted how all of the religious sisters had left Africa empty handed, having decided to leave their suitcases and contents for those that they felt were more in need. Their visit had provided them with a vision for the HIV work and its relevance and importance to other social service and poverty relief work. This in turn had rekindled their own sense of community and the place and role of their faith within it. The visit had imparted a renewed sense of purpose and commitment, which was then re-asserted through the debriefings and training sessions delivered by team members to the wider church community once they had returned home.

These sessions began to galvanize support and were supplemented by further specialized training provided from expert trainers from within the wider Catholic Caritas Internationalis network, including Catholic Relief Service (CRS, USA) and Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD, UK). Much of this training focused on developing specific skill-sets such as undertaking a nutritional review for a family or developing counseling skills. The programs positioned HIV as a threat to poverty-alleviation efforts (another strategic focus for both the local government and for the diocese) and to the development of human dignity. In addition to religious support the Center also benefitted from training and support from secular groups like the Hong Kong AIDS Foundation (HKAF), who worked with the local CDC providing train-the-trainer workshops to strengthen community health programs, including developing counselling initiatives to support antiretroviral (ARV) therapy.

Negotiating space

Once the demand for and importance of the work had been established, it then became important to establish a means of accessing the community in a sustainable manner through the establishment of a longer-term program or organization. To attract staff, volunteers, and funding to make the work sustainable, both RICOs needed a distinct sense of identity. Asserting a religious identity requires organizations "to be recognized as such, and to represent oneself as such" (Moulin 2013, 1), but in the Chinese context this is a more complex process than it may first appear, as RICOs often struggle with a sense of dual or fragmented identity. In terms of registration, organizations deemed to be religious are ordinarily registered by the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), but as RICOs engage in social service work as opposed to undertaking "religious activities" as narrowly defined within current policy regulations, they straddle the sacred/secular divide, and as such find that they face a range of dilemmas.

As mentioned earlier, at the time of my fieldwork there was no clear legislative framework regulating the RICO sector. The Regulations on Religious Affairs (2004), in place when I undertook my fieldwork (but not when the organizations first worked toward registration), sought to address this and encouraged a broadening of "normal" religious activities to encompass social welfare work, but the regulations were ambiguous as to how this should be achieved. As such, RICOs found themselves breaking new ground, occupying spaces that were both religious

and non-religious in an unregulated environment. While the absence of legislation could be interpreted as an opportunity (as it was by both communities pioneering the work), it could equally be a precarious position entailing constant renegotiation of their identity. At the time of my fieldwork, few RICOs had been able to register independently with the Religious Affairs Bureau, forcing them to choose other means of registration. The options available to them were to operate unregistered (and therefore illegally), to operate legally by positioning themselves as an NGO and registering with the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MOCA), or to register by "hanging under" a pre-existing religious institution's registration and falling under the jurisdiction of the RAB.

Registering as an NGO had a variety of possibilities including registering as a social organization under the 1998 Regulations on Social Organization Registration; registering as a foundation under the 2004 Regulations on the Management of Foundations; registering as a civil non-enterprise unit under the 1998 Regulations for the Registration and Management of Civil Non-Enterprise Units; or as a medical institution under 1994 Regulations on the Management of Medical Institutions. Though each of these was theoretically possible, any of these options required the approval of MOCA and a separate sponsoring unit. Given their religious background neither organization was able to find a unit willing to undertake their sponsorship. Registering as a business (the preferred option by some NGOs facing sponsorship difficulties) was not an option for either of these projects and so both the Home and the Center took the decision to "hang under" the registration of a pre-existing religious organization. Although this provided legal approval and therefore legitimacy, it also restricted any sense of autonomy as both RICOs were inextricably linked to a "mother" organization.

This constant renegotiation between the religious and secular is evident when looking at how the RICOs developed and nurtured their own sense of self as religious entities. The Center negotiated this from a position in which Catholics were a minority within the province, and where Catholicism is often still perceived as being a foreign religion. It is popular practice for organizations to identify what it is about their organization that is unique, and the naming of an organization is an important part of this process. In 2004, when the Center was launched, the name it assumed was Liaoning Province's Catholic Social Service Center. Making reference to "Liaoning Province" rather than "Liaoning Diocese," the name suggested a close working with secular authorities, while the "Catholic Social Service Center" made clear its religious affiliation. What was not so clear was who it proposed to serve—the Catholic community or the wider community at large? A few years later, after other dioceses had begun to open similar operations, the Center decided to rename itself Shengjing ren'ai in Chinese and Shengjing Caritas in English. During the Manchu period, Shengjing was the name given to Shenyang, the capital city of Liaoning where the center is located. Literally translated as "rising capital," this historical name harked back to Shenyang's political status in bygone years. The term *ren'ai*, meaning benevolence or charity, is frequently associated with Confucianism. As such, the name drew on elements seen as integral to Chinese and Catholic cultures but was not overtly Catholic to those

coming from outside the community of faith. In the English version, however, the term *caritas* was used, the Latin term for love and charity commonly used within Catholic social teaching. This change of name made the religious basis of the organization less explicit to non-Catholics in China while still retaining religious links to the Catholic Church outside through the positioning of the organization as being aligned to the family of Caritas Internationalis, the vast, Catholic international confederation of relief, development, and social service organizations. This reflected the wider development of numerous Catholic social service organizations within China, each of which vied to be the official representative of the Caritas network in the PRC. Interestingly, as part of the ongoing negotiation of its religious identity, when deciding on the Chinese name the Center chose not to adopt the usual term *ming ai* for *caritas* or love used within Chinese Catholic circles. Using the term *ren ai*, which is more commonly associated with Confucianism, arguably sought to distance the Center from any political sensitivity that aligning itself to an international Roman Catholic network would potentially bring, at a time when Sino-Vatican relations, though improved, were still yet to be normalized.

In the case of the Home, it was initially set up in 2003 as a collaborative UNICEF-funded project under the functional name Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture Buddhist Association "Hope and Help" AIDS Prevention and Care Cooperation Project. The project brought together a range of stakeholders including UNICEF; a variety of Chinese state agencies involved in HIV/AIDS prevention and care, including the national-level AIDS Prevention and Control authorities; and the prefecture-level Buddhist Association. As the name suggests, the project was initially launched as a model for care and support and focused on the Buddhist contribution, perhaps as a reflection of the strong influence Theravada Buddhism exerted over daily life. The importance of Buddhism to the project was emphasized in the original project objectives, which are listed on the Home's website:

1. Reduce community discrimination against HIV-infected persons and their families, relatives, and friends
2. Improve the community's HIV infection and provide ongoing care and support
3. Reduce the community's susceptibility to AIDS
4. Mobilize and develop Buddhist forces engaged in AIDS prevention and welfare undertakings
5. Effectively mobilize Buddhist monks to participate in AIDS prevention and control publicity and carry out HIV/AIDS patients with AIDS care and help work. (Foguang Zhijia 2017)

In November 2006, when the original project funding from UNICEF ceased, the project morphed into a RICO, a change that was signified through a change in name to "Home of Buddhist Light." This much less utilitarian name nevertheless symbolizes a communal, familial setting of the Home, which is based on Buddhist light symbolizing both the enlightenment of the Buddha and the constant state of impermanence and change in life.

The physical relocation of both RICOs was also important in the creation of their identities. When I first visited the Center, it was located in an anonymous

office in a commercial building owned and leased out by the diocese but not showing any outward visible links to it. Once it became more established, the Center's offices were moved into a set of newly refurbished rooms within the cathedral compound. Relocating the offices from an office block close to the cathedral to a suite of offices within the cathedral compound was not only important in terms of signifying a change in mindset within the Catholic community, bringing the Center into the heart of the church, but it was also important in terms of establishing a religious identity for the Center within the wider community. Being in the cathedral compound, visitors to the Center needed to pass through a large gate, across the threshold so to speak, of its Catholic home. The new offices were set in a side office to the right of the cathedral as you face it, behind the cathedral shop and to the rear of the medical clinic. The offices were independent of the main cathedral building and were away from the main thoroughfare. Accessible through a small gate, they were not generally accessible to the public, and as such they offered a sense of privacy important to those who wished for their status, or that of their family members, to remain confidential. The offices comprised a suite of rooms, providing space to potentially expand the team and to run a variety of activities. The discrete nature of the location made it suitable for holding confidential meetings, such as self-help groups, which could meet in safety in the knowledge that they could not be seen or overheard by others. Although slightly shabby on the outside, the offices themselves were professionally fitted out and nicely furnished. The sturdy metal doors imparted a sense of safety and security. The head of the organization had his own office, as did the accountant, for confidentiality purposes, while the remainder of the staff and volunteers were together in an open-plan office, with individual desks set in little booths. There was a large board room and additional meetings rooms that could be used for training or support groups. Coming into the main office, visitors were faced with the organization's logo, made up of an open book representing the bible, hands open in a gesture of giving and receiving, a heart made from two pieces of ribbon, and a simple unadorned cross. Above the logo was a crucifix and below it the words: "Practicing charity, witnessing the faith, serving society, instilling hopes." The walls of the office were adorned with several Christian texts and images, including some of the sisters' paintings and pieces of handwritten Chinese calligraphy. There were also photos taken from project sites and training programs with both state officials and overseas visitors, in addition to posters used in publicity.

Although the offices offered discretion for the clients, being housed within the cathedral complex nevertheless meant that the sounds, sights, and smells of daily church life and its rituals permeated the air. This contributed to the religious identity of the office, not just for staff but also for visitors. The sounds of church bells and services, with singing of hymns and chanting of prayers, mingled with the sounds of the market outside the cathedral gate. The smoke from incense burned during services, and candles burned alongside prayers said during the day also wafted across the courtyard and lingered in the air. As an outsider to both the community and the project, I was conscious of the faint, yet instantly recognizable, scent of incense that could sometimes be smelt in the offices, even more noticeable

when the office doors were opened. Such smells are often understood within Catholic circles as being a link between this world and the next, carrying prayers and messages from petitioners on earth to God. It seemed to me as though the sounds and smells imbued the office space and the work that took place within it with an "odor of sanctity," marking the office space as special and inviting staff, clients, and occasional visitors to the Center to partake in a shared sense of community.

In contrast to the Center, which existed as a minority faith within the local community, the Home negotiated its identity from a position where Buddhism, as the predominant religion, has a strong influence on daily life. In a similar way to the Center, the Home was initially physically located within the compound of the central temple, emphasizing the integral nature of the Home to the religious community. In a very similar manner, visitors to the Home needed to pass through various courtyards before reaching the office. The first time I walked to the office I felt like the physical journey from the temple entrance—which was also marked by a large stone gate—was somewhat like a pilgrimage as you wended your way from one set of buildings, courtyards, and open spaces to the next. Aware of the interest I was generating as I walked through the temple groups, I became conscious that this route offered less privacy than the location offered by the Center. Housed in a collection of rooms next to the offices of the Patriotic Association and close to the living space of the monks, the space was more connected to other administration offices within the temple—perhaps emphasizing a desire to place charitable work, and more particularly, HIV/AIDS work, at the core of Buddhist work in the local society, but it also offered less privacy. In a manner that mirrored projects undertaken within the Center, the location of the offices within the religious compound provided a place where the senses could be activated. More recently, the office has been relocated and is now housed in the Mengle Great Buddha Temple complex. The temple was rebuilt in 2007 and is now the largest Theravada temple in China, but within the Buddhist community I learnt that the new temple was tinged with controversy.

Like many temples in areas promoted as ethnic-tourism destinations, a significant proportion of the funds provided for the construction of the Mengle Temple came from a commercial enterprise, which entered into a ten-year contract to manage the temple as a tourist spot. As the religious communities often struggle to meet the financial demands for the upkeep of the temples, such contracts are initially welcomed as a means of survival. But as the details of these contracts are implemented the reality of the implications on the day-to-day life of the temple can be hard to bear, and the struggle between the religious and the secular takes on a new dimension. During one of my visits heated disputes were taking place, with religiously trained monks demonstrating against "fake monks" employed by the commercial enterprise. Their dispute centered on the claim that these "fake monks" were taking on the persona of a monk by using holy symbols such as wearing robes and carrying an alms bowl, not as a reminder of renunciation but instead as a means of financial gain. Those angry at their presence claimed that these "fake monks" demanded alms from unsuspecting tourists and cursed them when they were not forthcoming. They also brought disrepute to the religious community

through drinking and exhibiting other worldly behaviors not generally permissible for monks.

This dispute became directly relevant to the RICO and to the issue of religious authority when the offices were relocated to the new temple site. Despite the controversies surrounding the management of the temple, the move was (perhaps surprisingly) seen in positive terms by the leadership of the Home. This was mainly because they believed that it provided them with an opportunity to "reclaim" the temple for what they saw to be religious purposes. In practical terms, it also provided legitimate opportunities to secure funding for their own work. In contrast to traditional ways of seeking alms, and perhaps as a reflection of the experience with the "fake monks," this was done through marked charity boxes located within the temple grounds. A move to the new temple also enabled the Home to raise the profile of their work among a wider constituency, providing volunteering options for Dai community members to become engaged in wider community issues.

As Buddhism has such a strong presence in the local community, the Home has been content to retain its registration "hanging under" another religious organization. Sponsorship by the Buddhist Association and registration with the RAB furnishes the Home with a certain status, which underpins the religious nature of its work. Charity boxes provide a revenue stream and lay staff working for the charity are now employed (and paid) directly by the prefectural Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau. Working closely with the state is considered to be an opportunity to maintain open communication channels with the authorities and more specifically provides an opportunity to counteract any negative association with the development of tourism in the local community.

Due to the Catholic legacy of being perceived as a foreign religion, and the context in Liaoning where religious believers are in the minority, the Center found that being registered with the RAB impacts in practical terms on its ability to partner with outside secular organizations. The reticence of some organizations to formally engage with an organization registered as religious (albeit not one undertaking "religious work" as narrowly defined) highlights a range of issues. These include the impact that an ambiguous legislative framework has on the development of the field and the impact of ongoing sensitivities around the role of religion in the public sphere. As opportunities for new projects presented themselves, the Center sought to mitigate this by registering directly with the Civil Affairs Bureau, but to do this they needed to find a sponsor. Despite approaching a number of organizations with the capacity to undertake the role, the religious nature of the organization made it difficult for the Center to find such a sponsoring agent.

Registration status not only has an impact on who one can work with but also has a direct impact on funding and the long-term sustainability of the projects. Elsewhere in the world, RICOs are "often viewed by society as possessing a greater degree of trustworthiness and moral influence than their secular counterparts, and thus tend to gain the trust and support of donors more readily" (Liu 2011, 237). Having the status of a RICO would thus often be enough to secure a sustainable funding base. However, in the Chinese context, at the time of the fieldwork, and until only recently, public fundraising could only be conducted by those groups

registered as public foundations by MOCA. As neither group had this level of registration, fundraising outside of the religious complex, and in the public sphere, was not permitted.

The Center was initially funded directly from diocesan funds, with existing staff seconded to the Center and office space provided in a building owned by the local diocese. As the scope and remit of the work expanded, the Diocese received funds for the Center through religious networks from international Catholic partner organizations. Support extended beyond financial donations and extended to capacity development opportunities. These opportunities were extended to partner and state agencies including the Public Security Bureau and Center for Disease Control. Contacts were generated through these networks and were to prove pivotal in showcasing the potential benefits that religious communities could bring to HIV and other work in the community.

Gaining wider acceptance: Appropriating space for religious activities in the public sphere

Both RICOs needed to carve out a space beyond their office walls in which they could operate, but "doing religion" in the public sphere remains, as we have already seen, a contentious issue in China. For RICOs, access to the media is limited and close collaboration with secular partners, including government agencies, can result in programs being subsumed under their name, losing their affiliation to the RICO and with it any religious connection. As part of their goal in gaining wider awareness of and acceptance for their work, both RICOs have focused their efforts on capacity-building initiatives and community outreach programs.

Capacity-building initiatives

As part of my fieldwork, I was able to look through a range of material used for training and in a few cases observe training as it took place. Materials used by both RICOs were collated from a range of sources, and, as mentioned earlier, the majority came from capacity-building training programs by UNICEF and Buddhist networks within the "Mekong Project" (in the case of the Home) and WHO, Hong Kong AIDS Foundation, CAFOD, and CRS (in the case of the Center), supplemented by additional material coming from other religious and secular partner organizations. Because of strict publishing regulations much of the material used in both organizations' training interventions was provided by partner organizations, with the inclusion of local examples to make them relevant to the local context. Both RICOs focused their training on providing an epidemiology of the disease in China and the local area, including transmission routes and examples of cases within the province, alongside space for reflecting on the role religious wisdom could have as part of the national and local response to HIV/AIDS; but they also set the scientific knowledge within a religious framework, drawing on Buddhist and Catholic teaching respectively.

During training programs, it was common for PowerPoint presentations to be used. Many of these included photos providing a face (albeit pixilated) to the dis-

ease, showing the presence of HIV in the local community and emphasizing the point that this could no longer be seen as simply a foreign disease, as had been previously thought. These photos provided much more than a pictorial representation of the community, however. Taken by volunteers and selected by staff, the way the subjects were framed and the choice of who or what was photographed and then re-presented through training materials revealed something about how the issue of HIV was impacting on individuals and society but also how RICOs could be positioned to make a unique contribution in response to the crisis. I was struck by the way in which many of the photographs prevalent in the media at the time emphasized the negative impact of stigmatized lifestyles or portrayed victims in a disempowered manner. Images used in government publications often emphasized a "medicalized" approach. By contrast, the photos used by the Center and the Home in a teaching context sought to present an intimate, almost familial view of people, which focused on both prevention and care of those in need. Images not only reflected daily practices including meals, trips to the market, and graduation from school or college as representations of "ways of living" and aspirational images of what community could be—a supportive, nurturing community able to cope with the disease—but also reflected a growing relationship between the photographer and their subject. Sometimes the pictures included religious staff identifiable by their robes or religious habits and attire and reflected in pictorial form the close relationship built up by staff and volunteers with their clients, as well as the strong sense of mutual trust and acceptance between them. The stories these pictures told were of close links, of strong relationships. The underlying message was that there was no need to find a space where RICOs could operate—they were already present.

In addition to using images, personal relationships were also drawn on for a similar purpose. A few of the PLWHA working closely with the sisters at the Center volunteered to come to the training programs to talk about their experiences. With their permission, and that of the CDC staff also present, I was invited to join in a few of these sessions. The physical presence of PLWHA at these events was a turning point for many within the religious community in breaking down issues of stigma and in terms of earning greater acceptance for the Center's focus on HIV.

The volunteers shared intimate details of their status with the group and revealed stories of how prejudice in the community had already negatively impacted their lives. This vulnerability spoke to the hearts and minds of the participants and brought to life the technical details of the disease shared in previous sessions. Their personal stories fiercely challenged previously held views within society (some still held by participants on the training) that had somehow sought to justify and legitimize certain forms of social exclusion among affected communities. Arguably, it was the physical presence of these volunteers that challenged the participants most, defying the TV-produced image of someone living with HIV as being so skeletal as to be hardly human and contradicting the early (erroneous) public health messages that suggested a seropositive diagnosis was a certain, fast, and painful death sentence. These events not only brought the reality of a positive HIV diagnosis to life but also provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on their own reli-

gious beliefs. In a sense the volunteers became living spiritual autobiographies. In a format reminiscent of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, these individuals recounted their own stories within the group setting. Their deeply personal testimonies often traced an account of their life from a time of darkness to a point of light and "grace." In this way, personal life experiences were shared, religious values held by participants challenged, and real-life ethical dilemmas tackled in an open manner. Although some of the personal testimonies wove in details of how religious teachings had impacted on their lives, it is important to note, however, that not all these stories were shared by people who would consider themselves to be religious or practicing Catholics. Participants also responded by reflecting on the challenges these experiences posed to their own thinking, their own spiritual journeys, and their own religious beliefs. As such, these autobiographies not only served as a means of breaking down stigma but also served as a gateway into greater spiritual reflection, not just for the volunteer but also for the participants (both secular and religious) attending the training.

When it was not practical to involve PLWHA on programs, a range of visuals taken from real cases were also used to address some of the underlying issues surrounding HIV/AIDS, such as poverty and stigma. These were later linked into scriptural teaching that showed the relevance of the work to the wider community. In the Center, some of the artistically gifted sisters produced paintings, drawings, and pieces of calligraphy, each of which was inspired by stories of the work that their fellow sisters were becoming engaged in, linking the works directly back to scripture. These pieces of artwork were not just important as representations of what the disease was doing within the local community, and how it could be responded to, but were also important as a means of self-expression within the convent and wider church community. These pieces of artwork became points of discussion revitalizing faith through self-expression and a means of interpreting scriptures to reflect the changing demands of modern society.

Similar types of visuals were used at the Home. Both projects used pictures in their publicity that reflected stark images of challenging, impoverished contexts common in wider NGO publicity, raising awareness and empathy within the wider community. However, they also used more mundane photos, showing people at work in a market or in an office surrounded by others. Other images were more fun, showing children playing and people laughing and hugging their families and friends. These were portrayals that sought to lift the lid off preconceived notions of who was at risk of the disease and how they should be treated by society. The images said that the disease was indiscriminate, affecting young and old, rich and poor alike, a disease that could no longer be seen as a foreign ailment, but which was also present locally. The photos also sought to provide an alternative vision to some of the challenges faced by many PLWHA by their host community, such as isolation and loneliness. It was possible, as evidenced in these photos, to be HIV+ and be a professional holding down a job. It was possible to be HIV+ and a child, and that child should go to school, play with friends, and be surrounded by family. These pictures reflected lives touched by the disease but not devastated, precisely because of the compassion shown to them by their local religious community.

These photos were one of the ways in which the projects recognized that the fear of rejection by family and community were often critical issues facing disclosure of a seropositive status.

Community outreach programs

Acknowledging that the ongoing viability of the RICOs depended on their acceptance within wider society, both leaders of the Center and the Home encouraged the use of community-based events as an important part of their working strategy to embed their work within wider community structures. Recognizing that the local communities within which they operated could be either hostile to or supportive of their work, both the Center and the Home tapped into local festivals and feast days as a means of drawing in the local community.

Participation in festivals and commemorative events are examples of when RICOs can become "vehicles for activism" (Yavuz 2003, ix) in unexpected ways. At festivals in Xishuangbanna and in training programs run by the Center, the partaking of shared meals was an important feature of community-building efforts, with food prepared in the community and shared together. In Xishuangbanna home-style food was cooked in large open woks, with smells permeating the air from early in the day. Shared meals were also an important component of the Home and the Center's activities as a means of building a sense of community among staff and volunteers drawn from society. In the Home, these meals were vegetarian and taken in silence in a contemplative manner, reflecting the style of meals taken within the temple. Monks and volunteers from both the Center and the Home also went to take meals in the homes of those PLWHA. A focus on food and shared meals has practical implications, ensuring that PLWHA are receiving enough nutrition, but they are also seen as a means of breaking down the stigma surrounding families ostracized by a positive diagnosis. Instigating communal meals and linking teaching and awareness meetings into village festivals and novitiate training created practical opportunities for the community to gather. These events were intended to be informative and fun and involved the whole of the community, including those affected by a positive diagnosis. As such they not only reflected the critical role that nutrition played in the comprehensive care, support, and treatment of HIV-infected people but also offered practical opportunities to educate people about the transmission of the disease, showing that people could live safely side by side because the virus was not transmitted through day-to-day activities. In other words, these occasions were a time where participants could participate in a variety of ways, and where all, young and old, could delight in celebrating their senses. Such commonplace activities became important in showing that senses can be used in a real or an imagined way, creating memories through shared tastes and smells and in cementing a sense of shared identity. They also became important moments where individual identities and networks of support were once again constructed, formed, and refocused.

During my fieldwork I was fortunate not only to share in some of these meals but also to take part in a variety of events that were used as "communicative spaces" by the RICOs, where important messages about HIV and the projects were

conveyed to their own religious communities and to the wider public through the medium of art and performance.

In Xishuangbanna, the Home drew on traditional folk music in its fight against the disease. Volunteers were preparing for a number of performances timed to coincide with the Water-Splashing Festival, which was due to take place the following month, and I was able to listen to a few informal "rehearsals." Tapping into the oral traditions of the region meant that information about how to deal with HIV/AIDS could be conveyed to both educated and illiterate members of the community alike. The songs used the local Dai language not only to facilitate reception of the message in the local community but also as a means of building up that community.

One of the volunteers explained that Buddhist values were incorporated into the lyrics and music that was performed during cultural events, local festivals, and other community gatherings, with community members encouraged to take part in karaoke-style competitions. In less formal gatherings, such as the rehearsals I attended, people were encouraged to take the songs and develop themes or lyrics further. This not only encouraged engagement with the development process but also helped to satisfy a growing desire among young people for self-expression. In addition to live performances some songs were recorded by a popular folk artist and over 5,000 copies of the CD were distributed free of charge in the community, and the songs were also streamed online through the Home's website.

Commemorative events such as World Aids Day (December 1) were also used to raise awareness. Large art installations such as the Red Ribbon Project were instigated by the Center. These centered on the production of large, inverted-V-shaped red "ribbons," which were around two meters in height and were made up of hundreds of smaller badge-sized ribbons, crafted by passersby who then pinned their ribbon onto the installation. These were acts of representation, replicating the well-known HIV/AIDS red ribbon and showing that the local conversation on HIV-related issues was linked in with a much wider global discourse. They were also an invitation for passersby to raise their own awareness of HIV/AIDS and treatment and to engage in the project by physically making and then placing a small ribbon onto the large installation. The work emphasized togetherness and centered on the widespread nature of the disease and the duty, as the Center saw it, of all citizens, young and old, to join in the struggle to combat the disease.

The installation was simple and recognizable, and its placement within the church compound and on a busy pedestrian shopping street sought to bring the issue out into the open, to raise awareness among the Catholic community and the general public and create an opening for dialog. As a work-in-progress, the piece recognized the unfinished nature of the task before society and was an invitation to break the silence on the disease and to generate commitment and compassion in the fight against HIV/AIDS. This model was not one devised by the Center but rather was an idea adapted from overseas and used more widely in Chinese society. Coordinated and staffed by volunteers and religious sisters, such events sought to provide an opportunity for the involvement of religious workers, both lay and ordained, to become more visible in the public sphere and in the delivery

of charitable and social service work. To distinguish themselves from their secular counterparts the sisters wore traditional veils, religious habits, and crucifixes. The Center's logo was also visible on badges worn by volunteers and on publication materials that detailed their work.

The Home used similar events to raise public awareness. Artwork based on posters and ideas circulated in the UNICEF training but produced locally to incorporate local images, such as local temples, drew on common Buddhist images to convey important public health messages and to break down the stigma that surrounded the disease. In one of the most popular posters produced by the Home—described to me by a volunteer as being a "picture of community togetherness"—a group of young people, male and female, are sitting in front of a statue of the Buddha. One of the young people in the picture is sitting with their back to the viewer (making it unclear if they are male or female), wearing a white t-shirt with a red ribbon depicted on the back, representing those affected by a positive diagnosis (be they the PLWHA themselves or one of their relatives). The open palm of the right hand of the Buddha is extending outward, directly toward the chest of the young person in the t-shirt. Sitting as part of the wider group you can see the faces of the others, smiling and accepting. The picture clearly depicts a community of people embracing not just the individual but also the presence of HIV/AIDS in their midst, drawn together by Buddhism. The image very clearly conveys a sense of peace but also the energy of protection and deep inner security provided by a compassionate Buddha and a compassionate people.

In another, very simple image, the Buddha's hand is painted in the center of the page, a common depiction of the rarefied power of Buddha emanating though the hand in a gesture of compassion, liberation, and acceptance. The focus is again one of compassion toward the HIV community, represented by a single red ribbon in the center of the palm. In another poster, a hand-drawn picture of a bodhi leaf is depicted with a red ribbon threaded through the center of it. Again, the image seeks to connect those afflicted with HIV to a feeling of deep peace and serenity using the image of the bodhi leaf as a well-recognized symbol of liberation and enlightenment.

Although the examples cited above were seen by my interlocuters as being rooted in the local, they were either localized copies of foreign material (such as the posters and pictures just described) or echo other well-known practices happening elsewhere in the world. As such they are clear examples of what Patsy Healey calls the "transnational flow of ideas and practices" (2013). The power of music in both entertaining and educating communities, for example, is a practice that has been used extensively in Africa and elsewhere (Quan-Baffour 2008). The effectiveness of using such practices in bringing about social change has been well recorded and shows how transnational links can help support successful HIV/AIDS interventions in China. Analyzing the ways in which these practices have been operationalized by the RICOs also reveals a lot about the ways in which ideas and practices can be used by RICOs to negotiate space and accumulate power (Healey 2013, 1516).

RICOs as "opportunity spaces"

As religiously inspired charitable organizations working on HIV-related issues and concerns, both the Center and the Home have become what Yavuz would refer to as "opportunity spaces," that is "social sites and vehicles for activism and the dissemination of meaning, identity, and cultural codes within wider society" (Yavuz 2003, ix).

In many ways these "opportunity spaces" have emerged due to the ambiguity surrounding RICOs, vis-à-vis the lack of a clear regulatory framework, their unclear status derived from straddling the secular/sacred divide, their ability to feel at home in both a local and transnational context, and in the case of these two RICOs, their decision to work in the sensitive field of HIV/AIDS. These layers of ambiguity undoubtedly build competences in those operating in such a context but also serve as openings that other, more clearly defined organizations may struggle to access.

Emerging from a place of little trust, "opportunity spaces" emerge as a result of the constraint imposed on RICOs by their socio-political context and bring together a range of actors—experts and non-experts, religious and secular—from diverse backgrounds and sometimes voicing diverse concerns. These spaces go on to serve as a space for the translation of transnational discourses into the local context, through the sharing of technical expertise and best practice. Community knowledge is heavily emphasized and RICOs have not only populated these "opportunity spaces" with experts (both religious and secular) but have also drawn on their own grassroots networks to access vulnerable, hard-to-reach sectors of society. Their active participation in the space has not only built trust between groups but has also provided new actors with a sense of agency.

Although these spaces have at times undoubtedly reinforced traditional power structures, within both religious and political circles, they also have an emancipatory potential. Increasing space has been given over to lay contributions and for religious women, impacting on their own sense of agency. Space for self-reflection; the sharing of experiences or testimonies; and a time for communal prayer, meditation, and shared meals helps build a sense of community and reveals the imbedded nature of religious values within the wider community. It also serves as a model for those wishing to develop a culture of charity and altruism within wider society.

RICOs' ability to draw on a pool of religious personnel with medical training within these spaces has helped to build bridges with the medical and policy community. As trust has built, more opportunities have emerged, including requests for trained psychologists within religious communities to help support CDC-run voluntary counselling programs for those on anti-retroviral treatment plans. As professional expertise has been shared the "opportunity spaces" have provided a place for wide-ranging discussions on a more integrated approach to HIV care to take place, including community-based care plans and palliative care initiatives that incorporate a holistic approach to the issue. Medically trained religious staff have been instrumental in the integration of religious teaching into information dissemination strategies within the religious community, where their professional medical expertise has enabled them to validate technical knowledge about the disease. For

those skeptical of received wisdom, religious authority is tapped into in order to situate the medical discourse in a more relatable context. Their expertise has also served as a means of bringing religious values to the attention of a wider audience.

"Opportunity spaces" are therefore helping to create a sense of self-sufficiency within a community setting, both in terms of encouraging religious volunteers and donors and in ensuring that PLWHA develop a renewed sense of their own worth and a belief in their own ability to make a full and active contribution to society. The spaces have also contributed to community awareness, by helping communities to respond more humanely to the HIV crisis and by developing communal resilience through skills to find solutions to their own problems.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore the recent re-emergence of religiously inspired charitable organizations within Chinese society. Specifically, the article sought to explore the ways in which RICOs draw on the material—objects, space, the body, and sensory perception—as a means of negotiating space and gaining recognition in contemporary Chinese society.

Operating in an emergent religious marketplace, within a recently rehabilitated charitable sector, I argue that it is the very contradictory nature of this context that ultimately encourages the RICOs to draw on forms of material culture to bring the religious into the secular. RICOs do this by creating a range of "opportunity spaces" that become discursive spaces of sociability where practices can be displayed, exchanged, and negotiated. For now, these new "opportunity spaces" provide much in the way of promising space for the close collaboration of state and religious actors, alongside the translation of transnational discourses into the local context. All of this provides religious personnel with a discursive space within which they can challenge and strengthen their own beliefs and a work space to develop new skills in themselves and others, to facilitate the active participation of all in societal transformation and to realize their aim of a more just society. Whilst developments within the sector have been promising, not least in building community resilience, in facilitating the emergence of new actors, and in edging religion into the public sphere, new moves toward creating a legislative framework suggest that the RICO sector may well be starting to take root in society. In the complex context that RICOs find themselves in, materiality has given voice to the voiceless and has been a "fruitful way to understand how religion works" (Morgan 2008, 229) in the public sphere.

Although the ambiguity surrounding the RICO sector has enabled it to flourish in a relatively short period of time, given the relatively young age of the sector and the unpredictable times that we are currently living in, it would be sensible to strike a somewhat cautionary note when looking ahead. Thus far, the RICO sector has emerged and thrived in part due to the ambiguity of the context in which it is placed. Looking forward, however, it is likely that a more robust legal framework needs to be implemented before the sustainability of the sector can be guaranteed.

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Notes

1. In 1994, the publication of a special editorial in the People's Daily on the "Rehabilitation of Charity" (*wei cishan zhengming*) marked a significant turning point both in terms of policy rhetoric and in terms of restoring the practice of charity in wider society (Sun 1994).

2. HIV/AIDS was the sole focus for the Home but just one of a range of projects undertaken by the Center.

3. I was first made aware of the presence of RICOs and other Chinese participants at the Bangkok Conference through an internal evaluation I undertook for an international collaborative training program for Chinese nurses in 2005 and 2006. During my fieldwork visits in 2009 and 2011 key staff in both the Center and the Home recounted how the conference had been a watershed moment for their own thinking and the development of their respective RICOs.

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