



Popular Christianity, Sensation, and *Ling'en* Authority in Contemporary China

Analyses of aesthetic and sensorial characteristics of religion encourage us to think beyond the limits of a rational lens in order to rediscover the more magical elements of religion. This article explores the ways in which Spirit-oriented authority is produced through sensational forms in popular Christianity in China. Based on extensive ethnographic research in urban “Three-Self”-affiliated churches in China between 2009 and 2015, I argue that officially recognized “Three-Self” congregations maintain their legitimacy in the broader Protestant community through sensorially rich encounters with the Holy Spirit, which, at the same time, have the capacity to unnerve the state because they go beyond officially defined limits on religious activity. This article contributes to our understanding of how state-sanctioned religious institutions are (carefully) engaging with the wider “signs and wonders” movement in China and suggests that aesthetic approaches to examining Christianity in China might provide an alternative lens to the problematic and somewhat tired distinction between congregations categorized as “Three-Self” and “house church.”

KEYWORDS: sensation—charisma—religious authority—*ling'en*—Three-Self—Protestantism—signs and wonders

Desheng Church is located on one of Huanghaicheng's many winding tree-lined roads near the center of the city.¹ The stone church building was completed in 1922 by a group of Chinese Protestant believers who had parted company with the (North American) Presbyterian mission active in the city, which is located in the northern part of eastern China.² The building largely survived the tumultuous years of the twentieth century and became the only functioning Protestant religious site in the city in the 1950s. It is not a particularly elaborate building compared to some churches in China, but it is conspicuous nonetheless due to its high walls, high windows, and apex red-tiled roof. The main gate is topped by an arch across which the characters "God loves the people of the world" are fixed and leads into a small courtyard made even smaller by the neatly stacked replacement roof tiles and potted plants. A small red cross on the top of the arch and a cross on the roof of the church, which are illuminated at night, also help the building to stand out in the neighborhood.

Desheng Church is a legally registered "venue for religious activities" (*zongjiao huodong changsuo*), meaning that it enjoys protection under China's policy on religion and that believers are free to conduct "legitimate" religious activities within the confines of the venue. It is registered with the state through the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), which is a politically oriented "patriotic religious association" established in the early 1950s by a group of prominent Protestants and based on the core principles of "self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation" (the Three-Selfs). The organization aims to represent Protestant believers and engage with the Chinese state. Besides a national committee, there are committees at provincial, municipal, and often county or district levels. The TSPM is not a church but is often referred to as such. It works in partnership with the China Christian Council (CCC), whose remit is to deal with doctrinal and pastoral issues. Together, these are referred to as the *lianghui* ("Two Committees").

Studies of Protestant Christianity in China have characterized Three-Self-affiliated churches as modernist, disenchanting, and "cold and quiet" (Madsen 2013, 159) when compared with the experiential forms of practice and "signs and wonders" that play a central role in many unregistered house churches (see also, for example, Cao 2011). Yet, among Huanghaicheng's Three-Self-affiliated congregations, sensorially rich forms of practice are central to religion as well as to the (re)production of a particular kind of religious authority—*ling'en*—that centers

on the notion of being “filled with” or “moved by” the Holy Spirit. This article examines the sensorial and aesthetic dimensions of religious practice and authority among these congregations. Starting with an ethnographic account of a sensorially rich prayer meeting in Desheng Church, it goes on to situate *ling'en* Protestantism in the broader context of China's post-Mao religious revival and the literature on Protestantism in China. It then turns to focus on *ling'en* authority, considering its origins and meanings for contemporary Huanghaicheng Protestants, its (re) production through sensational forms, and the broader socio-political and institutional contexts that shape them.

A SPIRIT-FILLED PRAYER MEETING IN HUANGHAICHENG

The early morning prayer meeting (*chendaoy*) at Desheng Church takes place several mornings a week.³ The church building is comprised of a main sanctuary and a sizeable semi-basement. The sanctuary, which seats around 1,100 people, serves as the focal point of the main congregational activities and is generally packed to overflowing on Sunday mornings, when the congregation meets for its Sunday worship service, and on Saturday nights, for the “young people's meeting.” The semi-basement is divided into different interconnected rooms and has a number of functions including as overflow seating when the sanctuary is full and for smaller, more intimate church meetings that make up the weekly calendar of events, such as bible studies and the early morning prayer meetings.

Before five o'clock in the morning, lay believers—brothers and sisters, mostly middle-aged and elderly—shuffle into the small courtyard and continue quietly down the stone steps into the semi-basement. The brothers and sisters remain silent as they enter. Each collects a thin cushion at the door and kneels down on the tiled floor on their cushion facing toward the back of the room in between the hard, wooden pews. The cushions have a musty aroma due to the humidity levels in the room, despite the fact that they are sometimes aired in the sun out in the courtyard. But no one ever complains about the cushions or kneeling on the floor. Apart from the wooden pews, the room contains little else. Some bibles and hymn books are stacked on the top of one pew. A fan on the wall helps to circulate the air in warmer weather, and there is an air conditioning unit in one corner (but it is only ever used on the hottest days of summer). A television on one wall relays what is happening in the church sanctuary when this area serves as overflow seating. The unheated semi-basement is cold on this spring morning, but it begins to warm up as the sun shines through the half-windows. The room slowly fills up as more brothers and sisters arrive.

Sister Shen is leading the meeting today. In her sixties, she is a long-term member of the congregation and a familiar face at many of Desheng Church's activities. She is not a seminary-trained formal church leader but is recognized as an important part of the church leadership. The official leadership of Desheng Church is comprised of an elder (*zhanglao*), two preachers (*chuandaoren*), and two recent seminary graduates who have to complete a two-year probationary period before they can become fully fledged preachers. Coming under the oversight of the

TSPM/CCC, they are trained and appointed as official religious specialists and must undergo the local state's political background checks. However, there are also a number of lay believers—referred to as brothers and sisters like all lay believers—who assist the official leadership with pastoral care and leading meetings. These brothers and sisters never preach in Desheng Church because they are not certified preachers, but they form a collective leadership body together with the “official” leadership. Like the other brothers and sisters who help with the running of the church, Sister Shen spends many hours each week helping with pastoral work, talking with and praying for members of the congregation, and visiting the sick and infirm. Now, she encourages those who have already arrived to prepare themselves by “praying silently” (*modao*). Immediately, many in the room begin to pray in quiet murmur. It is difficult to hear what any one individual is saying. The hum of voices seems to become one continuous and gentle cacophony of sound.

By five o'clock, around twenty-five brothers and sisters have arrived and are kneeling on their cushions on the floor. Brother Xu, a regular participant in these prayer meetings, closes the door quietly, and the sound of the road beyond the courtyard is cut off. Sister Shen starts the meeting by praying. The hum of the *modao* prayers trails off and stops. Sister Shen's voice is gentle and she prays in “standard Chinese” but with a distinct local accent. Her prayer sounds more emotional and rises in pitch as she asks for God's blessing on the meeting. Her voice lowers as she ends her prayer. Holding a bunch of small sheets of paper on which prayer requests are written, she then explains that there “are quite a number of prayer requests today.”⁴ Sister Shen reads from the Book of Galatians 1:11–24, in which the Apostle Paul relates the “truth” of the gospel and how God personally called him by “grace” so that he could spread this “message.” The reading reminds the brothers and sisters of how the Protestant God speaks to people in a personal way and that he does so out of his choosing. These are, after all, words inspired by God himself. When she has finished reading, Sister Shen says quite matter-of-factly, and without explanation, “Let's start to pray.” She begins to read the first of the prayer requests: “Liu Yang's life is in danger as a result of bleeding in the brain.” Everyone begins to pray simultaneously but quietly, as before. After a minute or so, Sister Shen reads the next prayer request: “I have high blood pressure. Please pray for mercy and healing.” The prayers begin again. “My daughter has been dating someone for many years. Pray that God would help them form a family and get married.” Again, people pray. Sister Shen continues to read out a new prayer request every minute or so. “Liu Bo has liver cancer, which is at an advanced stage. Please choose [*jianxuan*] his soul and heal his illness.” People pray. “Shen Yan's faith is weak, and as a result she has been disturbed by Satan. Plead that God would send Satan away from her and strengthen her faith.” People pray. “Pray that God would take away the annoyance of Satan from Chen Yang. Take away his burden and heal his illness.” The prayers increase in volume and some people move from a kneeling position to lying almost completely prone on the floor between the wooden pews. Some bury their faces in their hands, and some begin to weep quietly as they pray. The room, cold before the meeting began, is now quite warm, heated by the sun and the bodies of the brothers and sisters.

Several of the sisters “speak in tongues” quietly. But only some. Not everyone speaks in tongues. Not everyone can. The tongue-speakers do not exhibit other distinguishing behaviors. Some perspire or have flushed faces, but so do some of those who are praying without tongues. Acoustically, the tongues are like strings of short, single-syllabic sounds. The vowel and consonant sounds are recognizable from standard Chinese or the local dialect.⁵ But together, these strings of syllables sound like a different dialect or even a different language. Believers would claim this to be a “heavenly language” (*tianguode yuyan*) or a “foreign language.” But the sound of tongues is not new and not unusual in this intimate early morning prayer meeting and does not appear to elicit any immediate response from the other brothers and sisters, and they keep praying.

Sister Shen’s interjections of prayer requests and the rising and falling of the volume of the prayers appears to take on a rhythmic pattern. There is no shouting, wailing, or hysteria. The rhythm of the requests and the praying seems to bring a sense of orderliness. After the meeting, people would say that the Spirit was there, moving through the believers, helping them pray and causing some to speak in tongues. The Spirit is in control.

After about fifteen minutes, a Brother Du prays for several of the people mentioned in the prayer requests in a loud voice so that everyone can hear. All other prayers cease and are replaced with frequent “amens,” “thank Gods,” and “hallelujahs.” Another sister prays out loud and the same thing happens. There is now a new rhythm. Once three people have prayed out loud to the whole group, there is a brief lull and Sister Shen starts to read out new prayer requests.⁶ The prayers form the same pattern as before, rising and falling. Some continue to speak quietly in tongues. Again, after about twelve minutes, a sister prays out loud to the group, the rest of the prayers die down, and people participate as before in these more public prayers with “amens” and “thank Gods.” Several more people pray out loud and then Sister Shen reads more prayer requests.

The same rhythm is repeated again as the prayers continue. At six o’clock, Sister Shen finishes the meeting with a concluding prayer covering many of today’s requests. Toward the end, she asks God to “personally lead” (*qinzi dailing*) them with his “unlimited ability” (*wuxiande nengli*), to open their eyes to “thoroughly understand” (*kantou*) the “mysteries of his words” (*ta huayude aomi*), and that they would know his “will” (*zhiyi*) in every situation. She asks for protection for them from the devil, because he appears in different ways in order to try to use believers for his own purposes. She prays that “things that are human” in the church be “removed” (*chuqu*) so that the congregation would have the power to overcome Satan in their battle with him. When she finishes, she calls for everyone to say the Lord’s Prayer. Everyone stands to recite the prayer together, a prayer that many of the brothers and sisters have repeated thousands of times. At the end of the prayer there is a confident and resounding “amen.” Sister Shen then gently says, “The meeting’s finished” (*sanhui*). People pick their cushions off the floor, shake the dust off them, and arrange the wooden pews back into neat rows. Some of the elderly sisters wipe sweat from their faces with handkerchiefs or face cloths

they carry in their pockets, and then everyone shuffles quietly back up the steps into the church courtyard and returns home.

This ethnographic account of one prayer meeting in Desheng Church has much to tell us about how aesthetic elements serve to facilitate the construction of religious authority. However, before we embark on our discussion of this account, we will first place it in the context of the religious revival that has taken place in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the reform era.

THE STATE AND THE RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN CHINA

The religious “revival” in the PRC since the late 1970s has included a resurgence of previously well-established religious traditions as well as the development of many new groups and movements. Christianity has undoubtedly been and continues to be one of the fastest-growing religions in this period. In particular, Protestantism, in a range of forms, has seen significant increases in terms of numbers, although exact figures remain impossible to capture. Within this prodigious increase in many different types of religious activity across all corners of the PRC, forms of religion that focus on what Richard Madsen (2011) terms “signs and wonders” have been a particular area of growth and development. As Madsen asserts, the “most rapidly growing segments of Christianity in China today are full of signs and wonders – miracles of healing, exorcisms, ecstatic experiences . . .” (2011, 17). We will see that Protestantism is no exception here, despite some of its representations in scholarly and public discourse as a model of “modern” religion.

It has now been well documented in the scholarly literature that the dominant form of Protestantism introduced into China a little over 150 years ago was a modernized form: “austere and rationalized,” purged of much of its “magical” element (Yang 2008, 14). In turn, this form of Protestantism positioned itself in direct contrast to “superstitious” practices within Chinese religious traditions. This distinction between “religion” and “superstition” did not, of course, previously exist within Chinese religions (Campany 2003). In the early twentieth century, reformers within China borrowed modern terminology from Japan, including the term “religion” (*zongjiao*, easily translated across from the Japanese *shūkyō*), a category developed in Meiji Japan, and synonymous in meaning with “Christianity” (Josephson 2006 and 2012).⁷ In Japan, the development of the category of religion was much more than merely a “game of words” and entirely transformed Buddhism (see DuBois 2011; Josephson 2006; Zhong 2014). In line with modernized forms of Christianity on which it was based, it was defined—in part—against “superstition” (*meishin*).

In China, this Christian-secular model was adopted as an ideal framework for how religion should be defined in a modern sense and a benchmark that reformers within Buddhism and other religious traditions could utilize to modernize their own religions (Goossaert and Palmer 2011). As a result, religious traditions within China were largely reconstructed along the lines of a “church-like organization, [with] an organized clergy and ordination system, a textual history, theological doctrines and scriptures, and so forth” (Yang 2008, 17). Thus, “religion” became

a distinct category separate from the state and was effectively institutionalized in the early part of the twentieth century (Yang 2008; Ashiwa and Wank 2009). Relegated to the private sphere, belief became one of its defining features at the expense of practice.⁸ As had previously happened in Japan, “religion” was pitted against the category of “superstition” (*mixin*), which was regarded as something backward and detrimental to the building of a modern state (Feuchtwang 2010, 23–24). This modernist approach to religion was adopted by both Republican and Communist regimes and remains at the heart of state religious policy in the contemporary PRC. An example of an official publication from the early reform era characterized superstition as:

activities conducted by shamans, and sorcerers, such as magic medicine, magic water, divination, fortune telling, avoiding disasters, praying for rain, praying for pregnancy, exorcising demons, telling fortunes by physiognomy, locating house or tomb sites by geomancy, and so forth. These are all absurd and ridiculous. Anyone possessing rudimentary knowledge will not believe in them.

(Document 3 in MacInnis 1989, 33–34)

Certainly, some of the Protestant practices in Huanghaicheng that we are analyzing in this article would be considered “superstitious” if measured against this official definition.

It is this modernist form of religion to which Protestants under the TSPM—such as Desheng Church—are supposed to subscribe. Officially, the TSPM is required to assist the party-state in implementing its policy on religion. In seeking to negotiate its legitimacy in a socialist state, it has tended to adopt modernist Protestant forms akin to what Madsen (2011, 134) refers to as “modernizing Christianity” with its “immanent frame” (see Taylor 2007). This frame rejects the supernatural, the miraculous, and the extraordinary. To be sure, there are a range of theological views within the TSPM at the national level (see Chow 2013). However, it has adopted a generally anti-superstition stance, resulting in attempts at creating an environment in which “signs and wonders” are either shunned or sidelined (see, for example, Xu 2008; Wang 2010; Liu 2010). It should therefore not surprise us that Three-Self-affiliated congregations have tended to be portrayed as conservative by informed China “church watchers.”⁹ For example, Wesley (2004, 106) argues that the “TSPM churches . . . tend to be clergy-dominated, traditional in worship style, reserved in tone, and extremely cautious concerning any display of emotion.” Even recent scholarly characterizations of Three-Self-affiliated congregations put forward a similar sentiment. Madsen (2013, 159) states that “officially-approved Three-Self churches are usually decorously staid. There are pleasant hymns and edifying sermons, but the overall effect is ‘cold and quiet (*lengjing*)’” (see also Koesel 2014, 139; and Cao 2011). This characterization of Three-Self-affiliated congregations differs from that of unregistered congregations (“house churches”), which are more broadly approached as “popular Christianity” and described as having experiential forms, with “signs and wonders” playing a central role in religious life (see Cao 2013; Madsen 2013).¹⁰

The account of the Desheng Church early morning prayer meeting presented above clearly challenges these assumptions. I have been conducting fieldwork in

Huanghaicheng since 2009, including a twelve-month visit from 2009 to 2010 (see McLeister 2013). The focus of my research is popular Christianity in Huanghaicheng's Three-Self-affiliated congregations and the interactions between these congregations and the local state.¹¹ Early in my fieldwork, it became evident that prayers for divine healing, glossolalia, exorcisms, and the like were practiced across these Three-Self-affiliated churches despite these practices going against religious policy, which emphasizes “legitimate” (*zhengchang*) religious activities—that is, those that are not “superstitious.” Within these churches, such practices are but part of a broader religious framework, referred to as *ling'en*. As we will see, this is a concept that centers on being “filled with” or “moved by” the Holy Spirit and has a strong emotional and experiential dimension.

One *could* attend a Sunday-morning gathering at one of the Three-Self-affiliated congregations in Huanghaicheng and leave with the distinct impression that it was quite formalistic and perhaps even “cold and quiet.” Sunday gatherings are very well attended. They are led from the front and follow a similar format every week: several hymns (accompanied by a piano and choir), a Bible reading, and a sermon lasting around one hour. However, it would be inaccurate to characterize the religious practices of both religious specialists and lay believers simply from observations at this one weekly gathering. To develop an in-depth understanding of the range of religious practices associated with this loosely networked group of churches requires engagement with the activities that take place outside the main Sunday gatherings.

What interests me in the context of these Protestant congregations in Huanghaicheng is the idea of *ling'en* and how it acts as a form of religious authority that transcends the authority of religious specialists. Drawing on Birgit Meyer's work on *sensational forms* and the *aesthetics of persuasion* (2008 and 2010), I examine how *ling'en* authority is constructed and how it shapes religious practice in these Three-Self-affiliated congregations.¹² Protestants in Huanghaicheng regard *ling'en* to be at the heart of authentic Christian practice. Therefore, while the state often views sensational religious activities and displays of emotion in religious settings with suspicion or even hostility, meaningful religious expressions involve the Holy Spirit, and this engagement can take on effervescent forms. Without what are deemed authentic expressions of Protestantism, congregations risk losing legitimacy in the wider Protestant community. Yet, if these expressions are too overt, congregations risk falling foul of the authorities. This is at the heart of why more overt sensational *ling'en* practices are conducted in some church contexts and not in others. I argue that *ling'en* authority has its roots in the first half of the twentieth century and has been constructed from a combination of practices belonging to a range of Protestant forms. I begin by locating Huanghaicheng before defining *ling'en* in some detail. This article will then discuss the Desheng Church prayer meeting as a sensational form that helps to produce and reproduce emotions and sensations that signal the presence of the Holy Spirit. This sensational form helps to establish and maintain ideas about *ling'en* authority. Exploring sensational forms of popular Christianity is an alternative lens through which to examine the wealth

of religious forms at the local level that challenge the tired binary of “Three-Self” and “house-church,” which still dominates the field.

LING'EN AND LING'EN AUTHORITY

For Protestants in the Huanghaicheng Three-Self-affiliated congregations, *ling'en* is a concept central to their religion.¹³ It was variously described to me as “the Holy Spirit’s grace (or favor)” (*shenglingde endian*) or as “the Holy Spirit’s gift(s)” (*shenglingde enci*) and is what we might term a specifically Christian concept, although there are elements that may have similarities to other religious traditions and practices in China. The term *ling* is often translated as “spirit” or “efficacy,” and the idea of *ling* is found in different contexts and across a wide variety of religious communities in China. Anthropologist P. Steven Sangren translates *ling* as “magical power” (1987, 84) and argues that *ling* is the “key cultural operator . . . structuring Chinese religious logic” (1987, 144), because “magical power is attributed to the mystical process that mediates order and disorder (*yang* and *yin*)” (1987, 131). Its centrality as a concept within Chinese religion has certainly facilitated the development of *ling'en* as a concept, although Huanghaicheng Protestants would deny any similarities between other religious traditions and their form of Protestantism. The character *en* could be translated as favor, kindness, grace, or affection (as in *en'ai*).

Melissa Inouye (2015) translates *ling'en* as “charismatic.” However, for the purposes of this article, I use the original Chinese term, because I take seriously the warning of seasoned scholars not to make ready assumptions about the relationship between certain religious practices and their similarities to churches or movements that would be labelled “Pentecostal” or “charismatic” in other contexts.¹⁴ There is also the danger in using these terms of assuming a sense of orthodoxy or “theologically correct” definition. This is something I wish to avoid. In sticking to the term employed by participants in Huanghaicheng, I can keep myself out of this discussion (although I do hope that this article can contribute to the ongoing debate). Moreover, the Protestants in the Huanghaicheng Three-Self-affiliated churches do not self-identify as “Charismatic” (*ling'en pai*) (and they would certainly also not self-identify as “Pentecostal” [*wuxunjie pai*]).¹⁵ My informants understood the practices of *ling'en pai* to be more “extreme” (*jiduan*) than their own and did not deem them to be fully genuine. This is a point to which I will return below.

Rather than provide a definition of Pentecostal or Charismatic Christianity against which to measure the concept of *ling'en* Protestantism in these Huanghaicheng congregations, I will describe in some detail what *ling'en* means in Huanghaicheng. At the heart of *ling'en* Protestantism is the idea of connecting to God through the Holy Spirit and receiving power from God by the Holy Spirit. This is done by being “filled with the Spirit” (*chongman shengling*) or being “moved by the Spirit” (*bei shengling gandong*). But the Spirit cannot be controlled because it is (all-)powerful. Participant accounts of being filled with the Holy Spirit tended to focus on feelings of joy, contentment, or peace. Sometimes these experiences caused

people to weep, especially the first time someone was “filled.” So, there is clearly an emotional and experiential aspect to *ling'en*. Huanghaicheng Protestants are not simply concerned with “beliefs” or “doctrine,” although these are important too.

God is regarded as the most powerful deity, besides which there are “evil spirits” (*xieling*) and the devil, Satan (*sadan mogui*). The world is divided into three areas of belonging: that which belongs to or is “of” God (and Jesus and the Holy Spirit), described as *shuling*; that which belongs to evil spirits or the devil, Satan, described as *shugui*; and that which is “of the flesh” (*shuruoti*) or “of the world” (*shushi*). Also at the heart of *ling'en* Protestantism is the power to overcome evil, whether as “sin” in an individual or externally in the world, as well as to recognize evil power in others. For example, at one youth meeting, Preacher Lu related a story about meeting a stranger who said that she knew that Preacher Lu was a Protestant believer because she could “sense” it. Preacher Lu in turn said that she believed the stranger was a member of Falun Gong and this turned out to be the case.¹⁶ Preacher Lu used this example to remind the young people that “evil” power is real and needs to be recognized as such. Staying free from “sin” and bad influences makes it difficult for evil spirits and Satan to take a hold in someone’s life. Committing sins provides a break or opening (*pokou*) that could allow evil powers to influence or even dominate a believer’s life. I found it common for my participants in Huanghaicheng to avoid going to Buddhist, Daoist, or popular religion temples or shrines because of the inherent danger to their spiritual life. Related to this aspect of *ling'en* was the idea of “fighting” or “battling” (*zhanzheng*) evil spirits and Satan. Participants even relayed stories of occasions when evil spirits “played a trick on them” (*gei ni kaiwanxiao*) and they lost their glasses, or a key failed to work in the door. One of the major ways to combat these evil spirits is powerful prayer.

The Bible plays a central role in helping believers decide what is genuinely *ling'en* and what is not. Most if not all biblical passages are read literally, including miraculous accounts.¹⁷ The Gospels and the Book of Acts are popular sources of evidence for *ling'en*. But these scriptures do not only serve as sources of inspiration. The words themselves are powerful, particularly when spoken. The better a believer’s knowledge of the scriptures, the better they can select one appropriate to the situation. A powerful example of this is during exorcisms, when a combination of any of the following may be used: prayer, speaking in tongues, singing, and reading of scriptures.¹⁸

The “gifts of the Holy Spirit” (*shenglingde enci*) and their application are also central to *ling'en* Protestantism. Gifts or special abilities that the Holy Spirit could bestow on people included speaking in tongues (*shuo fangyan*), interpreting tongues (*fan fangyan*), special wisdom (*zhibui*) and knowledge (*zhishi*), dreams, prophetic words (*yuyande yanyu*), exorcising evil spirits (*gangui*), and the ability to heal people from physical and psychological illnesses (*yibing*).¹⁹ Claims of divine healing—found in many Protestant (and Catholic) communities in China—are a major influence on people turning to the religion (see Oblau 2011a and 2011b). The believers in these Huanghaicheng congregations claimed that gifts and abilities were not fixed and that they could be “taken away” or be “lost.” The idea

of spiritual gifts also encompassed specific leadership roles. The leadership “gifts” included “pastor,” “teacher,” and “preacher,” and while prophecy was generally accepted as a gift, there was a common consensus that the biblical leadership role of “prophet” was no longer relevant (and there was no recognition of the role of “apostle,” either). While there was sometimes systematic teaching on the lists of “Spirit gifts” in the Bible (1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4), these lists were clearly not regarded as exhaustive. Common to Bible study sessions, for example, was the idea that the Spirit could give people a specific “insight” or “revelation” (*kanjian*). Whoever was leading the Bible study might ask, “Does any brother or sister have an insight?” People also spoke of “special [Holy Spirit] gifts” (*teshude enci*) such as learning languages or doing business. Participants claimed that things associated with *ling'en* Protestantism, and gifts in particular, could not be learned in the traditional sense of learning. For example, learning to “speak in tongues” is something that the Holy Spirit allows someone to do and therefore cannot be copied from someone else (although there is the danger that people speak “fake” tongues that are either made up by a person or, more dangerously, come from “evil spirits”). Accounts or “testimonies” (*jianzheng*) of how God had miraculously helped people were an important aspect of smaller church meetings (and sometimes sermons). During church festival gatherings at Christmas and Easter, which lasted many hours, lay believers were invited to relate “testimonies.”

THE ORIGINS OF *LING'EN*

Contemporary influences notwithstanding, localized forms of Protestantism in China have borrowed from a rich historical religious landscape. Space precludes me from providing an in-depth analysis here of the origins and development of *ling'en* Protestantism in the Huanghaicheng Three-Self-affiliated churches. However, as Meyer (2010, 75off) argues, sensational elements in religion are generated historically and evolve over time. It is therefore valuable to contextualize contemporary practices by highlighting some of the major influences that have helped to shape them. Many Protestant mission agencies and missionaries did not associate with or promote forms of Christianity that could be described as *ling'en*.²⁰ Lian Xi's (2010) comprehensive historical analysis of twentieth-century popular Chinese Christianity reveals the extent to which many forms of Protestantism were not simply clones of missionary-promoted Christianity but actively engaged with practices that emphasized Holy Spirit power (see also Dunch 2001; Kao 2009; Inouye 2017).

Huanghaicheng was influenced by various forms of popular Christianity that developed across China in the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1930s, Huanghaicheng was affected by “movements of the Holy Spirit” (*ling'en yundong*), described in Western academic literature as “Pentecostal” (Bays 2012).²¹ Foreign missionaries were heavily involved at the inception of these movements, but subsequent developments were led by Chinese Protestant religious specialists (Bays 1993). First-hand accounts of these “movements of the Holy Spirit” record divine healings, exorcisms, visions, dreams, and “bursts of joyous laughter” (Crawford 1933; Culpepper 1971; Monsen 1961). In addition to these “movements

of the Holy Spirit” in the 1930s, the famous preacher Song Shangjie (“John Sung,” 1901–44) and his co-workers known as the Bethel Band visited Huanghaicheng a number of times on their nationwide tours (see Lyall 1965). Song’s preaching, sometimes described as frenetic, meant that his meetings were often highly emotionally charged and were usually accompanied by divine healing (Bays 1993, 172–73). One of my participants in Huanghaicheng recalled witnessing, as a little girl, a relative being miraculously healed from a physical disability when Song placed his hands on the relative and prayed for them. Song is also known to have spoken in tongues, but it is not clear to what extent the practice was encouraged in meetings where he preached (Lian 2010, 146).

Several churches—often referred to as “indigenous Protestant denominations”—with an emphasis on *ling’en*-style practices were established in Huanghaicheng in the first half of the twentieth century, namely the Spiritual Gifts Church and the Little Flock. The Spiritual Gifts Church (*ling’en hui*) set up two congregations in the city in the late 1930s. This particular “denomination” (or “movement,” as Daniel Bays [1995, 127] refers to it) grew directly out of the earlier “movements of the Holy Spirit.” The church emphasized “messages in tongues” as well as “swoons and trances” (Bays 2012). In interviews I conducted in Huanghaicheng, elderly Protestants who had previously been members of these two congregations claimed that they also attended other churches in the city and that believers from other churches sometimes attended the Spiritual Gifts Church gatherings. This facilitated the transmission of practices associated with *ling’en* Protestantism in Huanghaicheng today. In addition, a number of former members of the church were in positions of leadership in several of the Three-Self-affiliated congregations in Huanghaicheng in the 1980s and 1990s. The Little Flock (*xiaoqun hui*, or “Assembly Hall,” *juhuisuo*) church movement established by Ni Tuosheng (“Watchman Nee,” 1903–72) was also very active in Huanghaicheng in the 1930s, becoming the largest “denomination” in numbers by the 1940s. Nee himself adopted but then rejected what he referred to as “Pentecostalism” around 1935 (Lian 2010, 172–73). However, divine healing and exorcism remained important practices in Little Flock gatherings.

I am not claiming that *ling’en* Protestantism in Huanghaicheng is entirely based on practices passed on or directly borrowed from these churches, movements, or individuals. I am also not claiming that the only influences on *ling’en* Protestantism in Huanghaicheng today are Protestant in origin. It is perfectly plausible—even likely—that other religious forms have had an impact on shaping *ling’en* Protestantism, but the nature of such influences is very difficult to trace. Some scholars have argued that localized forms of Catholicism in China are more akin to popular religion both historically (Menegon 2009) and in the contemporary era (Madsen 2001). While I think this is a provocative approach, Fenella Cannell (2006) reminds us that we need to consider the multiplicity of Christianities, and therefore we should be critical of conflating practices from one religious community with those from another without exploring the meaning of such practices for the adherents themselves.

As Edmond Tang (2008, 17) has noted, the affiliations of Chinese Protestants tend to be fluid and the Three-Self-affiliated believers in Huanghaicheng are no exception. This fluidity in the boundaries of the Three-Self-affiliated congregations provides a porous border through which new influences can travel, so besides the historical influences, there also continue to be new influences in the contemporary period. Within the Three-Self-affiliated churches there are several leaders who have close links to the Jesus Family (*yesu jiating*) in Mazhuang, Shandong province, which developed as an indigenous denomination in the first half of the twentieth century.²² Their emphasis on being “filled with the Holy Spirit” also led to dancing, visions, speaking in tongues, and trances (see Bays 2012; Lian 2010; Tao 2001). Although there is no evidence that the Jesus Family had any influence in Huanghaicheng before 1949, it arguably does today. One preacher trained in a Three-Self seminary and now based at Desheng Church, for example, was converted in the Mazhuang Jesus Family. In recounting his experience, he described how he was “filled with the Holy Spirit,” which resulted in “intense weeping” and “overwhelming feelings of joy.” Other church leaders have also been involved in a range of congregations independent of the TSPM. Elder Gu at Desheng Church had previously been a leader in one independent church and was known to have special abilities in exorcising evil spirits. Several of the larger Protestant congregations not affiliated with the TSPM also emphasize *ling'en*. The largest one is led by an ex-TSPM pastor who left his own Three-Self-affiliated church after being sidelined for encouraging the speaking of tongues, prophetic words, and dancing in the main Sunday gatherings. He also received free training in a Pentecostal church in Hong Kong. There are two Korean congregations in the city and although they are not officially open to Chinese nationals, this rule does not appear to be enforced very strictly. One of these Korean congregations in particular has vibrant and ecstatic worship and prayer meetings where people pray out loud simultaneously (Kor. *tongsung kido*) and speak in tongues, sway back and forth in their seats in rhythmic fashion, and weep. These congregations have tended to have the greatest impact on Korean ethnic minority (*chaoxianzu*) Protestants in Huanghaicheng, an increasing number of whom have opportunities to visit South Korea. Some discussed quite enthusiastically their experiences of *ling'en*-charged church gatherings.

Having sketched some of the influences on *ling'en* Protestantism in Huanghaicheng, let us turn to discuss the prayer meeting described in detail at the start of the article, which illustrates how *ling'en* authority is established through such sensational forms.

SENSATION, AESTHETICS, AND THE POLITICS OF *LING'EN*

The collective approach to praying described in detail at the start of this article is replicated (to a greater or lesser extent) across the group of Three-Self-affiliated congregations in Huanghaicheng. There are some variations in terms of content, but they generally tend to follow a similar model of prayer and the incorporation of glossolalia. Participants would agree that the Holy Spirit was present and moving through the meeting, involving everyone (or, at least, everyone who was

willing). The prayer meeting clearly has a range of interwoven sensorial elements, including silence, space, sound, and weeping. It is not just the physical space but also the bodies of the participants that serve as the site for many of the sensory components (see also de Witte, de Koning, and Sunier 2015, 119).

By any measure, the prayer meeting could easily be described as “hot and noisy” (*re’nao*) rather than the “cold and quiet” more commonly ascribed to Three-Self Church gatherings. *Re’nao* is an important element in many social gatherings in Huanghaicheng, as it is elsewhere in China (Chau 2008). Whether it is a small-scale social event such as friends meeting for a night out at a KTV (karaoke television) bar or a larger-scale social event such as a wedding, the success of the event depends to a large degree on whether or not it is *re’nao*. Scholars have highlighted the importance of *re’nao* in temple festivals in northern China (Chau 2006; Hua 2013). The *re’nao* of the festivals helps to attract people and put on a good show for the gods. However, the state fears *re’nao*, especially in religious settings (Madsen 2013), because it is associated with activities categorized as “superstitious” in the state’s modernist framework of religion. These superstitious activities can be an accessory to chaos (*luan*) and violence, which alarms the state (ter Harr 2011). There is always a degree of “indeterminacy” and “moral ambiguity” with *re’nao* (Hatfield 2010, 36). The state wants religion to be rational and ordered.

Early on in my fieldwork in Huanghaicheng, I categorized certain types of meetings as *re’nao*: prayer meetings, youth events, and the festival gatherings at Christmas and Easter. My categorization was not shared by participants. Leaders would sometimes make comments that revealed a negative view of *re’nao*: “We aren’t seeking after *re’nao*” (*women bushi zhuiqiu re’nao*) or “This isn’t *re’nao*” (*zhe bushi re’nao*). *Re’nao*, it became clear, was not something they associated with *ling’en*. However, the reasoning here was not in line with the state’s disdain for *re’nao* as something “superstitious” but because *re’nao* was considered to be associated with “the world” and not with the Holy Spirit. In other religious contexts, “evil” forces may be present and produce a *re’nao* atmosphere, something viewed negatively by Huanghaicheng Protestants. This narrative is important. It reveals a lack of alignment with the state’s definition of religion but also demonstrates that there are limits to the sensorial aspects of the Holy Spirit: some things are not acceptable—although there is some ambiguity regarding what those things might be, exactly.

The prayer meeting is not (only) an intellectual or inner-spiritual exercise: it invokes intense feelings and emotions and requires participants to employ their bodies, and in so doing, the Holy Spirit is made accessible.²³ Participants cannot really provide much of an account of how this format for the prayer meeting began or developed, and this induces more of a sense that this is Spirit-led. Yet, because participants have a shared religious aesthetic, they know beforehand the central elements involved in the prayer meeting, something akin to Saba Mahmood’s (2001) idea of “rehearsed spontaneity,” which encompasses both the formal and informal aspects of religious ritual (see also Brahinsky 2012).

This particular prayer meeting takes place early in the morning when the neighborhood is (relatively) quiet. People are silent or speak in hushed tones before the meeting starts, which encourages a sense of reverence, weakness, or perhaps

even unworthiness. The emphasis on silence at the start and end of the meeting serves to emphasize the involvement of the bodies of the participants. Forced to become more aware of their bodily actions in order to reduce noise, they must think, for example, about how they walk or how they kneel down in between the pews. The silence helps the participants to “tune their senses” (Meyer 2010, 754). Rather than being passive or simply an absence of noise, the silence is “active” and embedded with meaning (Fennell 2012, 550). Emphasizing the absence of prayer and glossolalia—sounds that demonstrate the presence and power of the Holy Spirit—silence increases a sense of expectancy. People’s sense of reverence is further emphasized by the bodily positions of kneeling or lying prone on the floor—positions of deference and vulnerability that also demonstrate recognition of a higher but unseen authority.

The silence of the semi-basement is in clear contrast to the noise of “the world” outside, the thick stone walls of the church helping to protect the participants from external distractions. However, more than this, the church is a space that embodies ideas of safety and memories of fellow believers and encounters with the Spirit. When questioned about the importance of church buildings, many Huanghaicheng Protestants emphasized the importance of people’s bodies as the vessel of the Holy Spirit. Yet, there was evidently a lot of emotional attachment to the Desheng Church building itself—a building that had survived Huanghaicheng’s turbulent decades of the twentieth century.²⁴ The cold stone walls and hard tiled floor of the church remind the believers of the emptiness of the world, in contrast to the feelings of warmth and emotional security offered by being filled by the Spirit.

In contrast to the preceding silence and the cold, the meeting was imbued with different sounds and warmth (although not “heat”). The reading of “God’s own words” from the biblical passage at the beginning contributes to inducing a sense of God’s presence. In this particular meeting, the passage refers to God revealing the Christian message to the Apostle Paul, serving as a reminder of the mystery (or magic?) of God’s engagement with his people as well as a sense of orthodoxy and truth. The prayer requests paint mental pictures of impossible situations, and many of them repeat the central tenets of belief and ideas of God’s ability and power. There is a practical side to the collective praying: more petitions are made to God in a short time, helping the believers get through a long list of prayer requests each time they meet. However, there are other important factors at play here. Collective praying is believed to be more effective, and the moving of the Holy Spirit is more tangible and intense when believers meet together. The combination of an increase in volume as people pray with increasing earnestness, weeping, and glossolalia into a rhythmic pattern is almost hypnotic, creating an aesthetic of the sublime and evidencing the presence of the Holy Spirit. The relatively small size of the semi-basement room means that the warmth from bodies engaging in quite a physically demanding activity raises the temperature and adds a further sense of intensity. The small room also helps to magnify the sound. The simultaneous praying contributes to a sense of unity and unified purpose. The speech of individual prayers is merged with others into a tapestry of sound, reinforcing a sense of the Holy Spirit’s power to produce something aurally pleasing.

Glossolalic utterances add a sensorial intensity to the prayer meetings (see also Hilborn 2006, 130). Participants embody the Holy Spirit as it enables them to speak. The aesthetic elements of glossolalia in a range of contexts, both for the individual glossolalist and for the collective, include feelings of enjoyment and pleasure (Goodman 1972, 6; Samarin 1972, 79). The sounds themselves are unintelligible to the speaker and the hearer, and together with the belief that glossolalic utterances are previously unlearned languages or the language of heaven itself, further establish the miraculous presence of the Holy Spirit. Further, I would argue that the fact that only some participants speak in tongues actually serves to increase a sense of the sublime, since it is not a “norm” for everyone. There is always the possibility that non-glossolalists will one day receive the gift of tongues. The shared experience of being part of the Holy Spirit’s work brings the participants together both emotionally and spiritually (Poloma 2006; Tsai 2015). The shared aesthetic helps to build and maintain community.

The intensity of emotion is displayed and reinforced in the weeping that always occurs in these prayer meetings and during other religious contexts at Desheng Church (weeping occurs during the “Good Friday” gathering, often during communion, and on other occasions). Here, participants weep for a range of reasons. Some are moved by the stories of pain and suffering in the prayer requests. Some are moved by the weeping of other participants. Some are moved by the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is most clearly and tangibly evident in the glossolalia—individuals come under the influence of the Holy Spirit to such an extent that they lose control of themselves, to some degree at least (see also Keane 2008, 122). The body is, after all, central to making spiritual experience authoritative (Brahinsky 2012, 217). The weeping and shared emotional values increase the sense of attachment between the members (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2000; see also Sunier and Şahin 2015).

The rhythmic pattern suggests a sense of order. This is not a chaotic enterprise. People do not demonstrate behaviors such as twitching, salivation, trembling, or spasms, which some observers have recorded in other glossolalia-filled contexts (Goodman 1972). The Holy Spirit is in control. The single prayers made to everyone and to which all the participants respond also serve to instill a sense of order. These prayers briefly “cool down” the atmosphere and prevent the prayer meeting from a loss of control or order, since there is the possibility of evil spirits trying to interfere. Felicitas Goodman (1969, 233) identified three phases of glossolalia: warm up, excitation, and cooling down. In the Huanghaicheng context, these three phases can be seen “on repeat” throughout the meeting, so that the sensation does not “overheat.” The “cooling down” is also facilitated by the final collective recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. The standing for the prayer physically moves people from kneeling or lying prone on the floor and signals a change in sensation. The familiarity of the words encourages a sense of unity and emphasizes the idea that that particular experience of the divine is at an end, since it is now only possible to use “normal” speech and not glossolalia. This sensorially abundant ritualized prayer meeting offers a particular aesthetic which, to borrow from

Meyer (2010, 754), persuades the participants of the truth and reality of the sensations that they experience.²⁵

LING'EN AS RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY

In Huanghaicheng, the sensorially rich atmosphere produced in certain contexts was taken to be evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit and *ling'en*. Evidence of *ling'en* is important in legitimating Huanghaicheng's congregations as genuine forms of Protestantism. Herein lies the importance of considering the socio-political and institutional context of sensational forms. There is a conscious choice in these congregations not to encourage (or even allow) certain religious practices in Sunday gatherings—the main face of the church, if you will. Glossolalia is one case in point. I met a number of lay believers who had been explicitly instructed by church leaders *not* to speak in tongues at these main church meetings. Religious specialists themselves also “self-censored” in these gatherings, even if they were glossolalists. I have never heard a church leader—formal or otherwise—use glossolalia in any church meeting (though I suppose they could do, quietly, in prayer meetings, for example). The same was also true of exorcisms.

At the same time, there is a conscious choice to provide other contexts for *ling'en* activities. These tended to be smaller gatherings often held in parts of the church building other than the main hall—like the prayer meeting described here—or in people's homes. We have already noted that *ling'en* elements of popular Christianity in Huanghaicheng do not correspond to the state's modernist model of religion. Providing some space for *ling'en* practices away from the “main face” of the church reduces the likelihood of the congregations receiving unwanted attention from the local state while at the same time presenting an ordered and relatively quiet form on the surface. The ordered nature of the prayer meeting, for example, helps the congregation to distance itself from accusations of feudal superstitious practices or disruptive activities. Holding a prayer meeting at five o'clock in the morning meant that it was highly unlikely there would be any visit or interference from Religious Affairs officials. But even if these officials did become aware of such activities, they would be less likely to crack down on them if they were conducted on a small scale. Additionally, smaller-scale venues for *ling'en* activities means that it is easier to maintain a sense of order. As we saw above, there is a fear of excess or even pandemonium when it comes to *ling'en* practices. There is a fine line between what is regarded as genuinely *ling'en* and sinister spiritual activity. Because *ling'en* practices are central to Protestantism in this context, there is a need for Holy Spirit-filled prayer meetings and the like. Such practices help to legitimate these congregations and if space is not available for *ling'en* activities, then perhaps lay believers and religious specialists alike may look to other Protestant communities that are seen to display more genuine forms of religious practice.

As a corpus of authoritative religious beliefs and practices, *ling'en* legitimizes both lay believers and church leaders because the Holy Spirit is central to it. Religious authority is *not* solely produced or maintained by religious specialists. Sensational forms both produce and reproduce *ling'en* elements—and they are produced

socially. This is a significant aspect of the sensational in Huanghaicheng Protestantism. Let me use an example to illustrate my point. Officially, the selection of church leaders lies ultimately with the local state. Potential candidates for officially recognized TSPM seminaries as well as candidates for leadership positions are subject to political background checks. The local *lianghui* handles applications, but even if it deems a candidate suitable, it does not mean that they will be successful. How any individual who is a candidate for either seminary or a leadership position is regarded in the Protestant community is a major element of the process. The *ling'en* qualities of any candidate are taken seriously by the lay believers committed to their congregation and wider Protestant community. Leaders are judged on whether or not their preaching is *shuling* (belonging to God) and can be sidelined if it is deemed not to be. Some measures of this are that *shuling* preaching is clear, powerful, inspiring, knowledgeable, does not draw attention to the speaker, and it leads people to convert. For example, Assistant Pastor He moved through the ranks to become Assistant Pastor, but he is unable to move beyond this to ordination as a full pastor. It was openly known that he was the next in line to become head of the local *lianghui*. Many said that he was inspired in his younger days and that his preaching was very *shuling*. However, a common complaint by lay believers was that he had become like a state bureaucrat in his approach to people and in his behavior and mannerisms. The head of the *lianghui* told me that Assistant Pastor He just did not have the support from the lay believers that he needed, and so he was unable to push for his ordination as pastor. He does not demonstrate sufficient *ling'en* qualities. The absence of *ling'en* authority, then, can result in leaders being challenged and losing their authority (even if their appointment is backed by the local state). However, as we have seen, *ling'en* authority is not just authority that rests and manifests in individual leaders but also more generally in the congregation.

Much of the literature on aesthetics and religious authority in the Chinese context focuses on charismatic leaders and their followers as well as on discussions of charisma (see, for example, Huang 2009; Zhe 2008; Junker 2014). Drawing on Max Weber's (1947) "classic" definition of charisma, scholars have also recently sought to rethink approaches to charisma and charismatic authority in the Chinese religious context (see Feuchtwang and Wang 2013; Feuchtwang 2008 and 2010; Goossaert 2008). These works define charisma as "an expectation of the extraordinary" (Feuchtwang and Wang 2013, 16) that is "embodied in a leader and a following" (Feuchtwang 2010, 108). In contrast to these accounts, it should be evident that the "leader" is somewhat absent from, or certainly in the background of, my ethnographic account in this article. There is no direct equivalent in the Huanghaicheng context to the Venerable Cheng-yen (Huang 2009), Li Yuansong (Zhe 2008), or Li Hongzhi (Junker 2014). There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, each Three-Self-affiliated congregation in Huanghaicheng is led by a leadership team comprised of religious specialists and lay believers. There is no single leader who commands a following in Desheng Church. Preaching is conducted by leaders from Desheng Church and other congregations in Huanghaicheng on a rotational basis. Different people lead the early morning prayer meetings. This

approach to leadership resists the likelihood of one leader developing a personal following, regardless of how *shuling* she might be. In addition, the boundaries of the congregation itself are porous. Even committed lay believers visit other churches and congregations regularly. This also limits the likelihood of a cohesive following developing behind any given leader. In this context, there are clearly limitations on the applicability of concepts of charismatic religious authority, which center on individual leaders. However, by focusing on the local religious *ling'en* discourse and arguing that religious authority is produced and reproduced via its own particular aesthetics, I hope to suggest possibilities for exploring the interplay between the sensorial and the authoritative in contexts beyond Huanghaicheng. This case study demonstrates that religious authority is not necessarily based on the relationship between a religious leader and her followers (congregation), because it is not necessarily the leader alone who is the medium or embodiment of the transcendent. The congregation collectively serves to embody the transcendent, and therefore the religious authority is collectively produced and reproduced.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I have focused in this article on the concept of *ling'en* as central to Huanghaicheng Protestantism. We have seen how *ling'en* authority is produced and reproduced collectively through sensational forms and religious aesthetics that confirm and make real the presence of the Holy Spirit. I have further demonstrated that these sensational forms are mediated through the socio-political context and that even religious specialists are subject to *ling'en* authority. It is important to bear in mind that these sensational forms are not static. While the prayer meetings I have described are structured in a particular way, there are sometimes subtle changes that could alter the form over time; for example, sometimes someone who is not leading will read a passage from the Bible during the meeting. Or, occasionally, someone will start a song that everyone joins in on. It is likely that new sensational forms will develop, demonstrating the dynamism and power of the Holy Spirit and *ling'en* authority. Finally, investigations into the realm of aesthetics and sensational forms might also prove a fruitful approach to forms of religious authority within popular Christianity in other Chinese Protestant contexts. This may reveal commonalities and points of comparison as well as contrast that are hidden or overlooked when the focus remains on the tired and somewhat arbitrary “Three-Self” / “house-church” binary.

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Deaf Protestant Congregation in Urban China” (forthcoming 2019) in *Studies in World Christianity*.

NOTES

1. Various aspects of this article were presented at the “Sacred Models: Authority and Representation in Asian Religions” workshop at the University of Manchester, October 31–November 1, 2014. I would like to thank workshop delegates for their helpful suggestions regarding the content of this paper, and I thank Chris M. White for some insightful comments. I would also like to particularly thank Jane Caple and Erica Baffelli for extensive comments on several drafts of this paper and for their help in clarifying the argument. Any shortcomings are entirely my own. A period of extended fieldwork in 2009 and 2010 was supported by an ESRC Postgraduate Studentship Overseas Fieldwork Expenses grant (grant number: ES/G024138/1); generous funding in the form of a Research Grant from the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh; and a Grant for Fieldwork from the Universities’ China Committee in London (UCCL), which enabled me to conduct four weeks of fieldwork in China during the summer of 2014. Much of the data on which this paper is based were generated during these two field trips. Huanghaicheng is a pseudonym.

2. That the church was established by Chinese believers is probably one of the main reasons why the building was not demolished in the Maoist era, as several of the foreign mission-built churches were.

3. The description of this particular prayer meeting is from May 2010, toward the end of a twelve-month fieldtrip in Huanghaicheng. I have conducted multiple trips back to Huanghaicheng since then and these early morning prayer meetings continue to take place.

4. Any person, whether a regular attendee or not, could fill in a prayer request form and leave it in a designated “prayer-request box” at any time. The box was opened on a daily basis, and prayer requests were addressed in all the church prayer meetings. The same practice was followed in all Three-Self-affiliated churches in Huanghaicheng.

5. For example, the voiceless velar fricative /x/ (*h* in *pinyin*), the close front rounded vowel /y/ (*ü* in *pinyin*), or the retroflex consonant /ɻ/ (*r* in *pinyin*).

6. I fully realize that the participants would not see themselves as praying to each other but to God.

7. For a detailed discussion on the origins of the term *shūkyō*, see Krämer (2013).

8. For accounts of a similar process in Japan, see Company 2003 and Josephson 2006. I use the term Three-Self-affiliated church (or congregation) rather than Three-Self church (or congregation) because, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a “Three-Self church.” My term reflects more accurately the actual status of these congregations.

9. I think it is pertinent to distinguish the accounts written by China “church watchers” from actual academic accounts that are more methodologically rigorous.

10. One very recent publication describes the Pentecostal influence on a group of Three-Self-affiliated churches in central Fujian including glossolalia and faith healing practices (Chambon 2017). Michel Chambon traces the origins of this influence to the Hong Kong-based Pentecostal pastor Dennis Balcombe but argues that the influence of Pentecostalism has been waning in recent years in these churches.

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

12. I draw on recent scholarship on the materiality of religion here. Analyses of aesthetic and sensorial characteristics of religion encourage us to think beyond the limits of a “rational disenchanting” lens in order to (re)discover the more magical elements of religion (Meyer 2010, 743). Aesthetic and sensory approaches to religion seek to overcome methodologies that are limited by the dualism of body and mind and focus on bodies, gestures, texts, religious paraphernalia, sound (music and other aural elements), and silence. Aesthetic elements are not simply important for the immediate effect, however. They are also a foundational element in

the construction of religious beliefs and religious authority and in the building of religious communities (see Meyer 2008, 718).

13. The importance of the term *ling'en* within Christianity in China is noted, but not discussed, in the introduction of the first-ever volume to be published dedicated to Chinese Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity (Yang, Tong, and Anderson 2017, 6–7).

14. There is an ongoing debate within scholarship on Christianity in China about the extent to which forms of the religion could be seen as “Pentecostal” or “charismatic” in the sense in which it is understood theologically. Some scholars have applied the terms Pentecostal and charismatic to the Chinese context without much critical reflection (see, for example, Anderson 2000). However, Tang’s words of caution should make us consider how we label religious phenomenon such as those examined in this article: “one is already struck by the similarities that can be drawn between what we observe in China and other movements of independent Pentecostal and charismatic churches in Africa and Asia. We are almost promised a readily available explanation of the outburst of activities on the ground—the prevalence of an emotional style of worship, emphasis on healing, opposition to the organised institutional churches and their liberal theology, resistance to any form of state control, as well as certain characteristics too often judged by others as ‘sectarian’ tendencies etc. On the other hand, we must be warned against the danger of imposing a ready-made explanation on an indigenous phenomenon. Or is it really indigenous? In fact, the comments above are already begging some important methodological questions before the data is adequately examined” (Tang 2011, 380). See Anderson (2011a, 13–15; 2011b), Hefner (2013, 2), and Hollenweger (2005, 1ff) for definitions and characteristics of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity.

15. See Inouye (2015), who makes a similar point. It should also be noted that the term *ling'en pai* should not be confused with the “Spiritual Gifts Church (or Society)” (*ling'en hui*), which I mention elsewhere in this article.

16. Falun Gong is a new religious movement that first developed in China in the early 1990s. It centers on the spiritual practices of meditation and *qigong* and draws on teachings from both Buddhism and Daoism (Palmer 2007). It was banned by the Chinese state in 1999, and the group was subjected to an intense crackdown in the years following its ban.

17. On “scriptural literalism” see Percy (2001). See also McLeister (2018) for an analysis of how Huanghaicheng Protestants draw on biblical language and imagery when trying to interpret events that they see as signaling the last days.

18. When a lady believed to be possessed by an “evil spirit” was staying at Desheng Church and being looked after by several female preachers, one of the young preachers cooked the breast of a dove to feed the lady. When I enquired about this, she claimed that this could help bring peace. I did not find any other occurrence of this practice anywhere else in Huanghaicheng, but I think it reveals interesting ideas about different mediums for the Spirit to be communicated.

19. I have never encountered a “public” utterance of glossolalia, and no “interpretation” of glossolalic utterances in any context in Huanghaicheng, although my participants held a belief in the gift.

20. To be sure, many missionaries, and particularly those in the earlier years of Protestant missions to China, may have claimed a *belief* in miracles, but they did not practice (or promote) faith healing, glossolalia, or prophecy, for example. There are, of course, exceptions to this. John L. Nevius (1829–93) of the American Presbyterian Mission wrote a voluminous study on spirit possession (Nevius 1896).

21. Despite this label of “Pentecostal,” Lian (2010, 86) argues that there is “no indication that Western Pentecostal missions, which had reached China by 1907, were directly connected to or played any significant role in the eruption of those revivals.”

22. The Jesus Family was also influential in the establishment of the Spiritual Gifts Church.

23. Here I draw on Meyer’s *sensational forms*, which are modalities or devices that “Invok[e], fram[e], and render accessible the transcendental” (Meyer 2008, 708). Further, they are

modes for accessing the transcendental that shape religious beliefs, doctrines—“religious content”—and norms (Meyer 2010, 751). So, sensational forms produce and reproduce religious feelings.

24. Discussions about repainting and changing the color of the outside walls in 2014 were emotionally intense!

25. Meyer’s *aesthetics of persuasion* is based on the notion that religion offers a particular aesthetics that creates religious subjects by “tuning their senses and enabling modes of embodying the divine through sensational forms, bring[ing] together sensation and power” (2010, 754). Religious aesthetics persuade participants of the “truth” and “reality” of the sensations they experience (2010, 754). This confirms a particular view about how the transcendent works. However, these sensations do not happen “unexpectedly” but “require the existence of a particular shared religious aesthetic” (Meyer 2010, 742). This further produces a sense of limitations in understanding and feelings of awe and power, allowing people to experience the “sublime” (2008, 708). Religious authority, beliefs, and values are thus established in a “complicated aesthetic process, the outcome of which is inherently unstable and ambiguous” (de Witte, de Koning, and Sunier 2015, 118).

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