

**Inhabiting secularity and postsecularity: Christianity,  
neoliberal transition, and the intersectional experiences of  
migrant workers in Shenzhen, China**

By

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## **Abstract**

This thesis contributes to geographies of secularity and postsecularity by examining Christianity and the experiences of migrant workers in Shenzhen, China. In the post-reform era, China appears to be caught in a contradictory dual process – the entrenchment of the secular values and, simultaneously, the notable revival of all forms of religiosity. I argue that this dual transition has opened up new possibilities for examining the relations between secularity and religion beyond the Western trajectory of modernization. This thesis first provides a dialectical analysis of secularity and postsecularity, which views them as distinctive yet mutually constituted epistemologies and conditions of being. I argue that geographers can significantly advance the understanding of secularity and postsecularity by offering geographical knowledge on: (1) the political-ideological project of secularity and how it is inhabited by individuals in the specific process of place-making; (2) what and how new postsecular subjectivities are engendered by, and co-constituted with, secular conditions of being; and (3) the wider socio-spatial conditions where variegated forms of secularity and postsecularity may be re-configured. To address these efforts, this thesis also engages with neoliberalism and intersectionality as analytical tools to explore the complex social and power relations from which secularity operates but also from which new religious subjectivities and agency may emerge.

These inquiries are examined by in-depth ethnographic research with Christian migrant workers in Shenzhen. I elucidate how migrant workers constitute their religious subjectivities by drawing on Christian resources and ethics, which enable them to come to terms with, but also sometimes to reframe and counteract, the neoliberal secularity that normalises them as productive, docile, governable, yet alienated, subjects. In particular, I focus on how migrant workers' negotiations of religion, class, gender and adulthood

mutually shape one another in such a way that postsecular subjectivities and agency are engendered. Although workers' intersectional religiosity is integral to, and indeed constitutive of, the way in which secularist state developmentalism, autocratic power, and neoliberal labour relations are legitimated, lived and reinforced, it nonetheless also implies a possibility of postsecular reflexivity, which sets an affective condition on the ways that secular powers and normalised subjects actualise as a part of migrant workers' everyday life. Above all, this thesis not only sheds lights on the specific configurations of secularity and postsecularity in China, but also establishes an intersectional approach to secularity and postsecularity.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 China in neoliberal transition: entrenched secularity and the possibilities of postsecularity

In the post-reform era, China appears to be caught in a contradictory dual process, with the entrenchment of secular values and state-sanctioned neoliberal-capitalist ideologies and, simultaneously, the notable revival of all forms of religiosity and faith (Yang 2004; Szonyi 2009; Gao & Qian 2019). China has been considered as an avowedly atheist and communist state and, in Casanova's (2013: 42) words, as "one of the most secular societies on earth." Religion seems to retain a very marginal place in Chinese public life under the governance of a totalising party-state that fundamentally builds on secularist and communist ideologies. Although liberal reform since the early 1980s has enabled China to switch from a "militant atheism" that views religion as "spiritual opium" to be eradicated from public life to a less coercive secularism that allows limited freedom for religious expression (Potter 2003; Yang 2010), secularist ideologies do not appear to be in decline but rather have become increasingly entrenched and hegemonic amidst China's pursuit of modernization. Some scholars have pointed out that the secular values of reason, efficiency, progress and development, alongside the triumph of the market economy, have become part of an overwhelming consensus among both state officials and ordinary Chinese people in the post-reform era (Wang 2009; Qian and Zhu 2016; Gao, Yin & Zhu 2019).

In particular, the Chinese state's effort to build a secular and modernised society has been fuelled by the neoliberal transition facilitated by Deng Xiaoping's "Southern tour" in

1992 and subsequently the legitimation of the “socialist market economy” as the goal of China’s economic reform. Many scholars argue that the post-reform China has been undergoing neoliberal reform, notwithstanding the discrepancies between China’s reform and ideal neoliberal restructuring (Harvey 2005; Kipnis 2007; Ong 2007; He and Wu 2009; Pun & Lu 2010; Wu 2010; Zhang 2012; Qian and Guo 2018; Zhou *et al.* 2019). This neoliberal transition is characterised by: the market as a dominant mechanism in the optimization of capital accumulation; the state’s creation and promotion of a flexible labour regime; the dismantling of the “work unit” as the primary location of welfare distribution; the production of spatial class differentiation; and the state-propagated norms of self-improvement, individual responsibility, competition, and the work ethic. In particular, Harvey (2005: 1) describes China’s market-oriented reform as “neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics”: with the embrace of neoliberalism, China has been transformed “from a closed backwater to an open centre of capitalist dynamism with a sustained growth rate unparalleled in human history”. Yet Harvey (2006: 34) also critically points out that China is essentially an outcome of a “particular kind of neoliberalism interdigitated with authoritarian centralized control”. In this sense, neoliberalism is deployed as an exception to the authoritarian regime in China, which articulates global capitalism with situated disciplinary technologies (Ong 2007). Therefore, as I show in this thesis, unlike in liberal and pluralist societies in the West, China’s trajectory to secular modernity is characterised by a combination of neoliberal governance, state developmentalism, and autocratic rule which work hand-in-hand to produce productive, docile and governable subjects.

One of the most remarkable results of China’s neoliberal transition is the emergence of massive rural-to-urban migration. According to the report of the National Bureau of

Statistics of China, there were approximately 281.71 million rural migrant workers in 2017<sup>1</sup>. However, these rural migrant workers constitute not only the key actors in China's rise as "the workshop of the world" but also the most marginalised group in contemporary China (Chan and Pun 2009). Over the past four decades, drastic industrialisation and urbanisation in China have precipitated class inequality, precarious and disciplined labour regimes, and vulnerability to exploitation for the large numbers of rural migrant workers (Zhang 2001; Pun and Smith 2007). This phenomenon is particularly evident in Shenzhen, China's first Special Economic Zone (SEZ) as well as the epitomic city undergoing the country's neoliberal experiment. In Shenzhen, the alliance of the state and capitalism enforces the economy- and profit-centred governance of migrant workers. For example, the local government has encouraged the expansion of the "factory dormitory regime," which accommodates large numbers of migrant workers yet simultaneously minimizes their consumption of urban welfare. Shenzhen's migrant workers, on the one hand, experience the institutional discrimination inflicted by China's urban-rural duality and the *hukou* (户口) household registration system<sup>2</sup> (Chen 1999; Zhang 2001). On the other hand, they suffer from a sense of uncertainty and uprootedness, disembeddedness from social networks, and the discontinuity between urban and rural lifeworlds (Qian & He 2012). In 2010, 18 young workers attempted suicide at the production facilities of the Taiwan-owned Foxconn company, the world's largest electronics manufacturer, and 14 of them died. The Foxconn episodes can be interpreted as the apex of long-term depression wrought by exploitation and alienation among young workers. This thesis therefore provides critical reflections on the secularist-neoliberal project in China.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbzb/dongtaixinwen/buneyiaowen/201705/t20170502\\_270286.html](http://www.mohrss.gov.cn/SYrlzyhshbzb/dongtaixinwen/buneyiaowen/201705/t20170502_270286.html)

<sup>2</sup> In China, *hukou* is a household registration system that differentiates between rural and urban populations in different management and welfare systems.

On the other hand, however, alongside the social and human costs of the advance of secular neoliberalism in China is an astounding religious revival and, in particular, the unlikely “Christianity fever” which has taken place over the last three or four decades. A 2012 survey conducted by the China Family Panel Studies programme suggests that the number of Chinese Protestants is approximately 26 million, making up 1.9 per cent of the total population (China Family Panel Studies 2012). According to another report entitled “Global Christianity” released by the Pew Research Centre (2010), there were at least 58 million Protestants in China in 2010, having increased almost tenfold over a period of 30 years. It is noteworthy that these figures have possibly been highly underestimated, as a large number of underground Christian practitioners make it hard to calculate total numbers (Yang and Yang 2017).

In the past two decades, massive rural-to-urban migration in China in conjunction with the nationwide religious renaissance has given rise to a distinctive religious group of Christian migrant workers<sup>3</sup>. Although the majority of Christian evangelical movements in China thrive in rural areas which it is difficult for the state’s surveillance to reach, this scenario is now beginning to be re-mapped, as tens of millions of rural Christians have thronged into cities in search of better incomes and livelihoods, and as urban churches increasingly see migrant workers as important targets for mission work and social services (Huang 2014, 2015). In Shenzhen, especially since the 2010 Foxconn suicide event, many migrant workers have sought spiritual shelter in the Christian faith in response to the exploitative labour regime. My fieldwork in Shenzhen indicates that migrant workers represent an estimated 80 per cent of attendance in some churches

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, the term “migrant workers” refers to people of rural hukou travelling to the city to work, while “Christian migrant workers” refers to migrant workers who are baptized Christians or claim to be Christians. They can be differentiated according to whether they were converted before (roughly two-thirds among our informants) or after migrating to the city (the other one-third).

located in or around manufacturing-concentrated urban areas. Rather than being dismissed by secular neoliberalism, the flourishing of Christianity among migrant-worker communities has become a vivid scene in Shenzhen.

Multiple explanations have been proposed to interpret China's religious revival, including those citing moral and spiritual crises caused by drastic social change (Bay 2003; Yang 2005; Hunter and Chan 2007), the renewal of traditional practices (Chao 1999; Jing 1996), changing state–society relations (Feuchtwang 2000; Yang 2008), and the religious market (Yang 2011). This line of inquiry casts light on what religion means in reform-era China by underscoring two points of view: first, it implies an anti-secular and antihegemonic sensibility that sometimes uncritically associates China's modernisation with the domination of secular and capitalist ethics; second, religiosity is therefore analysed as a backlash against secular modernity. These perspectives have resulted in specific theoretical difficulties for the conceptualisation of religion in an era of transition. Religion is read in reductive terms as a preconceived system of meanings and cosmologies that cuts against hegemonic state–capital coalition. What has been left largely unanswered, however, is how religion partakes in the constitution and consolidation of new socio-economic relations, values and experiences, and what new religious subjectivities are engendered in this process.

In response to these inquiries, one of the aims of this thesis is to open up a new paradigm in China's studies of religion by bringing existing research on religious revival in China into dialogue with the emerging scholarship of secularity and postsecularity. Over recent years, human geography (or more broadly social sciences) has witnessed a debate between those who argue for a more careful reformulation of theories of secularisation

and secularity (Kong 2010; Wilford 2010; Tse 2014; Dora 2018; Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018) and those who accept the analytical value of the concept of postsecularity that critically challenges secularist ethics and epistemologies (e.g. Beaumont & Baker 2011; Cloke & Beaumont 2012; Holloway 2013; Olson *et al.* 2013; Gökarıksel & Secor 2015; Williams 2015; Bartolini *et al.* 2017; Cloke *et al.* 2019). On the one hand, instead of dismissing the theory of secularisation altogether, the former approach acknowledges the “overly facile understandings of secularity in geographies of religion” (Tse 2014: 202). Therefore, they have sought to re-conceptualise secularisation and secularity as grounded and context-contingent processes, providing accounts of how the secular is lived and performed by modern subjects in different social, economic and political contexts (Tse 2014; Dora 2018; Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018). This approach is deeply inspired by Charles Taylor’s (2007) account of secular conditions of belief – that is, how modern individuals *inhabit* secularity, and how the individuated quest for spiritual realisation and the formation of new religious subjectivities co-exist with the secular condition of being. Moreover, influenced by Casanova’s (2009; 2013) call for global comparative studies of secularisation and secularity, this approach also engages with the geo-historical patterns and fusion of secularity in various institutional contexts (Wilford 2010; Tse 2014).

On the other hand, in the spirit of the postsecular turn in social theory, religion has been re-theorized as an ethical and self-reflective project that supplies key building blocks for the values and ideologies of secular modernity (Cloke *et al.* 2019). As Habermas (2006; 2010) suggests, modern society cannot flourish by simply resting on the moral stance supplied by secular reason; in fact, religious ways of life play an important role in addressing the malaises of modern society, such as issues of social injustice and the shrinking of welfare and public service in an age of neoliberal precariousness. In response

to Habermas's postsecular critiques, the geography of postsecularity has emerged as a burgeoning field over recent years (Beaumont & Baker 2011; Cloke & Beaumont 2012; Olson *et al.* 2013; Gökarıksel & Secor 2015; Williams 2015; Cloke *et al.* 2019). This line of scholarship argues that there is a mutually reflexive transformation of religion and the secular. In particular, recent research into faith-based organisations (FBOs) in human geography suggests that religion does not only negotiate the neoliberal economy and governance, but also co-constitutes the latter (Beaumont 2008; Beaumont & Baker 2011; Cloke & Beaumont 2012; Williams 2015; Cloke, Sutherland and Williams 2016; Sutherland 2017; Cloke *et al.* 2019). Religion provides ethical impulses that subvert, resist and rework neoliberal forms of care, thus restoring ethics and hope beyond the logics perpetuated by the secular logics of the state and market. Nevertheless, central to the scholarship of secularity and postsecularity is the common concerns approach about how new religious subjectivities, ethics and agency are made possible under the secular condition of being.

In light of the theories mentioned above, the central aim of this thesis is to establish a cross-fertilising research agenda between scholarship on China's religious revival and the geography of secularity and postsecularity. In this thesis, I suggest that the contradictory dual transition in China – the entrenchment of secularity and simultaneously the possibly postsecular religious revival – provides an important social niche to ground and advance a discussion on secularity and postsecularity in a non-Western context. In response to Casanova (2009, 2013) and Taylor's (2011) call to move beyond a Eurocentric understanding of secularisation as the normative knowledge and general trajectory of modernisation, I pay attention to the specific configurations of secular modernity in China. This effort is discussed in chapter 3, which gives a historical account of China's secularity

as well as in the empirical chapters about how secularity and neoliberalism are inhabited by migrant workers in Shenzhen. In particular, I investigate how religious ethics and subjectivities articulate, and co-evolve with, secular conditions of being (Taylor 2007) and especially neoliberal governance in Shenzhen. As I highlight in the empirical chapters, at the specific historical juncture of Shenzhen's rise as an epicentre of China's industrial modernity, Protestant Christian faith and institutions are integral to, and indeed constitutive of, the way in which state developmentalism, the ethos of the market economy, and neoliberal labour relations are legitimated, lived and reinforced, both individually and collectively. Echoing Taylor's (2007, 2011) arguments, people's courting of religion in the reform era as described in this study is not so much about whether the society is becoming "more" or "less" religious. Faith is not always synonymous with the pursuit of a transcendental spiritual domain aloof from, even superseding, everyday life experience in the secular world. Stories of migrant Christians in Shenzhen illustrate vividly that new religious interpretations, ethics and subjects are formed at the interstices of capitalist economy, state power and spiritual pursuit.

However, I also argue that political and economic transformation in China has indeed catalysed new desires for religiosity and the possibilities of postsecularity in which the individual can claim an alternative way of life beyond the personhood normalised by state power and secular-neoliberalism. In response to the emerging scholarship of postsecularity in human geography and beyond (e.g. Beaumont & Baker 2011; Cloke & Beaumont 2012; Holloway 2013; Olson *et al.* 2013; Gökarıksel & Secor 2015; Williams 2015; Bartolini *et al.* 2017; Cloke *et al.* 2019), I therefore pay special attention to an examination of the way these postsecular subjectivities, ethics and agency are made possible. As I show in chapter 5, the lived enactment of Christian theo-ethics (Cloke 2010;



Williams 2015) in the everyday praxis of care and justice among marginalised migrant workers can open an ethical space that reconstitutes the subjectivities normalised by autocratic and neoliberal agendas. Yet, religious ethics and discourse are not simply manoeuvred by migrant workers or religious institutions as tactical response to exploitative labour regimes, and in chapter 6 I emphasise the importance of the embodied knowledge of theologies and the affective presence of transcendence in the formation of the faithful subjectivity of migrant workers. Also, embodied theology enables a more hopeful, self-valued and morally superior subject for migrant workers.

Yet notwithstanding that the existing scholarship of postsecularity in human geography has presented substantial contributions to the grounding of Habermas's ethical critique of secularism and cross-over narratives of religion in public life (e.g. Beaumont & Baker 2011; Cloke & Beaumont 2012; Williams 2015), in-depth research is rare which links religious subjectivities and agency (Mahmood 2005; Braidotti 2008; Vasilaki 2016) to the discussion of intersectionality. In other words, instead of presupposing postsecularity as an ontological condition, I carefully examine the spatial conditions and multiple layers of power relations, lived experiences and identities in which new religious subjectivities and agency are conditioned and engendered. In this thesis, I argue that the intersectional approach provides a vigorous analytical tool to address and advance the understanding of secular and postsecular subjectivity by acknowledging how different forms of powers and lived experiences mutually constitute (McCall 2005; Collins and Bilge 2016; Hopkins 2017). Firstly, the intersectional approach emphasizes different systems of oppressions and social inequalities, so that migrant workers' subjectivities are not shaped by a single axis of social division (for example, class, religion or gender) but by multi-layered lived experiences and power relations (Collins and Bilge 2016). Secondly, therefore,

postsecular agency and subjectivities cannot be captured by simply examining the relevant religious experiences alone; instead, I focus on how religion affects and is affected by other lived experiences such as of class, gender and the specific life course in such a way that may enable the formation of new religious subjectivities. In general, I highlight in this thesis that it is through a careful examination of intersectional experiences that we can acquire situated knowledge regarding how postsecular subjectivities emerge in a relational world. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 in this thesis therefore deploy an intersectional approach to explore how secularity, neoliberalism and postsecularity are inhabited and negotiated in interactions among religion, class, gender and youth.

## **1.2 Research questions**

The following research questions are examined in an effort to address the overall research aims of this thesis:

- (1) How do religious (Christian) subjectivities and ethics articulate and co-evolve with secular conditions of being in the context of the neoliberal transition in Shenzhen?
- (2) What are the specific configurations of secularity and postsecularity in contemporary China?
- (3) In what ways do migrant workers constitute their religious subjectivities and how may postsecularity emerge from this process?
- (4) How can an intersectional approach provide new understandings of both secularity and postsecular subjectivity ?

## **1.3 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis contains ten chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 presents a theoretical outline concerning the geography of secularity and postsecularity. Chapter 3 then provides reflections on the spatial conditions of secularity and postsecularity in China. The methodology and research area are subsequently considered in Chapter 4. The following empirical chapters are organised according to the themes of neoliberal secularity and theo-ethics (Chapter 5), embodied theologies and technologies of the self (Chapter 6), Christianity and masculine subjects (Chapter 7), women's religious agency (Chapter 8), and the Christian trajectory to working-class adulthood (Chapter 9). Each empirical chapter can be read independently with a specific theoretical register, but overall they represent a comprehensive picture of migrant workers' religious lives. Chapter 10 concludes with a summary of the research findings and a discussion of the contributions of this thesis.

**Chapter 2** delineates a grounded dialectic of secularity and postsecularity and provides an analysis of its geographical implications. This dialectical agenda is achieved by reconciling critical theories of secularity that highlight both secular governmentality and the existential lived conditions of the secular (Asad 2003; Taylor 2007, 2011; Casanova 2009, 2013) with postsecular critiques that emphasize not only the mutually reflexive transformation of religion and the secular but also ethics and epistemologies beyond secularism (Habermas 2006, 2010; Cloke & Beaumont 2012). In general, this chapter considers secularity and postsecularity as distinctive but mutually constitutive domains of knowledge, conditions of being, and epistemologies. In the light of this, I argue that human geography can advance the understanding of secularity and postsecularity by engaging with three lines of inquiries that examine: (1) the political-ideological project of secularity and its epistemic knowledge regime, and simultaneously how secularity is

felt and inhabited by individuals in the specific process of place-making; (2) how new postsecular subjectivities are engendered by, and co-constituted with, secular conditions of being; and (3) the wider spatial conditions where variegated forms of secularity and postsecularity may exist and be re-configured. This chapter therefore addresses these theoretical registers by developing two approaches to the grounding of geographical studies of secularity and postsecularity. First, I engage with neoliberalism as a form of social order and governmentality in which not only does the political-ideological project of secularity operate but religion also persists. Second, I develop an intersectional approach to secularity and postsecularity that emphasises the multi-layered nature of power and the ways different subjectivities (concerning, for example, religion, gender and class) shape and form one another. I argue that both secularity and postsecularity are multi-layered, hybrid, and intersectionally constituted; therefore, an intersectional approach enables geographers to capture the complex socio-spatial relations from which postsecular subjectivities and agency may emerge.

**Chapter 3** examines the geo-historical conditions of secularity and postsecularity in China. This chapter responds to Casanova (2009, 2013) and Taylor's (2011) call for a global comparative study of religion that moves beyond dominant stereotypes about the trajectories of modernization in the United States and Europe. On the one hand I provide a brief genealogy of secularity and secularism in the history of China. Secularity and secularism are not simply latent functions and by-products of the inevitable project of modernization, but are more likely to reflect a state-led strategy and ideology to enhance state-building and social governance. On the other hand, I then discuss the possibility of postsecular transformation evident in China's remarkable religious revival in the post-reform era. The individual's quest for "moral reconstruction" and spiritual flourishing

amidst market-oriented reform, along with the increasing role of religion in addressing the malaises of neoliberal transition, have constituted a social niche for religion to persist in China. Overall, this chapter offers important contextual knowledge for understanding the malleable and hybrid religiosity of migrant workers in China.

**Chapter 4** discusses the research context and methodology of this thesis. Firstly I contextualise Christianity and migrant workers in Shenzhen by situating them in local history and political-economic conditions and explain why the emergence of “Christian migrant workers” has become a salient phenomenon in Shenzhen. This chapter then offers a discussion of the conduct of a reflexive ethnography of religion in China, with a particular focus on the production of situated knowledge and the researcher’s positionality.

**Chapter 5** examines the connections between the secularist-neoliberal governance of migrants and Christian theo-ethics. The regulation of migrant labourers has been one of the primary mechanisms of the state’s secular and neoliberal governance. This chapter therefore focuses on the “actually existing” workings of this neoliberal migrant regime and in particular its everyday encounters with locally-based ethical agents. On the one hand, I draw attention to how neoliberal subjectivities are materialised in the disciplinary migrant labour regime in Shenzhen, where the reconciliation of neoliberalism and autocratic power has resulted in the hyper-exploitation of migrant workers. On the other hand, I explore how the lived enactment of Christian theo-ethics in the everyday praxis of care and justice for marginalised migrant workers can open up an ethical space that reconstitutes the subjectivities normalised by autocratic and neoliberal agendas. I argue that theo-ethics not only negotiates but also co-constitutes secular-neoliberal governance

by either ameliorating neoliberal subjectivity or drawing on neoliberal logics per se; regardless, it creates possibilities for more hopeful spaces and hybrid subjectivities beyond secularist ethics.

**Chapter 6** further explores how Christian migrant workers constitute their religious subjectivities and religious bodies through theologies-by-praxis. This chapter responds to the postsecular critique which argues that religion should not be reduced to social dynamics falling outside the domains of self-interpretation and theological knowledge. This chapter contributes to this critique by examining how the knowledge of faithful subjectivities can be informed by more nuanced understanding of theology and postsecular ethics (Holloway 2013; Sutherland 2016). On the one hand, by analysing the preaching, sermons, and rituals of both house churches and TSPM (Three-self Patriotic Movement) churches I suggest that religious institutions offer migrant workers a locally-sensitive regime of embodied knowledge through which transcendent and faithful sensibilities are corporeally felt. On the other hand, these embodied theologies have been reflexively adopted by migrant workers as “technologies of the self” to constitute a desired way of being. Although migrant workers’ self-transformation often overlaps with the state/capitalist agenda of producing docile and productive migrant bodies, it nevertheless enables a more self-valued and morally superior subject that conditions or reframes neoliberal subjectivation.

**Chapter 7** examines the formation of Christian and moral masculinity by focusing on the intersections of religion, class and gender among rural migrant workers in Shenzhen. Theoretically, this chapter analyses how postsecular subjectivity may emerge through the intersectional constitution of masculinity by bringing postsecularity into dialogue with

critical geographies of masculinity. It explores how Christian migrant workers tactically deploy religious discourses to construct their masculine moral subjectivity in rural churches, urban workplaces and the family and thus transform and come to terms with (and sometimes reinforce) different hegemonic masculinities normalised by the hierarchical labour regime, traditional patriarchal culture, and secular values. I suggest that migrant workers' performance of moral manhood is itself hegemonic, as it is conditioned by a set of normative religious moralities and conduct. Nevertheless, it serves as a tactical alternative for migrant workers to reframe their marginal experiences and to claim a meaningful way of being men that may psychologically empower them. In this sense, Christian migrant workers' masculinity formation can be understood as a process of autopoiesis or self-cultivation as pious subjects beyond the secular-humanist account of autonomous and emancipatory personhood (Mahmood 2005).

**Chapter 8** focuses on the constitution of women Christian migrant workers' religious subjectivity and agency. In particular, I draw on recent debates about postsecular feminism regarding the extent to which women's subjectivity and agency can be conveyed through and supported by religious ethics and piety and the rethinking of women's agency beyond the limitations of Eurocentric and secular humanist theorizing (Mahmood 2005; Braidotti 2008; Vasilaki 2016). This chapter therefore advances this discussion by investigating women migrant workers' intersectional experiences of religion, gender, migration, and familial relation. I situate Christian migrant women's subjectivity within the intersectional "matrix of domination" in which subaltern femininity is created and within which new religious agency may arise. Firstly, women migrants' emphasis on the authority of feeling, emotion, and experience not only offers them a "comfort zone" to negotiate with labour alienation, but also redefines the male-

dominated religious sphere. Secondly, the agency of women migrants also manifests in their efforts to Christianize family relations. However, this is not achieved through practices of resistance, but by performing docile, hardworking, tolerant Christian femininities in the family.

**Chapter 9** researches young Christian migrant workers' transition to working-class adulthood and the possibilities of postsecular subjectivity and agency that emerge within the process of youth transition. By re-invigorating the concept of "spiritual capital", this chapter examines how postsecular subjectivities are mediated by and embodied as resourcefulness and the sino-knowledge of sociability in young people's navigation of adulthood. On the one hand, I analyse how the state's secular-neoliberal project operates through the creation of an educational-economic regime that reduces young rural migrants to cheap labour and deprives them of aspiration, hope, and upward mobility. On the other hand, I elaborate on how "spiritual capital" can produce *hopeful* geographies of adulthood for rural migrant youth, in terms of forming religious networks and a system of *jiazhiguan* (value). Young migrant workers also manoeuvre spiritual capital (in the form of what they call "Christian wisdom") to establish *guanxi* or interpersonal networks of influence beyond the social spaces normalised by the neoliberal labour regime.

**Chapter 10** concludes by summarising the key research findings, central arguments and contributions of this thesis. I critically rethink secularity and postsecularity in terms of the reflexivity and spatial conditions, religiosity, and intersectionality affecting the lives of migrants. In particular, the intersectional approach to secularity and postsecularity developed in Chapter 2 is re-examined



## Chapter 2 Geographies of secularity and postsecularity

### 2.1 Introduction

Over the last decade, discussions of secularity and religion have re-entered centre stage in inquiries in the humanities and social sciences, making significant contributions to new understanding of our modern “condition of being” and how common goods of social justice and human flourishing may be achieved (Asad 2003; Habermas 2006, 2010; Taylor 2007; Casanova 2009; 2013; Asad, Brown, Butler & Mahmood 2013; Berger 2017). This is particularly the case in the emerging scholarship of postsecularity that calls for a rethinking of the persistence, reformulation, and new visibility of religion in the public sphere and how alternative ways of life and politics beyond secularist ethics can be imagined (Habermas 2006; 2010; Beckford 2012; Beaumont 2019). In human geography, the notion of postsecularity or postsecularism has been widely adopted as an analytical frame to capture new spatialities and practices of religion and to challenge the categorical assumption of the secularisation thesis (e.g. Cloke & Beaumont & Baker 2011; Beaumont 2012; Olson *et al.* 2013; Gökarıksel & Secor 2015; Williams 2015; Cloke *et al.* 2019). Drawing primarily from the postsecular narratives enriched by the works of Jürgen Habermas (2006; 2010), this line of research emphasises the mutually reflexive transformation of secularity and religion, and the emerging spaces of rapprochement in which religion serves as an ethical and reflective project of neoliberal governance in addressing issues of welfare and social justices (Williams 2015). In particular, postsecularity has recently been examined as a space of possibility in which the formation of new ethical subjectivities and hopeful geographies may emerge in place-making and faith-based praxis (Cloke *et al.* 2019). Following this lead, one of the aims of this chapter

is to explore the formation of ethical subjectivities, agency, and conditions of being that emerge in and through the possible spaces of postsecularity.

However, instead of uncritically accepting the analytical values of postsecularity, some other geographers argue that the postsecular approach in geography has exhibited overly facile understandings of secularity, with a lack of attention to the geohistorical contingencies and complexities of secularity (Kong 2010; Wilford 2010; Tse 2014: 202; Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018). Also, as Tse (2014) argues, secularisation and secularity can themselves be understood as theologically constituted and as part of a process whereby *homo religiosus* remains robust. Therefore, they have sought to re-conceptualise secularisation and secularity as grounded and context-contingent processes, providing accounts of “how the secular is lived and performed by modern subjects at different levels of social, economic and political organisation” (Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018: 554). This approach is deeply influenced by Taylor’s (2007) phenomenological account of the secular condition of belief, which argues that secularity remains a real, tangible condition under which not only religions evolve and thrive but individuals form everyday subjectivities in modernity (Taylor 2007, 2011; Casanova 2013). In this chapter, I argue that the postsecular turn in human geography needs to consider how postsecular ethics and subjectivities articulate, and co-evolve with, secular conditions of being in the world.

This chapter therefore provides a grounded dialectic of secularity and postsecularity and an analysis of its geographical implications. In general, I consider secularity and postsecularity as distinctive but mutually constituted domains of knowledge, conditions of being, and epistemologies. As Taylor (2007) notes, modern individuals are facing a “cross-pressure” situation, a lived experience in which we desire to create new modes of

being through, or even out of, the immanence frame. In this sense, the prevalence of individualised spiritualities can be viewed as an outcome of Taylor's (2007) 'nova effect': the co-existence of individual quests for spiritual realisation, and new religious subjectivities made possible by the cross-pressure of secular condition of being (Tse 2014). That is why Taylor (2007) emphasises that how one inhabits secularity and immanent order hinges on how one interprets the meanings of transcendence. Building on these insights, a more nuanced understanding of postsecularity is presented in this chapter, where it is better understood as a condition and possibility in which individuals *inhabit* secularity and transcendence in such a way that new, multiple, and hybrid religious subjectivities emerge.

Above all, this chapter argues that human geography can advance the understanding of secularity and postsecularity by engaging in three lines of inquiry. Firstly, geographers need to examine the political-ideological project of secularity and its epistemic knowledge regime, and simultaneously how secularity is felt and inhabited by individuals in the specific process of place-making. Secondly, researchers need to answer questions concerning what and how new postsecular subjectivities are engendered by and co-constituted with secular conditions of being. Thirdly, research also needs to interrogate the wider spatial conditions where variegated forms of secularity and postsecularity may exist and be re-configured, especially beyond the Eurocentric understanding of secularity as the normative knowledge and general trajectory of modernisation.

This chapter therefore addresses these theoretical registers by introducing two approaches to the grounding of geographies of secularity and postsecularity. First I engage with neoliberalism as a form of social order and governmentality in which not only does the

political-ideological project of secularity operate, but religion also persists. In this thesis, I will show the ways in which neoliberalism operates as a secular-ideological project that moulds the subject-forms and affective life of individuals (Anderson 2016) and simultaneously opens up spaces for new religiosities and faith-based praxis. Second, I develop an intersectional approach to secularity and postsecularity that emphasises the multi-layered nature of power and the ways different subjectivities (for example, related to dimensions of religion, gender and class) shape and form one another. I argue that the secular and neoliberal project is often actualised and materialised through the normalisation and categorisation of intersectional subjects. This chapter also highlights the fact that postsecularity is multi-layered, hybrid, and intersectionally constituted; therefore, an intersectional approach enables geographers to capture the complex power relations from which postsecular subjectivities and agency may emerge.

## **2.2 Rethinking secularity: politics, space and conditions of being**

Rethinking secularity requires the analytical differences between “secularity”, “the secular”, “secularisation” and “secularism” to be distinguished. All four concepts are interconnected, referring to a regime of knowledge related to religion; therefore, they are sometimes used interchangeably in various academic disciplines. However, in this thesis, I see secularity as a broader concept that describes the condition of being in a modern secular age, encompassing the secular as a modern epistemic category (Casanova 2009), social-historical processes of secularisation, and the worldview and ideology of secularism (Asad 2009). This treatment can avoid reifying the concepts as referring to different realities while maintaining analytical distinctions. As Casanova (2011: 54) suggests, the secular is often understood as a residual category, “the other of the religious”.

The secular is therefore largely a modern epistemic tool utilised to capture the master narrative of modern transformation:

The secular has become a central modern category — theological-philosophical, legal-political, and cultural-anthropological — to construct, codify, grasp, and experience a realm or reality differentiated from “the religious”. Phenomenologically, one can explore the different types of “secularities” as they are codified, institutionalized, and experienced in various modern contexts and the parallel and correlated transformations of modern “religiosities” and “spiritualities” (Casanova 2011: 54).

Despite being a discursively constituted category vis-à-vis “religion” (Asad 2009), the secular as “modern social imaginaries” (Taylor 2004) may exist in most societies that have been inescapably involved in the project of modernisation, implicating different cultural politics and political-economic projects of governmentality. That is why Casanova (2011) encourages us to explore the multiple forms of secularities. This thesis therefore addresses this effort by looking at how secularity is embodied in the context of China.

However, secularity is often imagined in the historical processes of secularisation, actually existing or alleged empirical-social patterns of transformation in which religions increasingly lose their hold in modern society. The classic theories of secularisation anticipate the declining significance and presence of religion in the realms of individual lives, societies, and states, and argue for the individualisation of religion (Luckmann 1967; Berger 1969; Brown 2001; Bruce 2002). As Bruce (2002) points out, secularisation is the result of the holistic transformation of modern society, including the economic processes

of industrialisation, the social processes of individualism and rationalisation of social organisation, and the geographical processes of urbanisation and globalisation that dismantle place-based communities where religion persists. Bruce (2002) essentially posits a strong connection between secularisation and modernisation, following the neo-orthodox tradition established by Max Weber, who asserted that modernisation necessarily leads to disenchantment. However, for Bruce, the disenchantment of society does not replace religion altogether, which may continually function as a means of “cultural defence or integration”: religion persists if, and only if, “it finds work to do other than relating individuals to the supernatural” (Bruce 2002: 269).

However, theories of secularisation have been critiqued for their Eurocentric roots and overgeneralisations which overlook the geographically and historically uneven processes of secularisation (Casanova 2008; Gao *et al.* 2018). The classical theories are therefore at odds with the complexities of empirical reality; for instance, the flourishing of religion in the United States and “global South” (particularly Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, China and Korea) and the worldwide Islamic revitalisation. As Beaumont and Baker state (2011: 5), “Globalized societies on all continents find themselves caught in a series of contradictory dynamics, including simultaneous and dialectical processes of secularisation alongside the growing deprivatization of faith and its re-emergence as a shaper of cultural, political, economic processes”.

Instead of abandoning the secularisation theory altogether, some scholars have sought to reformulate it, arguing that secularisation retains explanatory value and therefore is still an actual process (Casanova 1993, 2008, 2013; Martin 2017; Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012). In general, this line of research rejects secularisation as a process with

ultimate telos occurring in a unilinear way independent of geo-historical contingencies. Overall, they accept that the social significance of religion has declined to varying degrees as society modernizes, but do not see this as a homogeneous process. Instead, as Casanova (2011: 54) argues, “‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’ are always and everywhere mutually constituted”: they are mutually competitive in some cases and reinforce each other in others. For Casanova (1993, 2008, 2013), secularisation includes three interconnected dimensions: the decline of religious beliefs and practice in modern societies; the privatisation of beliefs, which serves as a normative condition for modern liberal democratic politics; and the differentiation of religious institutions and norms from other social spheres. Because modernity may not necessarily result in the decline and privatisation of religion, as documented in many social contexts, Casanova (2006: 9) endorses the position that an understanding of secularisation as “a process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular sphere – primarily the modern state, the capitalist market economy, and modern science – from the religious sphere” is still an uncontested thesis in social science.

In recent years, human geographers have expressed growing interests in debates around secularisation and secularity (Wilford 2010; Tse 2014; Bartolini *et al.* 2017; Beaumont, Eder and Mendieta 2018; Gao, Qian and Yuan 2018; Gao, Yin and Zhu 2018), and have sought to reconceptualise secularisation as a grounded, reflexive, and spatially contingent process. Adopting a scalar perspective, Wilford (2010) emphasises the contingency and tension existing between structural forces of secularisation and secularism and the actually existing practices of human agents. He therefore reconciles the grounded and place-making process of secularisation with institutional differentiation and fragmentation. As Wilford (2010: 355) argues, secularisation poses “new problems and

opportunities, restrictions and openings to religion in advanced differentiated societies”. Rather than merely being conceived as a threat to religion and the sacred, secularisation is also “left open for sacralization in countless ways”: macro-level differentiation provides a range of possibilities for the resurgence of religions in public spheres and new spiritual practices and aspirations at the meso- and micro-scales (Wilford, 2010: 343). In general, Wilford (2010: 344) suggests that religion and spirituality are always differentially scaled, “confined to scales where their expression does not encroach on secular subsystems such as law, government, and the market”. He therefore uses the metaphor of “sacred archipelagos” to describe the condition of religion in modern society, in which religion is relocated to fragmented spatialities of lived spiritualities. In other words, social differentiation and modernization simultaneously establish proper scales or niched spaces at which religions continually flourish, since they continue to function as sources of value, meaning and reflectivity that modernity cannot offer people. Yet Wilford also recognises that the “agent in place” is not a liberated, free-floating space, but is conditioned by macro-level secular institutions and ideologies, and therefore geographical research needs to address the “embodied, material, and local responses to abstract, large scale forces imputed by secularization theory” and how individuals make sense of and interpret religious and secular meanings in specific contexts. Wilford’s arguments are echoed in Gao, Duo and Zhu’s (2018) research at a Chinese ancestral temple in one “urban village” in Guangzhou. They focus on the state-enforced secularisation imposed on the ancestral temple, the spiritual centre of the village, which aimed to mute religion-enabled resistance to the project of urban regeneration. However, the project of secularisation at the micro-scale does not achieve its aim, because it also opens space where “the formation of new religiosities as new legitimising religious



thoughts and discourses of the sacred arose within villagers' embodied practices of resistance”(Gao, Duo and Zhu 2018:1).

Wilford's argument is criticised by Bartolini *et al.* (2017: 338) due to its clear-cut separation of different public spheres that have distinctive spatialities and functions, thus seeking to map out and differentiate “spheres/places where the spiritual is present or not, legitimate or not and/or authoritative or not”. Rejecting any clear-cut distinction between processes of secularisation and those of re-sacralisation, Bartolini *et al.* (2017) argue that secular modernity is always-already co-produced with the enchantment of religions. Hence, instead of asking which scales, niched spaces/spheres offer more affordances for religious practices and expression, it is better to see modernity as “centrally engaged with questions of faith and religious values”. Likewise, as Tse (2014) point out, secularisation can itself be understood as theologically constituted and as a process whereby *homo religiosus* remains robust. Tse's (2014) “grounded theologies” or “secular theologies” are valuable theoretical innovations in exploring geographies of religion in a secular age. Consonant with Wilford (2010), Tse also argues for a more critical re-examination of secularisation and secularity. Yet Tse advances Wilford's arguments by asserting that “to be ‘secular’ is in fact an inversion of Christian theology”, modern concepts of the state largely reflect a “theopolitical imagination”, and secularisation itself originates from the processes by which theologies and the transcendent are implicated in society and religious practitioners constitute their private senses of the transcendent. By *grounded theologies*, Tse (2014) refers particularly to processes in which narratives regarding divine action and transcendent presence are addressed in the *performative practices of place-making*. In this sense, grounded or secular theologies are not so much about “the codification of religious propositions to which religious adherents give cognitive assent, but rather to the

performative practice of narratives about metaphysical divine action in relation to the immanent world” (Tse 2014: 204). He therefore highlights “the secular” as referring to the social implications of theologies and how religions relate to this-worldly concerns.

Instead of becoming tangled in debates over whether our societies are more or less religious, some key thinkers have moved the focus from secularisation to secularity or secularism *per se*, and especially to multiple configurations of secularities and conditions of being in secular modernity (Asad 2003; Taylor 2007; Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen 2011; Casanova 2011, 2013; Wohlrab-Sahr 2012; Asad, Brown, Butler & Mahmood 2013). The knowledge of “the secular” is closely associated with the context of Western culture, especially the history of Christian Europe. As Charles Taylor (2007) suggests, the ideology of the secular might return in the Third Republic in Europe, the regime which was primarily founded on the ideologies of the self-sufficiency of the secular in order not to be subordinate to the church. Yet, it was not until the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment that secularism emerged as a form of rational morality – for example, in the *theological rationalities* in Kant’s philosophy that intended to restrain religion within the regime of rationality – in the pursuit of liberalization (Taylor 2011). In 19th-century liberal Europe, secularism started to become a political and governmental doctrine, implicated in the project of normative-ideological state projects and the cultural programme of modernity that “brings together certain behaviours, knowledges and sensibilities in modern life” (Asad 2003: 25). For Taylor (2007), the history of the secular in the West is the foundation of a clear epistemic distinction between the immanent (this-worldly and self-sufficient spheres) and the transcendent (often identified as “religious” or supernatural).

However, it is not the intention of this chapter to elaborate on the genealogies and historical formations of secularity and secularism, which have already been systematically surveyed in the works of Talal Asad and Charles Taylor. Instead, I explore how knowledge of secularity can be applicable to wider spatial conditions and how different contexts reformulate understandings of secularity beyond Western societies. It is noteworthy that both Taylor and Asad agree that secularism – particularly as an ethics independent of religious conviction – is applicable throughout the world and societies that have been involved in the project of modernization (see Asad 2003: 2). I agree with Casanova’s (2011:55) argument that secularity, as a political-ideological or cultural agenda, may be “viewed as an epistemic knowledge regime that may be held unreflexively or be assumed phenomenologically as the taken-for-granted normal structure of modern reality, as a modern *doxa* or an ‘unthought’”. In other words, the unreflective assumption or “unthought” of secularism that defines what it is to be modern and what is “the good life” (Taylor 2011) might exist in different institutional arrangements and cultural politics across the world. Overall, I define secularity as a broad regime of knowledge normalised by political-cultural agendas as an unreflective condition of being in modern society. This definition highlights not only the historical-discursive formation of secularity in the regime of knowledge/power (Foucault 1988) but a phenomenological condition in which secularity is embodied – that is, how secularity is lived by modern individuals.

In order to further illustrate this definition, I need to further elaborate on Charles Taylor’s (2007) phenomenological account of secularity and his thesis of modernity as “a secular age”. Taylor’s question is not whether our society is less or more religious, nor does he intend to claim a historical switch from an “age of belief” to an “age of reason”. Instead,

Taylor is interested in providing a phenomenological account of the condition of belief – what it feels like to live and what is believable in a modern secular age. For Taylor, previous debates about secularisation mislead us in our understanding of modern society, as they are obsessed with *expressions* of belief rather than the *conditions* of belief. The problematics of the modern secular should concern questions about what is believable. In this way of framing the inquiry, Taylor thinks that “the secular” is not necessarily about the decline of belief but rather the default assumptions about what is believable (among various values, faiths, spiritualities, significances, ideologies, and so on). The overall thrust of Taylor’s thesis is to explain the structural constellation of the social, moral, and cosmic orders that constitute what he calls the *immanent frame* within which modern social actors interpret the meanings of themselves and make sense of religion (Casanova 2010; 2013). Taylor’s analytical project starts from his unique definition of “the secular”. Overall, Taylor (2007; 2011) and Casanova (2010; 2013) have devised four taxonomies of “the secular” and secularity:

- (1) In the broadest possible sense, the “secular” amounts to a time and space, or the realm of “earthly” politics. It derives from medieval Christian theologies that view the “secular” as the other of “sacred” or “religious”, under the sacred/secular divide (Taylor 2007). Taylor (2007) calls *categorical secularity*.
- (2) Influenced by the Enlightenment, “secular” started to refer to a neutral, areligious, and non-sectarian space that all worldviews, religious or non-religious, can share and compete for. It was first used by Augustine to describe how Christians and pagans come together to peruse their common interests in civil spheres (Casanova 2013). According to Taylor (2007), the normative sense of secularism often shares

this notion of secular, which posits a realm governed by neutral and universal rationality that can be shared by all people. Taylor refers this to *mere secularity*.

- (3) Taylor's (2007) third definition of the secular, which he refers to as *self-sufficient secularity*, that most helpfully contributes to the comprehension of religion in a secular age. A society is secular insofar as belief in God is one but not the only source of meanings that constitute our life (Taylor 2007). In this sense, belief and faith are reflective and contestable. For Taylor, it is the emergence of the "secular" in this sense that gives rise to an "exclusive humanism", a vision of life in which human beings flourish within the frame of immanence: "A purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. It means a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing" (Taylor 2007: 18). For Casanova (2013), self-sufficient secularity means the naturalisation of "unbelief" or "non-religion" as the normal human condition as an assumption of modern living.

However, as Casanova (2013) suggests, self-sufficient secularity may develop into a more secularist ideology that considers the absence of religion as the natural consequence of modernization. This is particularly evident in countries that utilise the ideologies of secularism to promote state-led modernization, such as China. Therefore, Casanova (2013) articulates a fourth sense of the "secular":

- (4) In this sense, being "secular" means the phenomenological experience that disengaged belief and immanent consciousness are not only passively free but mean "having been liberated from 'religion' as a condition for human autonomy

and human flourishing” (Casanova 2013: 33). Casanova calls this *secularist secularity*. In this respect, secularist secularity emphasises the superiority of our present secular modernity over supposedly earlier or less-modernised societies. That is, in Casanova’s (2013:34) words, “to be secular means to be modern, and therefore, by implication, to be religious means to be somehow not yet fully modern”.

In general, while mere secularity and secularist secularity may serve as different cultural-political projects, self-sufficient secularity exists as a secular mode of being. Taylor (2007) argues that we are living within the “immanent frame”, in which individuals make sense of the world entirely or mainly based on a secular worldly order, devoid of transcendent knowledge and values. Rationalisation, democracy, market economies and disassociation from religious authority together create new cosmic, social and moral orders. Modern subjects – religious or otherwise – are constrained by a “stadial consciousness”, focused on rational calculation and this-worldly concerns. Therefore, secular modernity gives rise to a system of phenomenological conditions under which people, including religious people, are disposed to non-transcendental mindsets, values, rules and practices.

However, a society of mere secularity or secularist secularity could simultaneously undergo religious revival, where vast swathes of the populace continually engage religious beliefs as sources of significance. People are obviously not neatly divided into the realms of immanence or transcendence. Instead, as Taylor (2007) notes, modern individuals face a “cross-pressure” situation, a lived experience in which we try to forge new modes of being through, even out of, the immanence frame. While the world is disenchanted, modern individuals nevertheless also experience the malaise of modernity

– a sense of *loss* inflicted by such disenchantment. In such a secular age, religions do not perish, but flourish in the form of what Taylor calls the “nova effect” – individuated quests for spiritual realisation and proliferating religious subjectivities that exist in fragmentation.

To sum up, Taylor and Casanova’s accounts of secularity offers important theoretical registers for geographers of religion. Firstly, “the secular” is inescapably exists in modern social imagineries, influencing the ways we make sense of the world; therefore, studies in geographies of secularity can significantly contribute to new understandings of how different configurations and knowledge of secularities come into being and are contextualised. As Taylor (2011) recently noted:

What to do? We might think of starting again with another term, one less identified with a particular civilizational trajectory. But that is probably utopian. The word “secular” is much too entrenched in all sorts of discussion, historical and normative, to be displaced ... Obviously, we need a great deal of close study of other, non-Western contexts in order to help here, and I find myself very ill equipped to offer further useful contributions (2011: 36, emphasis in original).

This coincides with Casanova’s (2006; 2009) advocacy that research needs to adopt the global comparative study of religion and secularity in order to historicise and contextualise all epistemic categories. A proper rethinking of secularisation and secularity will “require a critical examination of the diverse patterns of differentiation and fusion of the religious and the secular and their mutually constituted across all world religion” (Casanova 2006: 10). In this sense, geographers can contribute significantly to this project

by providing grounded examinations of the performative practices of place-making informed by the politics and ethics of “the secular” (Tse 2014) in different political regimes and different cultural conditions of being. This thesis therefore represents such an attempt, in response to Casanova (2009; 2013) and Taylor’s (2011) call to move beyond Eurocentric understanding of secularity as the normative knowledge and general trajectory of modernisation. I focus here on how secularity is configured, embodied, and lived by individuals in the context of China. As shown in this thesis, unlike in liberal and pluralist societies in the West, China’s trajectory to secular modernity in the post-reform era is characterised by a combination of neoliberalist governance, state developmentalism, and autocratic rule, which work collaboratively to produce a hegemonic regime of knowledge and particular subject forms.

Secondly, the immanent frame remains a real, tangible condition under which not only religions evolve and thrive but individuals form everyday subjectivities in modernity. In this sense, Taylor’s work provides a nuanced “reconciling of the secularizing agent-in-place” (Wilford 2010) with macro-level societal secularism. Taylor’s (2007) thesis recognises the tension between and contingency of secularity as macro-social process or individual consciousness or as actually existing ways of living by individuals. As I show in the empirical chapters, secularism operates as a macro-social force and mechanism of governmentality that shapes migrant workers’ subjectivities. It is pervasively felt, performed and negotiated at the level of the local and the everyday, in the domains of embodiment (Chapter 6), gender identities (Chapter 7 and 8) and adulthood (Chapter 9).

Thirdly, Taylor’s (2007; 2011) work has switched our focus from questions about how “religious” modern society is to how new religious subjectivities/ethics are made possible



by secular conditions of belief. As Smith (2014) suggests, Taylor's thesis of the secular age concerns not *whether or not* modern individuals inhabit the immanent frame, but *how*. Most importantly, as Taylor (2007) argues, how one inhabits the self-sufficient immanent order hinges on how one interprets the meaning of transcendence. As Tse (2014) suggests, the emergence of individualised spiritualities is essentially indicative of the nova effect of grounded theologies. Under this nova effect, what is really at issue is the individual's quest for fulfilment and ethical concerns about what counts as "fulfilment". Therefore, we can either inhabit the immanent frame as an *open space* where we feel the cross-pressure of secular being and recognise the alternative; or we are enclosed in the self-sufficient, self-contained spheres of secularity within which we cannot imagine being otherwise (Taylor 2007). In this sense, geographers of religion should be attentive to the contestability and cross-pressure of variegated modes of being secular in specific contexts and power relations. This thesis also responds to this theoretical concern by looking at how migrant workers inhabit both secularity and religion. As I show in this thesis, the ways migrant workers inhabit and interpret conditions of being impact on the formation of new understandings of transcendence. The migrant workers constitute new religious subjectivities/ethics as a reflexive response to circumstances in which they feel the cross-pressure of the secular condition.

### **2.3 The possibility of postsecularity in secular conditions of being: neoliberalism and new religious subjectivities/ethics**

If modernity is interpreted as a secular age, one must ask what modern postsecularity might mean? In which ways might modern and secular individuals be considered to be "postsecular" subjects? In this section, I elaborate on how "the postsecular" in secular conditions of being can be possible. In particular, I engage with the context of secular

neoliberalism as an “ontological condition-of-being” (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000) and a new social order in which not only do ordinary people constitute their subjectivities, but religious institutions also operate.

### **2.3.1 Postsecular critique and geography**

Over the past decade or so, debates on postsecularity or “the postsecular” have become one of the central concerns in social, cultural and spatial theory. This emergent approach has commendably contributed to analysing the increasing significance of religion in shaping both public politics and individual subjectivity. In general, postsecular assertions question both the “secularist self-understanding” (the self-sufficient and secularist secularities outlined above) and the validity of claims of religious deprivation. Although the term “postsecular” was first used by Andrew Greeley (1966) to describe a new type of *Gemeinschaft*-like community within the church (Beckford 2012), it is Jürgen Habermas (2006, 2010) who substantially initiated a newly emerging discourse of “postsecular” society. Habermas’ utilisation of “the postsecular” is built on his theories of secular modernity, and especially of societal rationalisation and the rationalisation of the lifeworld which offer vigorous insights into the modern public sphere. As Habermas (2006) suggests, modern society cannot flourish by simply resting on moral stances supplied by secular reason characterised by an anthropocentric understanding of the “disenchanted” world and functional differentiation of social subsystems; in fact, religious ways of life play an important role in addressing the malaises of modern society. The thesis of postsecular society is empirically supported by the phenomena of desecularisation or resacralisation, such as in the flourishing of religion in the United States and the “global South” (particularly Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, China, and Korean), and the worldwide Islamic revitalisation (Berger 2017). Yet, resacralisation

cannot describe a global change indicating a new epochal shift where religions re-enter modern society or replace the secular. Therefore, for Habermas (2006, 2010), instead of arguing to what extent religion has persisted, the postsecular present signals a general shift towards the re-emergence of a public, collective consciousness of religiosity in the public sphere; that is, the way citizens understand themselves in relation to religion. Habermas (2006) observes that this changing public consciousness is evident among European citizens who increasingly lost hope in the secularist dogmas that are dominant in public opinion and ethical issues. Moreover, the increasing inflows of immigration by guest-workers and refugees have forged a pluralist way of life in which religion remains crucial in integrating different communities and achieving tolerant co-existence in city spaces.

As opposed to Taylor's emphasis on the immanent frame, Habermas (2006) does not consider immanence and transcendence as so mutually exclusive (Qian and Kong 2018). Instead, the postsecular essentially articulates a dialogical space between religion and the secular and crossover narratives in which religious and secular ethics can be mutually translated. For Habermas (2008), such crossover narratives may result in a process of learning in which secular and religious mentalities can be reflectively transformed, leading to the reconstruction of political/ethical orientations, collective behaviours and universes of knowledge. On the one hand, secular reason must absorb the ethos of religion as social integration and reflective recourse, resisting secularity itself as the judge presiding over the truth of faith (Habermas 2010; see Cloke and Beaumont 2012). On the other hand, religious actors are also exposed to cross-pressure between secular and religious worldviews and ways of being, and hence face the need to cultivate an epistemic stance reconciling both religious and secular knowledge, leading to "a more reflexive

form of religious consciousness” (Habermas 2010: 28). Here, I agree with Cloke *et al.*’s (2019: 28) argument that Habermas’s ideas of postsecularity in essence reflects an ethical politics and “a normative desire to bring religion and spirituality back into the centre of social concerns”, directed towards developing the public and common good. Habermasian postsecular theories do not presuppose the end of secularisation, but emphasise that secularist ideologies and the secularisation paradigm need to be thoroughly revisited in order to account for new religious realities and moral landscapes. In other words, the postsecular approach serves as a self-reflective, critical rethinking and reformulation of self-confident secular modernity rather than merely a clarion call for the revival of religious practices.

Yet, despite Habermas developing grounds for postsecular analysis, postsecularism is “best understood not as any kind of clear position, but as a *spectrum* of concerns and possibilities” (McLennan 2010: 4). In other words, postsecular critiques include variegated sets of thoughts and desires, imbricated with radical-orthodox theology (Smith 2004), Leftist theory (Dews 2008; Eagleton 2009), and feminist debate (Braidotti 2008; Butler 2008). Habermas’s liberal account of postsecularity has also extended deep into radical orthodox theology, as notably represented by the theologies of John Milbank (2008) and Phillip Blond (2010). Instead of seeking to transform theologies and faith into secular enactment, radical orthodoxy re-emphasises the socio-political role of biblical truth and the church in opposition to secularised capitalist society (Cloke *et al.* 2019). Radical orthodoxy not only seeks to revitalise the frame of Christian tradition in which human nature is understood, but also to encourage the social participation of a “theurgy” and religious communitarianism based on true Christian virtues. In this sense, radical orthodoxy is a form of theology in response to the failure of secularism which, as Smith

and Whistler (2010: 14) suggest, seeks to cure the ills of secularism by establishing “a new imperialism” that returns to pre-secular Augustinian and Thomist theology. The postsecular perspective also receives wide purchase in studies of literature, art and popular culture (Bradley, Carruthers and Tate 2010; Beckford 2012). The last decade has witnessed the re-enchantment of culture, manifested not only in the “creative and artistic sensibilities that are moving away from secular themes to explore a realm of enchantment and magic” (Beckford 2012: 6) but in the burgeoning of spiritual, mystical, supernatural and superstitious ideas in popular culture (Partridge 2006; Bartolini *et al.* 2017). Some commentators therefore highlight the re-enchantment of popular culture with “alternative” spiritualities as the self-reflective mentalities of secular modernity and particularly of the hegemony of scientific reason (Partridge 2006) and as a new visibility of religion and spirituality in the public sphere (Moberg and Granholm 2017).

The postsecular ideas outlined above are dominated by Habermas’s critique of rational secularism where postsecularity is “primarily a matter of legal, ethical, and political adjustments to the persistence – or re-entry – of religious forces in the public sphere” (Beckford 2012:9). However, these approaches are also subject to various criticisms. First, the postsecular discussion is argued to be largely driven by an *anti*-secular thrust that treats secularism as a “unitary system” (McLennan 2010). Similarly, as Justin Wilford (2010:1) points out, recent postsecular scholarship is characterised by an anti-secular impetus and the idea that “theories of secularization, secularist ethics, and sociopolitical secularity are all intimately bound to a modern, neoliberal, imperialist ethic of domination, and that postsecular ethics can provide a pivotal energy for political resistance, something that secular liberalism has failed to do”. McLennan (2010) argues that postsecular critique needs to carefully differentiate the epistemological and political dimensions of secularism

rather than seeing secularism as a homogeneous system. Through a re-examination of Asad's genealogy of secularism, McLennan (2010: 6) calls for a move beyond the trap of "ideological critique" that view secularity in a doctrinal way; instead, secularity is better conceived of as "congeries of variously cohering sensibilities, attitudes, embodiments and 'way of being'". McLennan's (2010) critique of postsecular approaches appears to accept Taylor's immanent frame, as he suggests that postsecularity remains thoroughly *intra*-secular in character. Therefore, instead of seeing the postsecular as a corrective to the malaise and failures of secularism, some thinkers of postsecularity tend to consider it as the co-production of both religion and secularism (Knott 2010; Goh 2011). As Knott (2010: 21) argues, postsecular mentalities need to build on "secular values such as the importance of the self, human flourishing and human destiny, diversity, choice, and freedom".

Second, critics also suggest that Habermas's analysis primarily considers religion as a strategic reason for cultivating "the health of public politics and morality" (Beckford 2012:10; Cloke *et al.* 2019). For example, Beckford offers a critique of Habermas's reading of religion:

Indeed, there are grounds for thinking that Habermas adopts the idea of postsecularity partly for strategic reasons in addition to recognizing that the contributions of religion—as a cultural resource—may enhance debate and decision making in the public sphere (Beckford 2012: 9).

In other words, religion in Habermas's analysis appears to be read in reductive terms as a preconceived system of meanings and cosmologies or moral recourse that serves as a

complementary part of secular modernity by contributing to ideas of justice and human flourishing. Beckford's argument resonates with Holloway's (2013) recent critique of the epistemological violence implied in the Habermasian account of postsecularity. Holloway (2013) reveals that religion and belief are subject to a functionalist gaze which "tend[s] to reduce religious understandings of the absolute to functions of fulfilment of ulterior social dynamics that categorically fall outside of the horizons of the self-descriptions of the participants" (Harrington 2007: 546).

In general, two points can be drawn from this line of critique. On the one hand, postsecular analysis should move away from a Western liberal democratic assumption of public spheres in which a cross-narrative of religion and the secular is expected to healthily take place. Therefore, what Habermas leaves unanswered is how ideas of "public" and "state" interconnect (Cloke *et al.* 2019) and how postsecularity exists in different political-economic conditions of secularity. In this respect, this thesis provides an alternative context of power relations beyond Western liberal democratic spheres and explores how postsecularity is possible under authoritarian or autocratic regimes. As I show in chapter 5, despite the crossover presence of Christian theo-ethics and humanist ethics in offering care and social service for psychologically vulnerable migrant workers, it nevertheless does not take place in a democratic civic sphere but is rather implicated in both the state's regulatory power and a neoliberal labour regime.

On the other hand, postsecular critique should be unleashed from a functionalist reading of religion, with more effort to explore what religion and religiosity mean in modernity rather than merely criticising secularity. This is also related to Latour's (2005: 223) questioning of the prevailing paradigm of religion studies: "Why is it that when faced

with religion, we tend to limit our inquiry to its ‘social dimensions’ and take it as a scientific virtue not to study religion itself?” (see Holloway 2013: 204). Therefore, as Holloway (2013) argues, an engagement with theological and faithful sensibilities can contribute to the movement of postsecularism. This thesis systematically responds to Latour’s and Holloway’s arguments: religion in this study can be understood both as a form of capital, recourse or strategy reflexively utilised by migrant workers in response to lived circumstance (see chapter 9 regarding spiritual capital), and as theologies and ethics that migrant workers inhabit and practice as a meaningful way of life (see chapters 6, 7 and 8).

The third line of criticism comes from Casanova’s (2013) argument that postsecularity needs to seriously engage with the geo-historical patterns of secularity and differentiation and fusion of the various institutional spheres from a global comparative perspective. For Casanova (2013), Habermas’s use of the “postsecular” as a change in consciousness, “an altered self-understanding of the secularized societies”, is based on the meaning of *secularist secularity*. That is, the postsecular implies reflexively questioning the modern secularist “stadial consciousness”. However, Casanova’s concern is:

[W]hether Habermas’s postsecular correction has gone far enough or whether his position is still tied to European (mis-)understandings of processes of secularization which irremediably tend to link intrinsically contingent patterns of European Christian secularization with general processes of modernization (Casanova 2013: 34).

For Casanova (2013), secular modernity across the world is not the diffusion of Christian-secular European developments. In the history of many global South countries, the issue



is not about the return or re-creation of tradition but rather a recombinant transformation of becoming simultaneously both more “secular” and more “religious”. It is through globalisation that the Western Christian binary system of classification of religious-secular reality gradually accepted in non-Western cultures. In this sense, the “postsecular” needs to be critically deployed in non-Western contexts, since the religious and the secular are tightly imbricated. Chapter 3 therefore addresses this in terms of multiple secularities and postsecularities in China.

Overall, notwithstanding the merits of the Habermasian approach to the postsecular narrative, more research should delve into how postsecular ethics and subjectivities articulate, and co-evolve with, secular conditions of being rather than simply critiquing secularity. In this respect, religion is better understood as a way of being, theological sensibilities, disposition and embodiment rather than cultural/ethical resources to be enlisted in the politics of public spheres.

Moreover, a global comparative perspective is crucial to an analysis of the extent to which discourses of postsecular are appropriate to capture the religious landscape in non-Western cultures.

In recent years human geographers have increasingly engaged with the conceptual umbrella of postsecularity, exploring the situated, embodied constitution of the postsecular subject and the emergence of various spaces of postsecularity (Beaumont 2008; Beaumont & Baker 2011; Cloke & Beaumont 2012; Olson *et al.* 2013; Gökarıksel & Secor 2015, 2017; Williams 2015; Cloke, Sutherland and Williams 2016; Bartolini *et al.* 2017; Sutherland 2017; Gao and Qian 2018; Qian and Kong 2018; Cloke *et al.* 2019;

Gao and Qian 2019). Yet, geographical research into postsecularity is building on but not limited to the Habermasian critique of secular modernity and the crossover narrative in public spheres, and postsecularity has also been applied to the analysis of how religion constitutes everyday subjectivity, the meanings of lived, embodied experiences (Olson *et al.* 2013; Gao *et al.* 2019), and faithful and hopeful sensibilities (Holloway 2013).

One thread of scholarship represented by Paul Cloke (2010; 2012; 2019), Justin Beaumont (2012), Andrew Williams (2015) and Callum Sutherland (2016) has engaged in grounding Habermas's theories empirically and exploring postsecular rapprochement in the city. This stream of research primarily investigates the increasingly salient role of faith-based organisations (FBOs) as a sign of emerging postsecularity, charting "how the arenas of care, welfare, and justice have proved to be fertile ground for faith-motivated groups and individuals to forsake privatised forms of religion and to engage in more public advocacy and action on behalf of socially and economically marginalised people" (Cloke *et al.* 2019: 37). For Cloke and Beaumont 2012: 41), faith-based practices have opened the spaces of postsecular rapprochement, moving beyond both secularist fundamentalism and faith-based fundamentalism, so that "shared citizenship, mutual tolerance, reflexive transformation and crossover ethical narratives" are made possible.

Postsecular rapprochement is particularly evident in the emerging partnerships in which religious people and those of no faith put aside ideological and moral differences and come together to provide social care and welfare for excluded and marginalized people (Cloke 2010; Williams 2015). These collaborative spaces of rapprochement indicate that religious ethics are becoming increasingly malleable and flexible vis-à-vis secular concerns, moving from a practice of faith-by-dogma to faith-by-praxis in order to address

this-worldly concerns and engage in public engagement (Cloke and Beaumont 2012). Following Habermas, Cloke *et al.* (2019) argue that postsecularity can be grounded in geographical research in two ways: examining religion as *a community of interpretation* contributing to moral and ethical issues in the public sphere and *a community of service and care* in response to neoliberal austerity. In particular, Cloke's (2010, 2011) notion of *theo-ethics*, which refers to a theological shift in Christianity from orthodox theologies towards a more socially engaged faith, is used to investigate how religious ethics work out in the practice of care and service. In chapter 3, I offer an in-depth discussion and empirical examination of Cloke's notion of theo-ethics so as to explore how postsecularity actually operates.

A second thread of scholarship in the geography of postsecularity aims to disrupt the spatial and categorical assumptions of secularization theory by examining how embodiment, everyday life, and alternative spiritualities allow a variety of spaces for the persistence and flourishing of religion (Olson *et al.* 2013; Tse 2014; Bartolini *et al.* 2017; Gökarıksel & Secor 2017; Gao *et al.* 2019). Influenced by McGuire (2008) and Ammerman's (2006) research on lived religion or everyday religion, this line of studies de-emphasises the institutional, doctrinal and belief-centred approach to religion. Rather, they highlight the ways in which religion is lived and practised in the realms of everyday life, in terms of embodiment, affect, emotion, and spirituality, and emphasises the materiality and relational spaces through which people constitute and make sense of their religiosity (Holloway 2013). Spirituality is analysed as alternative and individually selected assortments of beliefs and practices devoid of institutionalised religious expression. For example, so-called "alternative spiritualities" such as New Age, yoga and *tai chi*, along with experiences of the occult and paranormal, have cut across the

boundaries of the religious and the secular (Bartolini *et al.* 2017). Therefore, some critical commentators argue that secular modernity is itself theologically constituted, always-already enchanted by transcendence and religious impulses (Tse 2014; Bartolini *et al.* 2017). Furthermore it is through context-specific experiences such as bodily sensations of pain and joy that people make sense of religious identities and affects. Embodiment is an important site in which transcendent meanings and religious authenticity are negotiated in modern, secular societies, enabling multiple, fluid experiences of religiosity (Knott 2010; Holloway 2013; Olson *et al.*, 2013). Yet, Gao *et al.* (2019) have recently argued against a misguided over-emphasis on “alternative” or individualised spiritualities and an epistemology that intentionally looks beyond institutions, beliefs and religious elites in the geography of postsecularity. Instead, they highlight how lived religious practices *per se* collapse spatial categories and create inter-institutional spaces. As they argue, “the story of lived religion is not only about how everyday life allows *affordances* or niche spaces for lived religiosity or moral orders but also about how everyday life is adopted into institutional religion and brings about transformations” (Gao *et al.* 2019). Therefore, while dismantling the boundary of orthodox/lived religiosity, Holloway (2013) advocates a relational approach to embodied religiosity, arguing that the religious or spiritual subject is generated through what he calls the patterning of space-times through which religious meanings are affectively felt.

Overall, the discussion of postsecularity in human geography moves away from adopting “the postsecular” as a simplistic categorization towards understanding how postsecular possibilities emerge in the construction of religious meanings and processes. The focus of this shift is evidenced in the increasing interest among geographers of religion in the religious subject, and in particular how theologies and ethics constitute religious

subjectivity (Holloway 2013; Sutherland 2017). Sutherland's (2017) conceptualisation of *theography* argues that, although religious subjects can be constituted through either institutional theologies or the affective and embodied presence of transcendence, it is through theology-as-praxis that religious actors can reflexively "engage in recursive theorizing of transcendence, negotiating between discursive and affective registers in order to make choices about and changes to practice" (326). Sutherland (2017) therefore highlights not only the contextual and ongoing formation of the theologically informed subject but the subject's reframing of theology in the process of faith-by-praxis. In light of this, Cloke *et al.* (2019) therefore intend to examine "actually existing" postsecularity in terms of the production of new subjectivities, a person's feelings, consciousness, desires, and hopes. Therefore, they take postsecularity to be "a third space where the blurred boundaries between religious and secular belief, practice, and identity can undergo reflexive engagement and produce new ethical and political subjectivities" (Cloke et al. 2019).

In this thesis, I therefore build on and advance Cloke *et al.*'s (2019) inquiry of postsecular subjectivities. Firstly, following Taylor (2007), I argue that the postsecular turn in human geography needs to consider the *conditions* of belief with which postsecular subjectivities and practice are compatible. Therefore, this thesis emphasises how postsecular subjectivities articulate, and co-evolve with, secular conditions of being in the world and in particular the neoliberal lived order (see the section on "Neoliberalism" below). Secondly, I argue that postsecular subjectivities are multi-layered and contested rather than singular religious/spiritual experiences, which therefore need to be examined in the intersectional matrix in which religion is mutually constituted along with gender, migration, class and a particular life course.

### **2.3.2 Neoliberalism: secular conditions for postsecular subjectivities<sup>4</sup>**

Given that religious subjectivity is crucial in grounding how postsecularity works out in practice, greater effort therefore should be dedicated to explicating the social conditions in which postsecular subjectivities are enabled, constituted, and embedded. Articulating Cloke *et al.*'s (2019) argument with Taylor's (2007) account of conditions of belief, the central problematic of postsecular subjectivities is not only the emergence of new ethics, consciousness, and religiosity, but also the conditions within which postsecular subjectivities and practices are compatible. For example, as Tse (2014) argues, the presence of lived religiosity is only an indicator of Taylor's (2007) 'nova effect'—the individuated quests for spiritual fulfilment and the proliferating and fragmented religious subjectivities that exist in a differentiated society. Following the spirit of Taylor (2007) and Tse (2014), a geography of postsecularity should attend closely to the “ongoing reorganization of the nature and forms of religion into configurations which are compatible with modern living” (Davie 2013: 61).

This thesis therefore engages with the context of neoliberalism as a secular “ontological condition-of-being” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) and new social order in which not only do ordinary people constitute their everyday subjectivities but religious institutions also operate (Cloke *et al.* 2019; Williams 2015). Neoliberalism was originally referred to as a set of economic policies characterised by the deregulation of the economy and privatization of state-owned enterprises (Steger & Roy 2010). However, the social and political implication of neoliberalism has been reformulated both as an ideology that prioritises market exchange as a normative reference for human conduct, and as a mode

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<sup>4</sup> Some material in this section has been published in *Social & Cultural Geography*.

of governance that embraces the logics of a regulating free-market (Ganti 2014). Neoliberalism therefore describes a wide array of socioeconomic phenomena across the world, including the shrinkage of the welfare state and social services in the West and market-oriented structural adjustment in the Global South and postsocialist societies (Ganti 2014). Although neoliberalism is not a singular and homogeneous process, it has become “hegemonic as a mode of discourse” that influences how we make sense of our society: “[neoliberalism] has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world” (Harvey 2005: 3). In general, the scholarship of neoliberalism can be classified into three broad themes.

Firstly, neoliberalism functions as structural force that has material effects on the local life-worlds of individuals. Many scholars, and especially Leftists, believe that neoliberal globalisation has exacerbated global and social inequalities (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Harvey 2005) as public resources and social welfare have been reduced or privatised, cities are increasingly commodified and gentrified, and vast reservoirs of populations are marginalised and dispossessed. As Harvey (2005) argues, neoliberalism is largely a class-based project that restores the power of elite classes. In Chapter 5, I elucidate how neoliberalism function through, and is materialised in, the migrant labour regime.

Secondly, neoliberalism is an ideological project that moulds the subjectivities and affective lives of individuals (Ong 2006; Muehlebach 2011; Anderson 2016). On the one hand, neoliberalism shapes particular “subjective forms” in congruence with the capitalist logic of accumulation and competitiveness through ideologies of the desired modes of

conduct, attitudes, and lifestyle. This manifests in Foucault's idea of "homo economicus"; that is, the way in which human beings make themselves as economic subjects as the basis for politics (Read 2009). Individuals are therefore involved in specific projects of subject formation that valorise the "myths" of competition, entrepreneurialism and individual autonomy. This influence is particularly apparent in the neoliberalisation of work, which demands the refashioning of particular affective bodies automated by technologies of self-regulation and targets and is characterised by "a normalised gig economy in which 'get the job done' mentalities have come to legitimate sequential servitude to the 'next task' and downgrading of working conditions" (Cloke 2019: 57).

On the other hand, the operation and reproduction of neoliberalism rely on human bodies, the affective life and, in particular, "the structures of feeling" that condition how neoliberal subjects are actualised as part of everyday life (Anderson 2016). For Anderson (2016: 745), the concept of the "structure of feeling" is particularly useful in analysing the effects of signifying-subjectifying processes, in which neoliberal subjectivities are translated, embodied, and affectively felt in the domain of everyday life. Described by Williams (1963: 63) as the "felt sense of the quality of life" in a particular period, a "structure of feeling" exerts pressure and sets effective limits on experience and on action (Anderson, 2016: 45). This is supported by Ho's (2009) studies of emotional citizenship, which reveal that Singaporeans living overseas are conditioned by a regime of emotion produced by Singapore state apparatuses that informs Singaporean migrants about appropriate emotional expressions of citizenship and social behaviour. Therefore, as Ho (2009: 789) points out, the intersubjectivity of emotions and feelings "structures social relations and underpins the social structure, operationalizing social life". However, the emphasis on the "structure of feeling" in a living religion is not to argue for a point of



connection between structure and subject, in which powers and already-constituted institutions determine what is felt (Anderson 2016). In this sense, human subjectivities and affects constitute the conditions of a “structure of feeling” and mediate the way in which neoliberalism circulates and operates (Anderson 2016).

Thirdly, an emerging line of scholarship focuses on the agents and institutions through which neoliberalism is articulated, operationalised and negotiated (Ganti 2014; Williams 2015; Cloke *et al.* 2019). It is concerned with how neoliberalism comes into dialogue with social agents, such as NGOs. In particular, religion and faith-based organisations (FBOs) are considered to be an alternative force that reformulates “actually existing” neoliberalism. The neoliberal order impinges on both the lived enactment of religious faiths and the way religious institutions operate. The everyday culture of neoliberalism is increasingly characterised not only by austerity and notions of a precarious life but also by the escalation of depression and hopelessness, resulting in “the psycho-spiritual crisis”, in which individuals feel disoriented and cannot identify meaning, purpose and sources of need fulfilment (Cloke *et al.*, 2019). Instead, religion, and, in particular, faith-based organisations (FBOs), are argued to open up ethical and political spaces that deviate from and subvert neoliberal subjectivity by offering care, social support, and an alternative regime of desire and hope for the victims of neoliberalism (Cloke *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, the religious institution itself adopts modalities of operation informed by secular logics of market and economics and therefore adjusts religious doctrines to accommodate everyday subjectivities and spiritualities (Hackworth, 2010; Qian and Kong 2018). This situation is particularly exemplified by megachurches that utilise modernised and growth-oriented strategies and move their theologies towards personal experience and spirituality so as to increase their competitiveness in the religious market

(Chong 2015; Goh 2008). Neoliberalism therefore exists as a background condition for the enactment of religious discourses and practices in everyday life and public engagement, enabling the reconfiguration of institutional religion from faith-by-dogma to faith-by-praxis (Cloke and Beaumont 2012; Williams 2015). In particular, as Cloke *et al.* (2019: 53) argue, “subjectivities of postsecularity can be considered a by-product of, and response to, [the] political-economic and existential set of conditions in late capitalism”.

Yet, rather than simply viewing postsecularity as a co-optation into the project of neoliberal governance, Williams (2012) and Cloke *et al.* (2019) argue that the political-economic and affective context of neoliberalism indeed enables and shapes the emergence of postsecular subjectivities. Cloke *et al.* (2019) therefore crystallise four forms of possibilities of postsecularity engendered by neoliberalism. Firstly, neoliberal austerity has created spaces of praxis for cultivating ethical capacities, theologies, and “common goods” that cut across religious and secular sensibilities. Secondly, postsecularity may serve as active resistance to neoliberal rationality, enabling the transformation of ethical relations from self-to-self to self-to-others. Thirdly, postsecular subjectivities may be manifest in an effective politics of hope that creates possibilities, inspiration and goods beyond the neoliberal regime of desire. Fourthly, subjectivities of postsecularity may challenge the unreflective assumption of disenchantment, leading to a new public consciousness concerning religious sensibilities.

However, some critical commentators note that research on FBOs must include an analysis of how a religious regime of feelings can be appropriated or tied to very different political and economic projects (Lancione, 2014; Williams, 2015). For example,

Lancione's (2014) research suggests that the affective atmospheres created by practices of care in FBOs may conceal the precarious experiences of homeless people. Likewise, utilising the concept of "spiritual economies, Rudnyckyj (2009) analyses the articulation of religious practice with neoliberalism by transforming workers into both pious religious and more productive working subjects. He suggests that Islamic spirituality is imagined as a moral duty that justifies the divinity of work. Thus, Islamic values of individual accountability, together with the neoliberal ideas of self-regulation, work hand-in-hand "to create a new ethical orientation toward oneself, one's work, and one's collectivity" (Rudnyckyj 2009: 106). It is therefore important to provide a more careful and critical assessment of religious practice *per se*. In this thesis, I offer such an attempt by investigating how religious institutions are implicated in the neoliberal labour regime and autocratic state power, where religious institutions and ethics sometimes reinforce the production of docile and productive bodies of migrants. Yet, I do not simply consider this as a co-option of religion into state-led governmentality, and critical research into religion needs to move beyond a focus on social dynamics and delve into individuals' subjectivities and agency that cannot be simply captured by secularist "social interpretation".

In this sense, investigations of the relationship between postsecular subjectivities and neoliberalism may face theoretical difficulties in reconciling critical theories and nuanced analysis and, in particular, what counts as "critical". Cloke *et al.* (2019) argues against the secularised epistemology of social science that is often unwilling to recognise religion as a force for good and simply reduces it to a part of social dynamics:

If a hegemonic pedagogic interpretation of religion only allows us to interpret faith-based activities as self-serving acts of charity, that at best provided an outlet for liberal guilt and morality, and at worst provides cover for proselytising and entrapment of vulnerable citizens, then it follows automatically that no good can come of such activities, and any scholarship that suggests otherwise is simply uncritical (Cloke *et al* 2019: 6).

Cloke *et al.* (2019) admit that religion has a “dark side” in opposition to human rights, in which religion may reinforce the neoliberal politics of subject-formation. Their solution is to limit postsecularity as a progressive possibility or a “good side” of religion. Yet, the clarification of good/dark side of religion cannot be said to sufficiently theorise the progressive politics of religion and postsecularity, as religious agency does not solely rely on a normative liberal understanding of human beings (Mahmood 2005) and is not necessarily associated with any anti-neoliberal impetus. In the following pages (section 2.3), I introduce an analytical frame of intersectionality to overcome these theoretical and methodological difficulties and to capture the complex nature of religion. In particular, I propose a new approach to examine how the intersectionality of migration can contribute to new understandings of postsecular subjectivities and agency under secular and neoliberal conditions of being.

## **2.4 Religion and intersectionality among migrants**

### **2.4.1 Changing landscape of religion: investigating migrants’ religiosity**

Kong (2010) evaluates that the increasing mobility of migrants has been one of the global shifts that deserves the attention of geographers of religion. There has been a significant amount of geographical research demonstrating the significant impact of religion on

migrants. The classical and early model of the role of religion in the lives of migrants formulated by Handlin (2002) emphasises the psychological benefits of religious faith in addressing the cultural discontinuity inflicted by the trauma of migration, but this ignored the social and cultural construction of religions and the formation of ethnic communities (Hirschman 2004). Existing human geographical and sociological research has examined the centrality of religion in migrants' lives. These researchers have mainly focused on (but are not confined to): migrants' religious places of congregation and the formation of faith-based communities (Yang & Ebaugh 2001; Ley, 2008; Tse, 2011); how religion contributes to identity construction for migrants, with particular attention to ethnic and gender identities (Dwyer 1999, 2000; Kurien 2001; Hopkins 2006); religion and civic and political participation among migrants (Chafetz and Ebaugh 2000); and the religious beliefs, practices, and organisations of second-generation migrants (Fleischmann *et al.* 2012). Recently some scholars have deployed a lived religion approach to migrant studies, which emphasises emotion and embodied practice and the narratives through which people make sense of their religious activity (Jeldtoft 2011; Edgell 2012). Studies of lived religion examine a wide range of the religious expression of migrants, focusing on not merely religious centres but also various contested spaces of secularization. However, Kong (2010) recently put forward a set of research agendas that current geographical scholarship on religion needs to address; for example, how labour migrants differ from families of migrants and refugees in negotiating their religious identity, the experience of subgroups within larger migrant categories, and the religiosity of second generation migrants. Ley (2011: xiii) suggested that: "Immigration from the developing world has been one of the forces bringing significant challenges to secularization theory in the old world". It cannot be ignored that migrants have been an important force in revitalising and renewing religions in modern society. In other words, future research requires

attention not only to the subjectivities of religious migrant groups, but also to the role of migration in enabling religion to persist in, or accommodate to, modern society.

Economic and political reform since the late 1970s has enabled millions of migrant workers from rural areas to become key actors in China's integration into the global economy, thereby making China a "world factory" (Chan and Pun 2009). It is commonly recognized that migrant workers have been one of the most marginalized groups in China who are experiencing the "double exploitation" of the state's regulatory power and the global regime of capitalism. In contemporary China, the *hukou* system (household registration policy) is still one of the most prominent mechanisms determining the distribution of social resources, and more broadly access to full urban citizenship, providing the basis for the most prominent form of institutional exclusion practised against rural migrants in urban space (Chan and Buckingham 2009). The *hukou* system, which stemmed from urban and industry-based policy in the early 1950s, was originally designed to regulate China's population mobility, and was adapted to manufacture a socio-spatial division that determines the allocation of state-subsidised welfare between urban and rural areas in the reform era (Chan & Zhang 1999). Under the *hukou* system, rural residents and migrants are treated as inferior citizens deprived of rights to settle in cities as permanent residents and to most state-sponsored benefits and welfare enjoyed by urban residents, ranging from medical services to children's education (Chan and Buckingham 2009). It should be noted that the *hukou* system not only denies the fulfilment of migrant workers' basic needs and access to social service, but also provides a legitimate basis for the social construction of differentiated social categories: it will be taken for granted that anyone labelled a migrant worker is considered as cheap labour and "low quality" (Angonast 2004). Thus, the system excludes peasants from many urban jobs, except for those regarded as "dirty", unskilled and low-paying. In essence, the

urban-rural divide of the population is the state's regulatory strategy adopted not only to maintain the cheap labour needed to feed into China's modernization project but to minimize migrant workers' consumption of limited public resources (Wu 2010; Qian and He 2012). This is particularly true with respect to housing. How to house the urban poor and the huge wave of rural to urban migration has been a great challenge for the Chinese government, since the state is neither able nor willing to provide temporary migrants with housing welfare that is prioritised for urban residents (Wang 2007). Despite this, Wang (2007) argues that Chinese cities do not appear to have the large-scale slum settlements found in other developing countries, which is mainly due to the Chinese state's strict control of the population of migrant workers and its alliance with global capitalism (Pun 2005). For instance, the intensive expansion of factory dormitories initiated by global capitalism in many Chinese cities was allowed by the government as an alternative means of accommodating large numbers of temporary migrants (Pun and Smith 2007). Wong, Li & Song (2007) conducted a social survey to identify to what extent migrant workers are living marginalised lives, classifying the most five vulnerable spheres for migrant workers including employment and working conditions, social security and medical benefits, the education of migrant children, housing, and discrimination by urban residents. They further argued that the *hukou* household registration system, the process of decentralisation and the obscure role of trade unions have contributed to the experience of marginalisation among migrant workers. Lu's (2006) research reveals that migrant workers also experience wage discrimination in comparison to urban residents and non-migrant workers, and the *hukou* system in particular is a significant determinant of the wage gap. To conclude, the state attempts to make a large supply of rural labour available to advance its modernization strategy at low cost, and simultaneously ensures that most peasant migrants will eventually return to the countryside without burdening the state. On

December 12th, 2015, China announced reforms to the *hukou* system that attempted to allow more rural migrants to attain urban *hukou* status, which it was hoped could help alleviate some of the tension between urban and rural residents. However, as Chan and Buckingham (2008) reiterated, we should not over-interpret China's recent *hukou* system reform, instead it needs to be clarified that "the cumulative effect of these reforms is not abolition of the *hukou*, but devolution of responsibility for *hukou* policies to local government, which in many cases actually makes the permanent migration of peasants to cities harder than before", and therefore as a cornerstone of China's rural-urban "apartheid" the *hukou* system remains intact and potent. Even if the *hukou* system is completely abolished, the longstanding social exclusion imposed on migrant workers cannot easily be eliminated in the short term (Cao 2010).

On the other hand, the lived experience of migrant workers cannot be separated from the overwhelming global capitalism in which they are subjected to a flexible regime of labour and are susceptible to exploitation (Pun 2005; Pun & Smith 2007; Chan and Zhu 2010). These rural migrants are attractive to global investors because of their institutional and social inferiority, as well as the severe labour surplus in the countryside. Fan (2007) argues that the migrant labour regime is a safe haven for urban and industrial employers that thrive on cost-minimisation and exploitation. In many global factories, management practices have become heavily reliant on the use of institutionalised coercive discipline and the manipulation of workers' bodies, thus fostering and squeezing the highest possible production from workers. One of the most noticeable contributions in this field is Pun Ngai's (2005) book *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in the Global Workplace*, offering an ethnographic account of Chinese women workers and the interactive operation of global capitalism, the socialist state, and the patriarchal family, all of which constitute the complex system in which the migrant workers are situated.



Pun's lively description of women workers' lives was based on eight-month participant observation in an electronics factory in Shenzhen, China's first Special Economic Zone, and accounts of Pun's experiences working and living alongside the women factory workers. Drawing on Marx's theory of class struggle, Pun (2005: 24) argues that "a new Chinese working class [is] struggling to be born at the very moment that the language of class is sentenced to death". Pun provided vivid descriptions of the workers' positioning on assembly line, the factory's social and spatial disciplinary regulation, and workers' daily resistance and formation of social identity. She anticipated in her concluding chapter that "a silent 'social revolution' from below" (19) was occurring amidst China's repositioning as "the workshop of the world". By that she means that a new working class of migrant workers has been formed. Pun's (2009; 2010) recent research regarding the dormitory labour regime reveals that its use for accommodating millions of migrant workers has become a necessity for the daily reproduction of labour power suitable for the production needs of the global market. Within the dormitory regime, a set of disciplinary techniques is utilized to control the working and non-working day of workers, and the living space of workers is merely an extension of the workplace, resulting in a sense of hardship and incarceration among workers. The marginalisation of migrant workers in the political and economic domains, to varying degrees, has further excluded them from mainstream social norms in a cultural sense (Qian and He 2012). For example, migrant workers were often stigmatised as a population of incivility and criminality (*mang liu*) who were supposed to deserve harassment by the state's policing and control apparatus. Marginalisation in the cultural sphere may further deepen the vulnerability and subordination of this already marginalised group in the face of dramatic societal transition and the capitalist model of social relations (Young 1990).

Nevertheless, the extant mainstream discourse of scholarship on Chinese migrant workers as stated above places much emphasis on the existential condition of the uprootedness of migrant workers in the face of the state's regulatory powers and the regime of global capitalism, but relatively less attention has been paid to migrant workers' agency in re-solidifying and reconstructing their subjectivity. E.P. Thompson suggested (1963:9) that the formation of the working class was not determined by social and economic structures alone amidst historical change, but instead was 'an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning'. Migrant workers are not entirely passive recipients of the state's arrangements and capitalist disciplines, but are capable of manoeuvring various kinds of resources to negotiate with existing inequality. For example, Yu and Pun's (2008) research into "dagongmei" (girl workers) revealed that though the identity of these workers was constructed by the collusion of state, capital and society as an inferior subject, instead, they could recover more freedom, equality, and value through self-transformation in practices of consumption. This thesis therefore responds to the lack of research into how religion can enable an alternative mode of life for Chinese migrant workers.

In past decades, groups of Christian migrant workers have emerged in China's megacities (Huang 2014; Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018), given that millions of rural Christians have migrated to the city and increasing numbers of migrant workers have converted to Christianity. However, the existing scholarship concerning Chinese migrant workers has neglected their religious beliefs and practices. In particular, how religion may be implicated in the migrant worker's agency has been largely ignored. Defined as "a system of symbols" by Geertz (1973: 90), religion provides individuals with perceptions of a general order of existence and shapes their attitude towards life, which makes its hardships and difficulties more acceptable. This is particularly true in E.P. Thompson's

description of why Methodism was so widespread among the English working class from 1780 to 1832, because it offered workers a form of interpretation in the face of exploitation and displacement:

For migrant workers, it [Methodist church membership] could be the ticket of entry into a new community when moving from town to town. Within this religious community, there was (as we have seen) its own drama, its own degree of status and importance, its own gossip, and a good deal of mutual aid. [...] Men and women felt themselves to have some place in an otherwise hostile world when within the church. (Thompson 1963: 379)

In addition, Thompson argued that the Methodist form of religiosity which emphasized the values of discipline and compliance served as a “moral machine” that led the workers to willingly sell their labour to the master-manufacturers. Therefore, “many working people turned to religion as a ‘consolation’, even though the dreams inspired by Methodist doctrine were scarcely happy” (Thompson 1963: 380). This interpretation of working class religiosity pointed out the conflict between the morals of religion and the ethics of the capitalist model of production, but its Marxist reduction of religion to “the opium of the masses” might be considered problematic. Nevertheless, religion not merely provides a form of interpretation for workers to negotiate the conditions of exploitation and alienation, but also opens up possibilities for a way of life beyond the secular order. Above all, the state’s regulatory power, the emerging global capitalism, and the the subjectivity of working class are crucial to understanding the religiosity of migrant workers and the possibility of postsecularity in contemporary China.

#### **2.4.2 Intersectionality: an analytical tool**

According to McCall (2005: 1771), intersectionality is perhaps the most important concept or analytical frame to date that can apprehend multiple identities and categories and the complex ways in which different forms of inequality and oppression are enmeshed. In this thesis, I advance the discussion of secularity, neoliberalism and postsecularity by deploying an intersectional analytical framework that captures the ways in which gender, class, life course, and religion mutually form and shape one another. Firstly I argue that the ways individuals inhabit secularity and postsecularity are shaped by multi-layered identities and experiences. As I discuss in this thesis, Christian migrant workers are not solely dominated by their religious experience but also are situated in particular gender relations, a class-based hierarchy and specific life courses. Different forms of lived experiences affect and are affected by each other, which influences how migrant workers make sense of religion and transcendence. Secondly, as I suggest above, critical research into religion needs to delve into the complexities of social relations and individuals' subjectivities rather than simply differentiate the good/bad aspects of religion or reduce religion to social dynamics alone; in this sense, the intersectional approach provides a specific social context to examine which postsecular subjectivities are enabled in relation to gender, class and migration, for example. In other words, this thesis uses an intersectional approach to ground the discussion of secularity and postsecularity, exploring how the social, cultural and political processes of secularity and postsecularity are embodied, felt and inhabited in migrant workers' everyday lives and multiple experiences. In what follows, I elaborate on the analytical value of intersectionality and how it can advance the scholarship of secularity and postsecularity.

#### ***Intersectionality as an epistemology***

Intersectionality is not only a distinctive epistemology but a burgeoning field of study that examines the interlocking of different categories of experience and political intervention in countering social inequality (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013). Instead of focusing on single axes of difference, the intersectional approach emphasises the mutually constitutive forms of social categories and oppression. Despite the varied meanings and scope of intersectionality, Collins and Bilge (2016: 2) provide a generally accepted description of this concept:

Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analysing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves.

The concept of intersectionality is primarily based on the feminist critique of identity categories. As McCall (2005) notes, the current mode of research on intersectionality is the result of the convergence of the development of different sets of feminist thought. The early feminist critique in women's studies urged the need to incorporate women's distinctive experiences into research agendas. Yet, the simple addition of women into research accounts did not challenge the pervasiveness of male bias and privileges, which subsequently led to the introduction of gender as an analytical category utilised to reveal

the social institution of male domination (Scott 2007). The feminist critique went much deeper during the 1980s and 1990s as it interacted with postmodern and poststructural philosophies that sought to deconstruct the very categories and differences themselves. This gave rise to two influential feminist critiques: first, poststructural feminism questioned the biological base of gender and emphasised the processes of practices, cultural norms and performance through which gender was constituted; and second, feminists of colour criticised the assumption of women and gender as “unitary and homogeneous categories reflecting the common essence of all women” (McCall 2005: 1776). It is the combination of these two ideas that led to the intersectional critique.

The term “intersectionality” is generally agreed to have been developed first by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991), although thoughts on intersectionality or what Hancock (2016) calls “intersectionality-like thought” can be observed in early Black feminism’s intellectual and political tradition. Crenshaw (1991) puts forward the need to rethink the experiences of Black women whose lives cannot be captured by looking at the dimensions of race and gender separately. The idea of intersectionality was therefore used to elucidate how different oppressions could not be analysed independently: “[The] problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw 1989: 140). In other words, different systems of oppression do not operate separately from each other but are subject to a more general system of oppression, the “matrix of domination” (Collins 1990). This resonates with Pun’s (2005) argument outlined above that Chinese women rural migrant workers are subject to “triple oppressions of global capitalism, state socialism, and familial patriarchy that work hand in hand to produce particular labour exploitation”. In particular, to address

different ways in which Black women are marginalised, Crenshaw (1991) distinguished between structural, political and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality refers to multi-layered forms of domination, while political intersectionality is about the ways in which black women simultaneously struggle with different political agendas such as racial and gendered politics. Representational intersectionality focuses on how black women are discursively marginalised.

However, the metaphor of intersection may not necessarily address the complex interaction and interrelation of different categories. Therefore, early approaches to intersectionality have been criticised for the danger of treating social categories as mutually ontologically fixed and separate features, which are then combined with others (Brown 2011; Jorba and Rodó-Zárate 2019). These accumulative approaches to intersectionality therefore result in what Brown (2011:543) calls “an unhelpful additive notion of oppression”, with the risk of reducing intersectionality to the additive nature of different categories. Collins and Bilge (2016) have recently identified six core ideas of intersectionality that help researchers to critically engage in “how the events and conditions of social and political life at play” mutually shape one another, including social inequality, power relations, relationality, social context, complexity and social justice. In other words, intersectionality is not only about multiple identities but is also about a dynamic process in which different structures of power position themselves in particular social locations (Hopkins 2017). In considering social inequality and social justice, Collins and Bilge (2016) encourage scholars to move beyond class- and race-based social inequalities and to consider more complex politics to foster justice. By power, they emphasise “different dimensions of the organisation of power relations”. On the one hand, power needs to be understood as a mutual and intersectional construction. On the other

hand, they focus on how the domains of power operate *via intersectionality*. The idea of power, as I argue in what follows, is the most important dimension of intersectionality. The idea of relationality encourages relational thinking about intersectionality that rejects *either/or* binaries and instead embraces a *both/and* frame. Collins and Blige (2016) use the concept of relationality to address a Foucauldian account of power, arguing that it is not a thing operating in a zero-sum game but rather becomes visible through relationships. Finally, by emphasising social context and complexity, Collins and Blige (2016) highlight the importance of different historical, political and intellectual contexts that shape intersecting power relations and the complexities of social practices through which intersectional identities are enabled.

Nevertheless, as Hopkins (2017) suggests, intersectionality is not characterised by an additive approach but by its focus on the ways specific forms of inequality are mutually constitutive; yet sometimes the deployments of the concept in empirical research unwittingly result in an additive approach being used. This is because, as McCall (2005: 1771) points out, “there has been little discussion of how to study intersectionality, that is, of its methodology”. In this respect, McCall (2005) offers one of the most valuable contributions in crafting an intersectional methodology. McCall (2005) describes three approaches to intersectional methodology used in the existing literature, namely, *anticategorical complexity*, *intracategorical complexity*, and *intercategorical complexity*.

The first approach, anticategorical complexity, is based on the poststructural critique that deconstructs analytical categories. This approach is responsive to the increasing scepticism about using “master” categories in analysing anything in more than a simplistic way. Therefore, the project of deconstructing of normative categories is the



deconstruction of social inequality per se, since “symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality, and gender” (McCall 2005: 1777). That is, scholars in this line of tradition advocate a focus on social processes of categorization and revealing the hierarchy in and social production of boundaries that stabilise social inequality. It emphasises dynamic forces rather than categories, gender performance rather than genders, lived religious practices more than religious principles, and economic exploitation rather than class (Christensen and Jensen 2014). The second approach of intracategorical complexity interrogates the “boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself” in order to “reveal the complexity of lived experience” underlying the categories used (McCall 2005: 1773). In other words, this approach is cautious about the normative assumptions involved in categorisation yet does not reject the importance – both material and discursive – of categories. It is therefore more appropriate to be “critical of broad and sweeping acts of categorization rather than [...] of categorization per se” (McCall 2005: 1779). The third approach, termed intercategorical complexity, encourages scholars to “provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (McCall 2005: 1773). In comparison to anticategorical and intracategorical forms, the intercategorical approach focuses on the complexity of relations among multiple social groups rather than the complexity of a single group or category, therefore using categories strategically to display the linkages between inequality and categorisation.

Jorba and Rodó-Zárate (2019: 179) observe that the “mutual constitution” model is dominant in existing studies of intersectionality. Therefore, intersectional thinking always recognises that different categories “are changed by the interaction and [...] can even fuse

one with another”. Yet, thinking on this mutual constitution is vague in terms of whether different existential categories are affected by each other or the process of mutual constitution creates new categories or involves proliferation. This therefore results in specific theoretical difficulties in simultaneously acknowledging the complex interaction among categories and the ontological specificity of each category. To resolve this tension, Jorba and Rodó-Zárate (2019) propose to understand gender and race as the properties of categories rather than as categories (things) per se. They argue that gender and race as properties have effects on individuals’ experiences. In this sense, the mutual constitution of categories could be understood as “the relation between the properties and the whole experience as a relation of emergence” (190).

In summary, the intersectional approach can shed light in this thesis on three theoretical registers. First, Christian migrant workers in this study do not share homogeneous and coherent lived experiences, which vary according to different social categories and differences within this group. Second, Christian migrant workers may be subject to different systems of oppressions and social inequality, and research needs to examine how religion interacts with the categorisation of gender, class, and life courses in such a way that justifies these social inequalities and power relations. Third, I consider religion, gender, class and life course as distinctive lived experiences rather than categories themselves. Therefore, I focus on how different forms of lived experiences affect and are affected by each other in a way that may enable the formation of new subjectivities that cannot be simply captured using singular categories or binaries such as religious/secular.

### ***Intersectional power and agency***

One of the most important contributions of intersectionality is to provide an analytical tool to investigate how powers are organised and operate and the ways in which macro-scale social and cultural processes are embodied and felt in the everyday experiences of religion, gender, class and specific life courses. Yet, as I have discussed above, the mutually constitution of different forms of lived experience and categorizations always imply not only multi-layered oppression and social inequality but the formation of new subjectivity, ethics and agency. In this section, I propose three aspects of intersectionality that help ground the understanding of secularity, neoliberalism and postsecularity:

**The intersectional nature of power.** Intersectional subjects have increasingly become the “object-target” through which either disciplinary or neoliberal forms of power circulate and operate. Understanding power as intersectionally constituted means neither to reduce it to a thing nor to stabilise it as a categorical entity. As Foucault (1988) argues, power is not based on a zero-sum game or absolute domination but forms in relations. In this sense, intersectionality can shed light on how social-structural arrangements of power are exercised through the relationality of social differences. In late-capitalist society, power increasingly relies on multiple forms of the categorisation of human bodies. Eisenstein (2014) notes that:

Capital is intersectional. It always intersects with the bodies that produce the labour. Therefore, the accumulation of wealth is embedded in the racialized and engendered structures that enhance it ... Labor – the other side of capital – comes in colors and sexes and genders and is formulated through new expressions of power. Racialized, sexualized and gendered labor contributes to capital accumulation and structures the inequality that emanates from it (Eisenstein 2014).

Eisentein's analysis resonates with Ben Anderson's (2012, 2016, 2017) recent discussions of neoliberalism, affect and biopower, although he does not explicitly talk about intersectionality. Anderson (2012, 2016) shows how affective capacity and relations can be interpreted as object-targets for discipline and biopower, in conformity with neoliberal governance and in particular the expansion of new productive forces in late capitalism. In the light of Anderson's arguments, research into intersectionality needs to consider how life is normalised through intersectional power, because life in modern society is increasingly made productive and governable through techniques of intervention (Foucault, Davidson & Burchell 2008; Anderson 2012). That is, the intersectional nature of life is used as the "object-target" for the production of normalised and governable subjects (Anderson 2016). These techniques of intervention are manifestly evident in the gendered, racialized, and classed-based regime of citizenship and migrants that justifies the global division of labour and locally-based neoliberal development (Zhang 2014).

In this thesis, I respond to and advance these arguments by showing the ways in which secular neoliberalism works through the normalisation and categorization of gendered, class-based, and aged subjects. In the empirical chapters, I show that secular neoliberalism functions through the intersectional biopolitics of gender, class and urban citizenship that maximises the productivity of migrant workers yet simultaneously minimises their labour costs and consumption of urban welfare. For example, qualified workers under the neoliberal labour regime are subject to a particular feminine quality of being submissive (see chapter 7) and hegemonic masculinity that justifies hierarchical and military management (see chapter 6). Overall, I argue that the political-ideological

project of secularity and secularism is always materialised in intersectional subjects. Secular and neoliberal powers rely on what Collins (2000) calls a “matrix of domination” that grounds the basis for differentiating, engineering and stratifying human beings, which itself constitutes an overarching structure of inequalities and power that cannot be challenged by singular anti-oppression force.

**Intersectional lived experiences.** Intersectionality also helps us to capture the complexity of mediated lived experiences through which “a range of contemporary geo-historical processes and transformation are lived and felt” (Anderson 2019: 3). This approach emphasises that individuals’ subjectivities are composed through and negotiated by intersectional practices and lived experiences. Intersectional lived experiences are therefore about a series of experiences, including sensation, embodiment, emotion and affect.

As secularism and neoliberalism operate as a macro-social force and imagery, they are pervasively felt and performed through intersectional experiences at the level of the local and the everyday. In this sense, lived, embodied, and affective experiences are part and parcel of political-economic processes, which constitute the “structure of feelings” that condition how particular forms of power are actualised (Anderson 2016). It can be argued that intersectionality interacts with what Anderson (2017: 504) calls “the intensities of power” – that is, the quality that “power operate[s] by becoming part of an organizing experience”. This is illustrated by recent studies of precarisation in cultural geography, paying attention to “the bodily intensities of precarity with a concern for how a sense of precarity surfaces in and is dispersed through multiple everyday scenes” (Anderson 2017: 504). Overall, I argue in this thesis that intersectionality can help us understand the

structure of lived experiences that conditions how social powers are actualised and are organised. The argument is illustrated in the empirical chapters that the intersectional experiences of migrant workers in turn reframe the ways secular and neoliberal power operate.

**Intersectional subjectivity and agency.** In Collins's (2019) book *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, she proposes three major areas of inquiry into the intersectional structure of power, lived experiences of intersectionality, and new ways of living and agency that may emerge within this structure:

The idea of intersectionality works in multiple registers of recognizing the significance of social structural arrangements of power, how individual and group experiences reflect those structural intersections, and how political marginality might engender new subjectivities and agency (Collins 2019: 26).

In contrast to her previous discussion that is primarily based on a critique of power and oppression and therefore sees intersectional agency as anti-oppression, Collins (2019) has recently started to pay attention to the ethical-political formation of the intersectional subject. By scrutinizing philosophers Simone de Beauvoir and Pauli Murray's analysis of existential freedom, Collins (2019) distinguishes between intersectionality as a process of becoming that might open up spaces of possibility, ethical aspiration and existential freedom, and as the reality of oppression. This shift in the ethical-political formation of intersectionality may be inspired by the literature on religious women's agency and in particular the postsecular turn in feminist theory (Singh 2015), which challenges the resisting, secular-humanist, and emancipatory assumption of women's subjectivity. In

this sense, intersectionality simultaneously offers a situated lens to examine what ethical subjectivities and agency emerge.

As discussed above in section 2.1.2, the possibility of postsecular subjectivity cannot be simply subject to the criterion of good/bad religion, but must rather be analysed in the specific contexts in which religious agency emerges. The liberal and humanist approach primarily or solely links agency to the autonomous, free-willed, and choosing agent, with the capacity to act independently within or against structural constraints (Davies 2000). This sense of agency is in conformity to emancipatory politics, justifying the feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonialist movements. A radical form of the liberal account of agency seems mostly to portray religious values as false consciousness and counterproductive of agency, to proselytise to people to submit to religious authority. This is exemplified by some feminist studies of the veil of Muslim women, which equates the veil with women's oppression by Islamic patriarchy and fundamentalism (Bilge 2010). However, instead of presupposing a universal trait of an autonomous and pre-social agent, the poststructural critique posits that agency and subjectivities are discursively constituted. For example, Judith Butler (1993) argues that subject-formation does not necessarily reside in a conscious intent or action but is often achieved through the unconsciously repeated performance of social norms. In this sense, the realisation of human agency is opposite to processes of subjectivation. Notwithstanding the fact that "poststructuralist critiques have been key in decentering liberal notions of autonomy, voluntarism, and the transcendental subject, the normative subject of poststructuralist feminist theory remains a liberatory one, her agency largely conceptualized in terms of resistance to social norms" (Mahmood 2001: 208). However, feminist anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2001, 2005) and Rosi Braidotti (2009) argue that both liberal and poststructural accounts are deficient in capturing the

nuances of religious agency. Recent theoretical advances in feminist theory have therefore substantially expanded the scope of agency to encompass multiple and previously unrecognised forms. This line of inquiry particularly focuses on the extent to which religion can address human agency. For example, Burke (2012) summarises four forms of religious agency in existing scholarship, including: (1) resistance agency, the capacity to challenge, resist, and modify religious meanings and tradition; (2) empowerment agency, the psychological and emotional empowerment provided by religious practices and ethics; (3) instrumental agency, to accrue material and non-religious resources from religious practices; and (4) compliant agency, a way to inhabit religious norms or religious ways of lives for reasons internal to the religious meanings themselves. It seems that the latter concept of religious agency has not been fully recognised, as the former three are consistent with secular-humanist social science.

Yet, it is perhaps Mahmood's (2001; 2005) research into Islamic piety and virtue that most successfully articulate ethical forms of life in theories of agency. For Mahmood (2005: 15), "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms". By drawing on Foucault's (1997) concept of technologies of the self, Mahmood (2001: 210, emphasis in original) argues that:

Importantly, to understand agency [...] is neither to invoke a self-constituting autonomous subject nor subjectivity as a private space of cultivation. Rather, it draws our attention to the specific ways in which one performs a certain number of operations on one's thoughts, body, conduct, and ways of being, in order to "attain a certain kind of state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality" (Foucault 1997: 24).



Mahmood (2005) claims that women in the Egyptian piety movement achieve agency to the extent that they can inhabit the norms and submit to religious authority by a degree to the point where piety becomes instinctive. Therefore, by disputing the universal assumption that agency primarily or solely arises from resistance or confrontational practices, Mahmood (2005: 23) calls for the study of how religion constitutes coherent projects of ethical self-formation; that is, “the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated”. In this sense, postsecular subjectivities may arise from the ways in which individuals inhabit religious meanings, which possibly opens up new forms of agency and ethical self-formation under the constraints of secularity and neoliberalism.

However, engaging in ethical agency cannot be said to sufficiently address the formation of postsecular subjectivities, as Laidlaw (2013: 142, emphasis in original) argues: “The overall effect of Mahmood’s discussion, then, is an equivocation between saying that women in the piety movement attain a distinctive, non-liberal kind of freedom, and saying that they attain quite other values than freedom”. In other words, religious agency cannot be simply defined or captured in a singular way; instead, it is more likely to be a relation of *emergence*, where religious agency emerges from the interaction among different forms of lived experience in a specific geo-historical context. As Bilge (2010: 23) points out, “[I]ntersectionality, as a meta-theorisation of power and domination, proves invaluable to anchor the formation of subjectivities and agency within a nexus of social relations and structures (of race, class, gender) that work together to (re)produce power and privilege”. Therefore, the subject-formation of postsecularity can thereby be situated into the relational concerns with interlocking power structures and lived experiences.

I therefore argue that it is through an intersectional lens that postsecular subjectivities and agency can be embodied and materialised. This thesis presents such an effort. By analysing the intersectionality among migrant workers, I carefully clarify the situated and historical structures and power relations as well as multiple lived experiences from which different forms of postsecular subjectivity and agency arise. In general, I highlight that postsecular subjectivities and agency are multi-layered, hybrid and contested, and need to be understood in terms of geo-historical context (chapter 4), the ways religious institutions translate theo-ethics through faith-by-praxis (chapter 5), and the ways migrant workers constitute their embodied, masculine, feminine and youth subjectivities in response to secular and neoliberal conditions of being (chapter 6-9).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have systematically reviewed the literature on secularity and postsecularity in human geography and beyond. The classic thesis of secularisation is increasingly problematic, particularly due to the challenge from the emerging scholarship of postsecularity that revitalises and rethinks the role of religion in modern society. Therefore I argue that, instead of focusing on debates about whether societies are more or less religious, a geography of religion should seriously re-consider what secularity and secularisation mean in modern society. As Kong (2010: 765) suggests, “keeping the gaze on ‘postsecularization’ as a global shift may thus be misleading; it is not a discourse that can be universally and evenly applied unproblematically without more careful consideration of what secularization means and how rigorously evidence for such has been collected”. In essence, secularity remains a real, tangible condition under which not only religions evolve and thrive but individuals form everyday subjectivities in modernity.

By building on and developing Taylor's (2007; 2011), Asad's (2003; 2010) and Casanova's (2006; 2009; 2013) accounts of secularity, I suggest that there are three lines of inquiry that a geography of religion can advance: (1) to examine the political-ideological project of secularity and its normalisation of unreflective knowledge and how these secularities are re-configured in different geo-historical contexts; (2) to explore the ways individuals inhabit secularity and the immanent frame in the everyday practices of place-making and the cross-pressure they face in the modern secular age; and (3) to study the embodiment and materialisation of secularity in the intersectional subjectivities of religion, class, gender and age. This thesis therefore addresses these theoretical concerns in the empirical chapters.

It is through a rethinking of the meaning of secularity that a more nuanced scholarship of postsecularity can arise. In this sense, the concept of the "postsecular turn" is theoretically rewarding in the sense that it emphasises that secularist ideologies and epistemologies need to be thoroughly revisited to account for new religious realities rather than presupposing a re-entry into a religious society. In particular, the scholarship of postsecularity acknowledges the alternative subjectivities and agency existing beyond the secular and normative liberal ethics. This thesis therefore contributes to this debate in examining how postsecular possibilities and agency emerge in the construction of religious meanings and processes in specific contexts. In general, instead of treating secularity and postsecularity as mutually exclusive domains, I argue that that geographers of religion need to consider how postsecular ethics and subjectivities articulate, and co-evolve with, secular conditions of being in the world.

In this sense, this thesis provides two approaches to the grounding of geographies of secularity and postsecularity. First, I highlight neoliberalism as a condition of being and a regime of unreflective knowledge in which the political-economic project of secularity operates and individuals constitute their everyday subjectivities. Second, I use an intersectional approach to examine how religion, gender, class and age mutually shape one another in such a way that gives rise to new subjectivities and agency. I argue that the intersectional approach not only helps us to understand the ways “actually existing” secular and neoliberal power are actualised, but also provides a specific context in which to examine the specific postsecular subjectivities and agency that are enabled.

## **Chapter 3 Religion in China: variegated secularity, variegated postsecularity**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Following Casanova's (2009; 2013) insights, I argue that research on secularity and postsecularity should adopt a global comparative perspective that recognises them to be context-contingent. A comparative geo-historical analysis can move beyond the dominant stereotypes about the trajectories of modernisation in the United States and Europe, opening up a space for further geographical inquiry into multiple patterns and reconfigurations of secularity and postsecularity across different cultures and political regimes. Yet, according to Van der Veer (2011), the project of European modernity is better interpreted as part of what he calls "interactional history". In other words, modern ideas such as nation, secularity, citizenship, and right, came into interaction with Asian and African societies within the orbit of imperial expansion. Therefore, Van der Veer (2011) advocates an analysis of how the universalism of thoughts emerges from a history of interactions.

One of the most salient characteristics of China's modernisation is that China appears to be caught in a contradictory dual process involving the entrenchment of secular values and state-sanctioned capitalist ideologies and simultaneously the notable revival of all forms of religiosity and faith (Gao and Qian 2019). On the one hand, China has been viewed as an avowedly atheist state and, in Casanova's (2013) words, as "one of the most secular societies on earth". The assumptions that religion is not important to the life of

the Chinese and that the Chinese have always been secular, programmatic and rational as modernisation advances are generally accepted and prevalent among not only intellectuals but ordinary people. Yet, on the other hand, there is a widespread interest in religious practices in response to the publicly accepted discourse of “moral and spiritual crisis” in the post-reform area. In this chapter, I elucidate the evolution and configuration of secularity and secularism as well as the possibilities of postsecularity in China in order to provide contextual knowledge for the analysis in subsequent chapters.

### **3.2 Secularity and secularism in China**

There are at least four genealogies that can be traced for secularity and secularism in the history of China (Yang 2008; Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Palmer and Winiger 2019): (1) the structure of religio-political authority in imperial China; (2) China’s encounter with Western colonialism and its entry into modernity; (3) the repression of religion in the era of communist revolution; and (4) the neoliberal transformations in the post-reform era.

The extent to which ancient China was religious is controversial. Some Western Scholars have questioned whether China had a past “Age of Faith” (Davis 2001), since Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism are more likely to be conceived as “teachings” (教) rather than institutional religions. Conversely, another line of scholarship brings back the role of religion into China’s history, which was formerly presumed to be largely secular, and now questions whether there ever was an “Age of Faithless”, since imperial China (259 BC – 1911AD) was a highly enchanted society (Yang 1965; Szonyi 2009; Goossaert and Palmer 2011):

Communication with deities, demons, spirits and invisible forces was pervasive at all levels of society, from the cult of the kitchen god by all families to the Imperial cult conducted by [...] the emperor himself, and from use of divination practices in relation to all aspects and decisions in life, to the practice of *fengshui* in the siting of dwellings of the living and of the dead in relation to chthonic forces (Palmer and Winiger 2019: 87).

According to C.K. Yang's (1965) classic study of Chinese religion, "diffused" religion constitutes the main form of traditional Chinese religion. These "diffused" religions do not refer to specific kinds of religion but are woven into the fabric of secular institutions and family life with rituals positing the presence of ancestral spirits as well as of a wide array of gods and ghosts that exist, protect and threaten people in their earthly lives. In this sense, the traditional Chinese religions are themselves profanely constituted. This insight is crucial to an understanding Chinese religiosity and the social function of religion in contemporary China.

Many historians of Chinese religion therefore argue that Chinese society from the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD) onwards can be interpreted as a market where people make options from a variety of ritual practices, teachings and divine symbols (Davis 2001; Ownby 2003; Szonyi 2009). Yet the imperial regime was built using Confucian religious and moral-political discourses, which created high levels of the sacralisation of the emperor through an elaborate system of state sacrificial rituals (Yang 2008). Anthony Yu (2005) suggests that de-institutionalising Buddhism, Daoism, and sectarian and popular religions was a crucial technique to maintain the sovereign power of the Confucian imperial state, and therefore these religions could not establish the authority and

autonomy comparable to those of the church in Europe. This form of secularism may help explain why “the flexible polytheistic system of dispersed and differentiated local and regional ritual territorialities” (Yang 2008: 7) during the imperial age of the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1912 AD) was rapidly swallowed up into a totalising, centralised and modern monolithic state in the subsequent republic, communist and post-communist eras.

However, secularism as a hegemonic ideology substantially emerged in late imperial China (1842-1912 AD), when China’s Confucian state encountered Western modernity and colonialism. Although China was never fully colonised by the West, the humiliation by and threat from foreign imperialists, including Western, Japanese and Russian powers, not only evoked a Chinese desire for state-strengthening and modernisation but brought about the totalising processes of secularisation and de-traditionalising. During this period, Chinese secularism primarily developed as a form of scientism and rationalism. Many political reformers and state elites saw the enchanted elements of communication with the cosmos, popular religions and traditional teachings as superstitious, unscientific and backward, impeding state-strengthening and civilisation (Goossaert 2006). This hegemonic secularism was particularly manifest in the “smash temples, build schools” (毁庙办学) campaign against temple cults and specialists in the late Ching reform and later adopted by the communist movement after 1949, during which half a million temples were destroyed or “secularized” (Van der Veer 2011). These movements were deeply influenced by Western, enlightenment ideas, in which civilisation, progress and scientific rationality were considered as a basis of national identity. The formation of the republic state required a new type of subject that emphasised liberation from the constraints of superstition, feudalism, and Confucian authority towards the atomised and secular self



(Duara 1996). In this process, intellectuals played a crucial role in reinforcing the secularist project of nation-building. Intellectuals and elites spearheading modernisation in both the republican and communist regimes shared similar anti-religious mindsets, and enforced the stated-endorsed secularisation of everyday life. As Yang argues,

What made Chinese secularization different from the Western experience was the fact that it was a top-down process engineered by the educated elites and the modern state, and that it was part of a nationalist and centralizing process whereby local communities and their deity cults were shorn of their identities and autonomy. (Yang 2009: 7)

It would therefore be better to see Chinese secularisation more as a state-led strategy and ideology than as a latent function and by-product of modernisation as in a liberal understanding of religion. However, Szonyi (2009: 317) argues that the self-conscious category of “religion” was the result of state-led secularisation and differentiation in the early 20th century in China: “secularization in China was a dual movement of distinction and intervention, to distinguish religion from superstition and to reshape those aspects of religious life that did not meet the new criteria to make them better serve state agendas”. It is against this backdrop that the Western missionary of Christianity took roots in the late-Ching and Republic eras, as Christianity was conceived as a moral religion versus magic/superstition, in association with Western modernity.

During Mao’s time, political leaders saw religion as an “opiate of the mass”, and the Cultural Revolution almost witnessed the complete disappearance of religion from the public sphere under militant atheism. The enchanted cosmos and the spiritual life of the people were replaced by the sacralisation of communist utopia and particularly by the

Mao-cult. The communist movement required people's self-transformation into revolutionary subjects. The sacralisation of the party and Mao operated through a regime of truth that demanded that individuals should examine their inner world, emotions and attitudes through self-reflection or public confession, such that they could defeat any trace of feudal or bourgeois thoughts hidden within the inner self or unconsciousness (Duara 1996; Goossaert and Palmer 2011).

However, this anti-religious ideology has evolved into a less coercive, but no less hegemonic, secularism amidst China's pursuit of economic modernisation since 1979 (Potter 2003; Leung 2005). Based on an analysis of Chinese Communist Party policy, Potter (2003) argues that the state adopted a more tolerant perspective on religion in post-Mao China as a new approach to the building of regime legitimacy, accepting a trade-off of social and economy autonomy in exchange for individuals' political loyalty. In the area of religious affairs, the state has made a transition from coercive oppression to active governance, relocating religions to a sequestered sphere and continuously enforcing atheist propaganda through public education, mass media and grassroots party or social organs (Cao 2010; Yang 2010). The regulatory strategies in this period include the categorisation of religions, restricting places of worship to officially registered sites subject to annual inspection, and the enactment of laws that iterate the distinction between religious belief within the boundary of state protection and "illegal and criminal activities being carried out under the banner of religion" (Potter 2003: 324). The Chinese regulatory framework also pays particular attention to Christianity because the communist regime fears ideological subversion via religion from the West, given that Christian missionary work has historically been linked to imperialism (Potter 2003).

In the post-Mao era, the maintenance of church-state relations is less reliant on domination and coercion, but instead increasingly achieves it through ideological power. It is generally accepted that the Chinese party-state's religious policies derive from a Marxist interpretation of the socialist theory of religion which states that, with the realisation of a communist society, religion will eventually fade out due to individuals' increasing scientific consciousness and material satisfaction (Xing 2003). When the leaders of the party-state realised and gradually accepted the impracticality of its target to eliminate religion, the state's perception of religion also changed from conceiving of it as "the opiate of the people" to "encouraging religion to adapt to socialism". This is primarily because of the state's desire to unite people with different religions and to maintain social stability and develop production (Xing 2003). For example, the former head of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, Ye Xiaowen (2008), describes this shift in one report:

A clear path of change lies before us: from viewing religion in a chiefly negative light, to objectively viewing religion as having both positive and negative capabilities, and finally to looking at religion from a positive angle and emphasizing its positive functions. (cited in Szonyi 2009: 314 )

The co-option of religion is congruent with the state's encouragement of modern sensibilities concerning reason and progress, while market-based economic liberalisation, industrialisation and urbanisation have firmly taken root.

### **3.3 Post-Mao religious revival: the possibilities of postsecularity?<sup>5</sup>**

Nearly five decades ago, the American scholar Donald MacInnis (1973) visited China, reporting on a totally atheist country with empty churches and temples:

During the Cultural Revolution, under the slogans of “class struggles are the guiding principle” and “completely break with conventional ideas,” religion was listed as part of the “four olds” [old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits] and of “feudalism, capitalism and revisionism” that should be eradicated. Religious beliefs of the great masses were said to be reflections of class struggles in the sphere of ideology and signs of political backwardness and reaction; religious believers were cracked down on as “ox-monsters and snake-demons,” resulting in many framings and fabricated cases. Religion was a realm of heavy catastrophes. The Religious Affairs Administration was dissolved; religious affairs cadres were censured for their crime of following “the wrong political line.” All religious venues were closed. Many religious artifacts were destroyed. Religious research completely halted. The “criticism of theism” quickly became in practice the theoretical declaration for struggling to eliminate religion in society. (Yang 2004: 104).

However, this situation has dramatically changed: China may now have become one of the countries where religion is flourishing most, where all kinds of religions, old or new, institutional or folk, are being revived and are thriving (Cao 2010; Overmyer 2003; Yang 2010) despite the continuing strict regulation imposed on religion. An astounding religious revival has taken place over the last three decades including, in particular, the unlikely “Christianity fever” in China. A 2012 survey conducted by the China Family

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<sup>5</sup> Some of the material in this section has been published in *The China Quarterly*.

Panel Studies programme suggested that the number of Chinese Protestants was approximately 26 million, making up 1.9 per cent of the total population. According to another report entitled “Global Christianity” released by the Pew Research Centre, there were at least 58 million Protestants in China in 2010, having increased almost tenfold over a period of 30 years. A substantive body of research has documented the remarkable religious revival in China. Scholars have taken various approaches to explain this change, including citing moral and spiritual crises caused by drastic social change (Hunter and Chan 2007; Yang 2005; Bay 2003), the renewal of traditional practices (Chao 1999; Jing 1996), changes in state–society relations (Feuchtwang 2000; Yang 2008), and the religious market (Yang 2011).

However, to what extent can we understand China’s religious revival as a form of postsecularity? Some scholars consider China’s religious revival as a sign of the return of tradition or as “invested tradition”. In this line of scholarship, the rebuilding of rituals and practices, especially of folk religions, has sometimes been interpreted as an “invented tradition” that repackages the lived spiritual order of the pre-Mao past by drawing from communal memories (Siu 1990; Chao 1999; Jing 1996). However, an all-encompassing folk belief system was irrevocably diluted due to political movements. Therefore, revivals of religions are not continuations of past traditions, but cultural innovations drawn from cultural fragments in the post-Mao era (Siu 1990). This thread of research indicates that religion has somewhat returned into public life in the post-reform era.

However, this perspective is problematic due to its assumption that coherent and authentic “traditions” existed before Mao’s era (Chau 2006). Moreover, this approach implies an understanding of China’s transformation to capitalist modernity as what Kipnis criticizes

as “historical rupture,” which poses “tradition” as the antithesis of the “modern” (Kipnis 2016). Communal memories, in fact, are neither about mechanically collecting pieces of traditional practices nor freely re-inventing spiritual and ritual experiences in response to a changing social and political environment. Instead, it should be better conceived of as what Kipnis calls a “recombinant transformation,” an ongoing recombination of pre-existing elements into a new pattern or mixture (Kipnis 2016). In the light of Kipnis’s (2016) views, the return of religion in China is itself changing and historically constituted, and should be reduced to neither preconceived categories nor a de-historicized, free-floating representation of the present. Nevertheless, this research suggests that China’s political and economic reform in the past four decades has opened up new social spaces for religion and there are more hybrid and mutually constituted relationships between the religious and secular. In what follows, I discuss the possibilities for postsecular subjectivities to emerge from the political economy in post-reform China. Following Cloke *et al.*’s (2019) ideas, I consider postsecularity as an ethical and self-reflective project involving hybrid subjectivities in response to the conditions of being in contemporary China.

Firstly, religion, and particularly Christianity, serve as a crucial moral and spiritual impetus contributing to “moral reconstruction” in the post-Mao era and to the “harmonious society” encouraged by the state. One of the prevailing explanations of the religious revival is that people in the post-Mao era are experiencing a spiritual vacuum that is enlivening aspirations for various religiosities and traditional ethics. This thesis takes the view that changes in lived experiences have been affected by drastic social changes such as the collapse of Maoist ideology (Lee 2007), the dismantling of traditional social, moral and cosmic orders (Yang 2008), and the intensifying sense of uncertainty

among individuals in the face of overwhelming market forces. A spiritual anchor, therefore, is desirable. Yang Fenggang argues that the “emerging market is exciting and perilous, accompanied by widespread moral corruption, which prompts many individuals to seek a theodicy, or a religious worldview, to put the seemingly chaotic universe into order” (Yang 2005: 325). For example, a recent special issue of *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* examined the moral dimension of religious revival in rural China and challenged “the current tendency to reduce religion into a politics or economy of human need” (Liang 2014: 394). Religion offers “a moral life devoid of state presence” for underprivileged villagers in rural communities who appropriate Christian ethics to re-imagine ill bodies under limited public healthcare or construct a local cosmological system as an alternative moral order to instrumental rationality and the market (Liang 2014; Qi, Liang and Li 2014; Tapp 2014).

As the state’s religious policy has eased, Christianity has had an increasingly significant impact on the spiritual cultivation and moral reconstruction of the Chinese (Zhuo 2006; Wielander 2009). Xinping Zhuo, Director of the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, argues that the Christian notions of original sin and transcendence have opened up a new sense of the self and of transcendence beyond the Confucian and Taoist traditions, since Christian transcendence emphasises the ultimate transformation of oneself outside the bounds of this-worldly concerns, and therefore it serves as an important moral resource for the pursuit of goodness by the Chinese (Zhuo 2006). Moreover, Zhuo (2006) also points out that the Christian concept of *agape* based on Jesus Christ’s self-sacrifice emphasises the unconditional nature of love, which is different from the Confucian understanding of love based on human relationships.

Therefore, the Christian *agape* has a great ethical capacity to promote the exercise of social responsibility among Chinese Christians.

Secondly, faith-based organisations (FBOs) and in particular Christian institutions have increasingly filled the gap in social services and care left by the state experiencing neoliberal reform. China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy is accompanied by the collapse of *danwei* (work unity) and its associated welfare system, a vast reservoir of laid-off workers in state-owned sectors, the ever-widening rich-poor gap, and the exploitative and precarious labour regime for rural-to-urban migrants. For example, China's Gini Coefficient has grown rapidly from 0.32 in 1990 to 0.467 in 2018<sup>6</sup>. According to a 2012 report released by Peking University, the poorest 25% of Chinese citizens own an estimated 1% of the overall wealth of China, while 30% of the country's wealth is concentrated among 1% of the richest. This situation has impelled the state to reconsider state-society relations, allowing more space for NGOs and FBOs to participate in social delivery (McCarthy 2013). In turn, in serving marginal and vulnerable people, FBOs help relieve the pressure for public goods provision, cultivate new ethics of sacrifice and love, and contribute to the state-propagated "harmonious society". Nevertheless, the praxis of these emerging faith-based organisations and the possibility of the formation of new civil and ethical subjectivities have not been examined in sufficient detail. In chapter 5, I respond to this point by examining the role of theo-ethics and faith-based practices in addressing neoliberal precarities.

Thirdly, China's religious revival always-already implies the malleable and hybrid religiosity co-produced by the religious and the secular. Van der Veer (2011) raises the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/china/resident-income-distribution/gini-coefficient>



question “how do we explain the failure of a century of systematic destruction of Chinese religious life?” One of the answers is that Chinese religious life contains the heritage of Maoist subjects that absorbed quite a lot of its impetus from religious movements (Van der Veer 2011). Both Maoism and religion provide inspirations for alternative imaginations or transcendence beyond reality. Likewise, as Palmer and Winiger (2019) suggest, Maoist subjectivities that emphasise technologies of spiritual discipline and self-reflection are somewhat congruent with Christian technologies of self-transformation. Therefore, some critical commentators note that Christianity cannot be simply interpreted as an antithesis to the state’s secular project of modernisation and governance. For example, instead of assuming that Christian values and ethics enable a space in which Chinese people negotiate and reclaim their autonomy from an authoritarian state, Wielander (2013) critically argues that Christian values actually overlap with the party-state’s project of maintaining power and moral legitimacy. Christian values, and particularly the concept of love, are compatible with the state’s efforts to construct a “harmonious society” by propagating state-endorsed moral standards and filling gaps in social welfare and services. Additionally, the Christian theologies of original sin and *agape* work in tandem with the state’s discourse of civility that seeks to construct a “harmonious” public sphere composed of cultured, self-disciplined, law-abiding and productive citizens (Wielander 2013: 2009). This is consonant with Cao’s (2010: 66) argument that “Christianity certainly has gained recognition from the state as a useful source in local governance.” For Cao, Christian belief not only serves as a moral asset for governance but also facilitates the state’s developmentalism and labour regime by disciplining and motivating the workforce. In his research into Wenzhou Christianity, many Christian entrepreneurs apply theologically mediated moral vocabularies, for

example, “transforming faith to productivity” and “using Christians to govern the factory,” to reinforce capitalist production and enterprise management (Cao 2010: 66).

However, I do not argue for the co-option of Christianity into the state’s governmentality, but suggest that these hybrid religiosities can be captured by neither state-resistance nor co-option models. The possibility of postsecularity in China’s religious revival should move beyond the criteria related to whether religion offers the capacity to resist, or is simply co-opted into, state-led neoliberal governance. Instead, in this thesis, I associate the possibilities of postsecularity with the ways individuals constitute hybrid religiosities and multiple agency in response to the secular conditions of being.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have analysed the geo-historical context of secularity and postsecularity in China. In general, secularity and secularism have emerged due to China’s encounters with Western imperialism. Secularism became a hegemonic ideology that the state in both the Republic and communist China used to break away with “backward” traditions. In this sense, secularity and secularism do not simply represent a latent function and by-product of the inevitable project of modernisation, but more likely a state-led strategy and ideology in the history of state-building and social governance. In the post-Mao era, the political project of secularity is less reliant on domination and coercion, but is instead increasingly achieved through ideological power and economic rationality. In this thesis, I further explore how China’s secularity is embodied in neoliberal governance, state developmentalism, and local autocratic rule that shape the secular consciousness of docile and governable individuals. On the other hand, interestingly, China’s political-ideological project of secularity appears to arouse rather than stifle people’s desire for religiosity,

which is evident in the nationwide religious revival. Therefore, I argue that the agenda of secularity in China always-ready implies the formation of new religious subjectivities and agency that cannot simply be dismissed by ideological power. Overall, unlike the liberal and civic spheres in the West in which different values contest democratically, the geo-historical context of China offers a unique testing ground for an exploration of how religion is mutually constituted with secularist and autocratic power.

## Chapter 4 Research Context and Methodology

### 4.1 Contextualising Christianity and migrant workers in Shenzhen<sup>7</sup>

Shenzhen is the fourth largest metropolitan city in Mainland China after Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, as well as the first Special Economic Zone in China. Most recently, Shenzhen has overtaken Guangzhou to become the third most important economic power as measured in terms of GDP. Shenzhen is located on the Pearl River delta – one of China’s (and the world’s) most influential manufacturing and industrial centres and economic engines. According to the 2017 national census, Shenzhen houses a population of more than 15 million, approximately 70% of whom are migrants who do not hold local *hukou* status. Shenzhen has been considered as the epitome of China’s crusade of Reform and Opening and the neoliberal transition since 1978. Taking advantage of policy privileges and its proximity to Hong Kong both geographically and culturally, Shenzhen soon began to experience an unprecedented economic boom, developing from a fishing village to the “workshop of the world” over the past 30 years.

My rationale for choosing Shenzhen as the geographical focus of this study is threefold. Firstly, Shenzhen has been a pioneering city in experiencing the country’s neoliberal reform (Pun 2005), and is characterised by its upholding of secular values of economic rationality, pragmatism, progress, efficiency and development (Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018). This is particularly manifest in the famous saying “It doesn’t matter whether a cat is black

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<sup>7</sup> Some material in this section has been published in *The China Quarterly* and *Cultural Geographies*.

or white, as long as it catches mice”, put forward by Deng Xiaoping, the second-generation leader of China as well as the designer of China’s opening-up and reform policy. Put differently, as long as the economy works efficiently, it is a good economy regardless of socialism or capitalism. Thus, Shenzhen was the first city in China which opened to global capitalism. Secondly, Shenzhen is characterised by a vast reservoir of rural-to-urban migrants. Most of these migrants are employed in manufacturing enterprises, such as Foxconn. Yet although these migrant workers are key actors in China’s integration into global economy, they are simultaneously the most economically and socially marginalised group in Shenzhen. Over the past four decades, drastic industrialisation and urbanisation in Shenzhen have precipitated class inequality, precarious and disciplined labour regimes, and vulnerability to exploitation for the large numbers of rural migrant workers.

Thirdly, and the most importantly, Shenzhen has experienced both the entrenchment of secular modernity and, simultaneously, a notable flourishing of religion. For instance, Fan and James (2003) have documented an intriguing re-emergence of popular religions, traditional rituals and Confucianism values among both Shenzhen’s residents and immigrants, for whom traditional religious values appear to help them to rebuild the mutual trust that was devastated in the Cultural Revolution and to establish a moral economy vis-à-vis capitalist forms of social life. In the case of Protestant Christianity alone, 27 TSPM (Three-Self Patriotic Movement) Churches has been re-opened or built in the past two decades, most of which have full attendance at Sunday worshipping sessions. There are also immense numbers of house churches or underground churches operating beyond the state’s surveillance.

Christian missionaries in Shenzhen date back to the nineteenth century. Shenzhen was one of the earliest areas in the Pearl River delta to be targeted by Western missionaries, when China was forced to open up to foreign trade and missionary activity after its defeat in the First Opium War in 1842. In 1848, Christianity was first introduced in Shenzhen, and particularly among the Hakka people, a migrant group from Northern China who were subordinated by indigenous inhabitants. Yet, it was not until the early twentieth century that Christianity was substantially accepted by the Hakka people, due to evangelisation from the German missionary society the Basel Mission (Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018). The churches provided privileged access for Hakka people to missionary hospitals and schools, which mitigated the hardship of their life (see Figure 4-1). After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, all churches were taken over by the local Communist government and soon began to experience devastating state disruption throughout the turbulent period between 1954 and 1978 under socialist extremism. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), all churches in Shenzhen were completely shut down. Devout believers turned to the "black market" (Yang 2006) in religion, and conducted worship in places away from the state's surveillance. Since the economic reforms after 1979, the policies of the Chinese state concerning religion have slackened and the right to religious belief was reinstated in 1984. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, many people in China turned away from the discredited morality of Maoism, and resumed, or were converted to, religious belief as a way of filling the vacuum of faith. After 1984, underground worshippers started to reopen and re-establish Christian churches with the state's permission, while others refused to be involved into state regulation and continued to operate underground. One of the huge TSPM churches that was established in this period is the Meilin Church, which can accommodate more than 3000 people.



Figure 4-1. Missionary school established by Basel Mission  
Source: exhibit in Cunzhen museum, photographed by the author.

This research is based on fieldwork that I conducted during two phases (between March and June 2015 and September 2017 to March 2018). It involved nine Protestant churches in Shenzhen, including five Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches and four house churches (see Figure 4-2 and Table 4-1). While the churches did not claim to belong to a specific denomination, the pastors preferred to identify themselves as evangelical. Seven of the 9 churches are located in the *guanwai* 关外 area<sup>8</sup> of Shenzhen (outside the Special Economic Zone), where factories and migrant workers are particularly concentrated. In Shenzhen, Christian migrant workers, be they rural Christians or new converts, constitute a significant proportion of the churchgoers. As shown in Table 4-1, migrant workers constituted more than 80 per cent of attendance in these churches.

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<sup>8</sup> Until 2011, a vague borderline was used by the state to separate Shenzhen's less-developed areas (*guanwai*) from the urban core (*guannei*). The term *guanwai* here refers to the current Baoan, Longgang and Nanshan districts of Shenzhen.

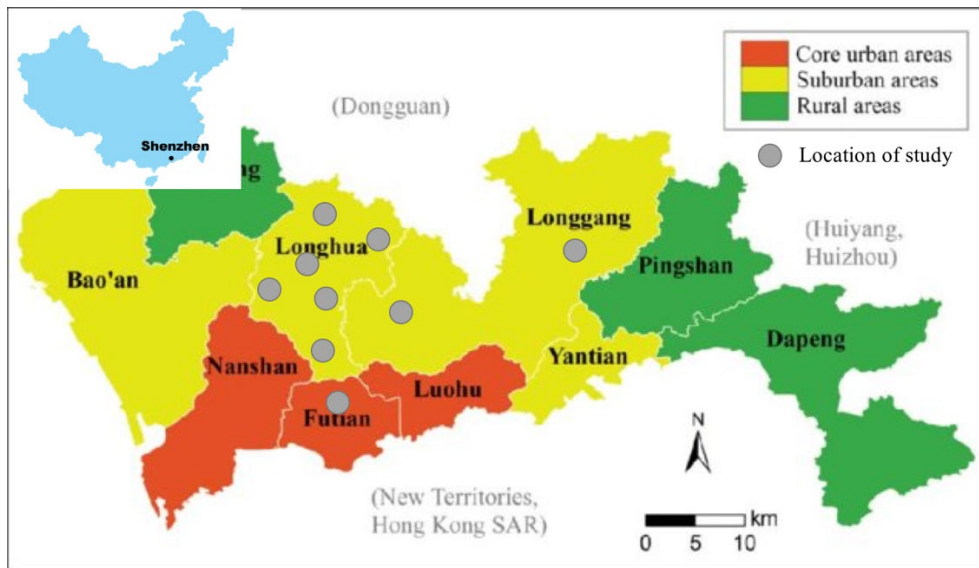


Figure 4-2 Research locations.

Sources: redrawn by the author, based on Chen *et al.* (2018)

Table 4-1 Proportion of migrant Christians among total churchgoers

Church name	Location	Percentage of migrant Christians
Shanzhuli (TSPM)	Shiyan 石岩	90%
Langkou (TSPM)	Longhua 龙华	80%
Guanlang (TSPM)	Guanlan 观澜	80%
Meilin (TSPM)	Futian 福田	N/A
Bantian (TSPM)	Bantian 坂田	N/A
Foxconn House Church A	Longhua 龙华	85%
Foxconn House Church B	Guanlan 观澜	80%
House Church C	Guanlan 观澜	90%
House Church D	Futian 福田	N/A

Sources: Data for Shanzhuli Church, Foxconn House Churches A and B and House Church C were calculated based on lists of registered church members. The figures for Langkou Church and Guanlang Church were estimated by pastors at our request.

There are many factors contributing to the predominant role of migrant workers in church attendance. Firstly, rural-to-urban migration plays a crucial role in both the translocal mobility of religiosity and *in situ* religious conversion. This is particularly the case in



Shenzhen's two "gospel villages,"<sup>9</sup> Sanzhuli and Langkou. In these two rapidly urbanizing villages, Christian beliefs inherited from the Basel Mission in the late 19th and early 20th century gradually lost their hold in the local communities due to disinterest among villagers in spiritual pursuits. However, the inflows of rural migrant workers have substantially re-energized the local churches and migrant workers now constitute approximately 90 per cent and 80 per cent of registered churchgoers in Sanzhuli Church and Langkou Church respectively. Secondly, the relatively relaxed religious policies in Shenzhen provide room for evangelising among migrant workers. Church leaders and local officials often negotiate with each other pragmatically and, hence, implement the state's religious policies in a practical way in terms of, for instance, tolerance towards evangelical activities in public spaces and house churches. As one TSPM church preacher remarked, they sometimes invited foreign clergymen to preach without prior application to the local authority. The local government also exhibits a somewhat tolerant stance towards house churches, which are technically illegal and unapproved by the state. Foxconn House Church A, for instance, suggested that they had long enjoyed the government's acquiescence. The government has neither responded to their application for registration nor taken coercive action to shut down the church.

Thirdly, both TSPM and house churches tend to target migrant workers for evangelisation, and the competitive relationship between TSPM and house churches has further reinforced evangelical activity aimed at migrant workers. Foxconn House Church A, established by Taiwanese senior managers in 2011, largely targets Foxconn workers in response to the 2010 Foxconn tragedy. According to their records, 55.4 per cent (72 out

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<sup>9</sup> Here, "gospel village" refers to villages in Shenzhen that have widely accepted Christian beliefs due to the work of Western missionaries, with more than fifty per cent of the population being Christians (see Gao and Qian 2018).

of 130) of their churchgoers are Foxconn workers. If migrant workers from outside Foxconn are added, then approximately 80 per cent of the congregation are migrant workers. The saliency of migrants also applies to Guanlan Church, a TSPM church which is largely sponsored by a “boss Christian” who owns a plastics factory located next door. The “boss Christian” donated 3 million yuan to re-establish the church in 1999. Thus, a significant proportion of its churchgoers are workers from his factory. Likewise, House Church C was organised in a factory by a “boss Christian” who introduced Christian activities as a form of communal life and leisure. Foxconn House Church B was originally a small congregation spontaneously organised by Foxconn workers, but it has developed into a church with more than 100 members, most of whom are migrant workers. Overall, the migrant-worker-driven Christian revival in Shenzhen provides a social niche in which the co-production of secular neoliberalism and religion can be examined and the possibility of postsecularity explored.

## **4.2 Conducting a reflexive ethnography of religion in China: positionality and situated knowledge**

### **4.2.1 Ethnography: advantages and limitations**

The primary method used in this research is ethnography, which is a method that mainly rests on participant observation and interviews during through the seven months which I spent observing and interacting with migrant workers and church members. The origins of ethnography lie in nineteenth-century anthropology, when some researchers, and particularly Franz Boas, conducted descriptive accounts of indigenous communities with non-western cultures (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). That is, the ethnographer was usually required to reside over a relatively long-term period with local people and to participate in everyday activities in order to document and interpret their distinctive way

of life as well as the values and beliefs underlying it. Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) substantially developed ethnography in his two years of fieldwork accounting on native enterprise of the Trobriand people who lived on the island of New Guinea. Where anthropologists had previously mainly focused on “ethnology”, which relies on historical documents or materials produced by travellers or missionaries, Malinowski’s method was characterised by direct observation and participation in the life of local groups. Over time, ethnography came “to refer to an integration of both first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organization and culture” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:1).

By adopting an ethnographic approach (Wolcott 1999; Atkinson 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), the data collection and analysis in this research are characterised by three distinctive features. The research places the emphasis on the “natural” and everyday context rather than controlled conditions created by researcher, and thereby it can be distinguished from techniques using questionnaires and highly structured interviews. Although I was inescapably involved in the process of knowledge production in this study, I made an effort to minimise my influence on the ways in which Christian migrant workers and religious institutions constituted meaning. For example, a significant proportion of the data are drawn from fellowship conversations at the churches, which provides a crucial supplement to the interviews. Also, the research was conducted primarily with a single group (Christian migrant workers) in order to facilitate an in-depth investigation, although the study of church elites was also necessary so as to gain an understanding of the structure in which ordinary migrant workers practised their religion. The analysis of data then consisted of making interpretations concerning the motivations,

meanings, consequences and functions of the human actions or institutional practices involved, and mechanisms of their implication in the local or wider social context.

As a qualitative method, the methodology of ethnography has developed as a competing or “conflicting” philosophical position with respect to quantitative approaches. It is generally accepted that early ethnography built philosophically on “naturalism”, while quantitative methods rest on “positivism”. These two philosophical approaches give divergent accounts with regard to the best way to approach the real world. Positivism provides a methodological model for social research which privileges the logic of experimentation and statistical laws to provide scientific rigour (Ayer 1966; Caldwell 2010). Therefore, positivists seek to explore the “overarching laws” of society or nature by identifying relationships between variables. In this sense, they are encouraged to place a greater emphasis on sampling procedures and statistics in order to increase the generalisability of their findings. For positivists, the world is out there for exploration and knowledge of the real world can be tested or at least confirmed with certainty. Therefore, scientific knowledge is capable of justifiably replacing myths of common sense and traditional views. Ethnography, however, along with many other kinds of qualitative approach, does not match up to these positivist imperatives. As a result, in the 1950s, ethnography came under criticism for lacking scientific rigour and the data ethnographers produce were accused of being subjective, or representing idiosyncratic explorations of one to two cases that were not representative. In response, ethnographers, and especially Lofland (1967) and Blumer (1969), and later Schatzman and Strauss (1973), developed alternative insights into the nature of social research, which are often described in terms of “naturalism”. Naturalism argues that society and culture should be explored in their “natural” state, uninfluenced by the researcher. Therefore, “natural” rather than controlled

and “artificial” settings is considered to be more awarding for data collection. For Matza (1969: 5), naturalism is mainly “the philosophical view that remains true to the nature of the phenomenon under study”. In other words, knowledge inherently exists in the real world and not lies in the methods deployed to study the world. Equally importantly, naturalism proposes that, since the behaviour of individuals is not structured in a mechanical way, but instead continually varies according to people’s interpretations of the circumstance in which they are situated, social research which aims to understand people’s behaviour should be concerned with the meanings that guide that behaviour (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Hence, in ethnography, the researcher as a social actor participates in the specific situations that people live in, can give such capacity and access to learn the culture of people. In the face of the criticism from quantitative researchers, the development of naturalism undoubtedly legitimates ethnography. Against this background, it could be understandable that early ethnographic research preferred that no interpretation should be involved in a study, nor formal interviews, and getting off the veranda.

However, the methodology used in this research moves beyond both positivist and naturalist approaches and instead follows the post-structural and social constructionist approaches that emphasise the subjectivity of the researcher in producing knowledge. In essence, both naturalism and positivism share similar grounds that seek to comprehend social phenomena as pre-existed objects independent of the subjectivity of a researcher, although they are interpreted in divergent ways. They therefore both claim that preserving objectivity in social research is a priority in producing valid knowledge of the social world. This gives rise to an important issue regarding the subjectivity and reflectivity of the

researcher in ethnography. In this chapter, I provide some reflections on the issue of the researcher's reflectivity

Following a constructionist point of view in ethnography, I am self-conscious of my positionality and worldview in the interpretation of text and the perception of the world I am involved in, and therefore the ethnographical text produced is regarded in terms of constructions. That is, my subjectivity is an indispensable component of ethnography, since an ethnographical account is inevitably a reflection of social and historical positioning and a specific background in which the researcher is situated. In this sense, I need to critically reflect upon my ways of thinking and the social and cultural environment in which I am situated (as elaborated upon below). This is particularly important in a country whose citizens are dominated by atheist education. Put differently, in social research, not only is the researcher's subject important but also the context where this is arranged (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008).

I also engage with the ideas of poststructuralism, especially its claims of the unstable nature of meanings and truth. Therefore, I emphasise the role of discourse and power in producing ethnographic knowledge. Hence, the validity and truth-claims associated with ethnographic knowledge need to be considered in terms of how this knowledge is produced and what power relationships are embedded in it (Crang and Cook 2007). This thesis therefore suggests that it is the subjectivity and position of the researcher that facilitate the reliability of the ethnographic method. Hebert (2000) argues that there are two factors that shape ethnography as a distinctive understanding of the nature of the social world. Firstly, ethnography offers the scope to examine the ways in which macro-level social structures explicitly function and are reproduced through the processes of

everyday life. Ethnography can arguably elaborate on the relationships between the macro- and micro-logics of social life. Hebert (2000) takes “the state” as an example, arguing that the state is often conceived of in terms of structural scope and power, whose coercion can determine the distribution of social resources. But the exercise of state power is inevitably implicated in everyday life; and an in-depth exploration of everyday processes can reveal the “contingent nature of state power, and the various tensions, fractures” (Hebert 2000:555) which characterise state institutions. In this sense, ethnography offers a method for the examination of secularity and postsecularity as concrete social processes rather than simply conceptual knowledge or the social imaginary. Secondly, it seeks to reveal the sets of meanings that guide the actions of individuals and which code the everyday processes in which they are situated. Ethnographers argue that social life is meaningful and its meaning systems are created through the inter-subjectivity or ongoing interactions between social agents. However, ethnographers move from outside to inside; for example, only through long-term participant observation and communication with local people can they understand how these meaning systems orientate people and their social world from the points of view of insiders, which the use of questionnaires and statistical analysis cannot fully achieve.

Two methodological insights can be drawn from Hebert’s discussion. Firstly, I did not take the classic approach of congregation studies of Christianity; instead, my research largely relies on information about individual Christian life histories, narratives, and emotions in order to reveal the processes of everyday life and its underlying meanings as produced by individuals. I followed the everyday routines of Christian migrant workers and their practices in churches, factories and living spaces, and participated in sermon sessions, fellowships and other religious activities in and outside the churches. Secondly,

I was cautious of the ways in which institutional and lived knowledge are produced and constantly questioned how knowledge was produced and how it can best be presented so as to avoid misrepresentation.

Although ethnography is theoretically and practically valid, there are still many potential critiques concerning the limitations of ethnography in this research. Most commonly, ethnography is criticised for lacking scientific rigour because it “involves a small sample size, is difficult to replicate, and contains a great deal of subjectivity and interpretation on the part of the researcher” (Rengert 1997: 469). However, following Hebert (2000), I would argue that it is exactly the features of small samples and the involvement of the researcher that make ethnography reliable. I consider the research process to involve reflexive and self-conscious acts, where even “objectivity” is itself a product of social construction. On the other hand, my Chinese identity enables me to act as an insider in understanding social phenomena in my own culture. Therefore, ethnographers are engaged in conversation with one another. Another critique might arise from concerns regarding ethnography’s capacity to allow generalisation and representativeness. In response to this, I would argue that it may depend on the specific research questions and concerns involved, because some ethnographers do not appear to regard generalisation as being necessary since they only offer interpretations concerning one particular group or phenomenon. But for ethnographic research that seeks a micro-interpretation of the larger scale of social life, there are some ways to improve the ability to generalise, including comparative analysis which can explore similarities and divergences between groups, a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, and the examination of existing theories through fieldwork (Heber 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). As an example of small-scale ethnography, this research does not aim to provide general and



representative knowledge of scenarios of secularity, neoliberalism and Christianity in China; instead, it attempts to capture the complexity of the Christian revival among working-class communities in Shenzhen and the ways in which broad social and cultural processes are inhabited by ordinary people.

#### **4.2.2 Positionalities and the political context in this research: insider/outsider, methodological agnosticism and reflexivity**

The study of religious and spiritual belief as an aspect of cultural life raises complex epistemological and methodological questions for social scientists (Stewart 2001). When a researcher conducts research into his/her own or different ethnic/religious groups, issues of positionality and in particular the negotiation of the researcher as insider/outsider abound. The existing literature highlights the advantages of being an insider in undertaking research, providing greater ease in establishing rapport with participants and hence more reliability in the interpretation of data on account of a shared cultural outlook and knowledge (O' Connor 2004). For me, being an insider as a Chinese and a Cantonese person in particular may enable me to enter into the experiences and meanings of these working-class communities more easily and thereby bridge the gap between subject and object. However, the very familiarity may also limit my interpretative ability, and increase the risk of making presumptions with regard to what is being perceived as an outsider would. As a result, an outsider position may be more reliable in this sense. Yet the insider and outsider positions, in many circumstances, can simultaneously co-exist or alternate during the research process (Rubin 2012). This is particularly the case for me, a researcher who has been trained in a Western university and returned to my home country to conduct fieldwork. For example, I can regard myself as an outsider when interviewing Christian migrant workers in regard to their experience of Christianity due to my non-

Christian status, and simultaneously an insider given a similar cultural background. Therefore, I am constantly aware of my fluid insider/outsider status and have become reflexive about their positionality.

On the one hand, I should take advantages of my position as an insider by utilising my social network during the fieldwork. Hence, I gained access to field sites with the help of a few acquaintances who were young Christian workers serving the Churches. My research started with interviews with these acquaintances, who tended to be more open because of high levels of familiarity and trust. For example, I interviewed several church volunteers who are my friends. To enter into the experiences and meanings of other Christian workers as an insider, I participated in volunteering work at one church with the help of the gatekeeper (a Church sexton) who had already granted my request, so that I could establish mutual trust with other migrant workers and be more likely to access the private moments of their lived experience. In sum, my insider position helped me to gain access to information that other researchers might not have obtained.

Yet, many scholars have pointed out that the boundaries of insider/outsider should not be considered fixed, but are rather open to revision in accordance with specific social contexts (e.g. Sherif 2012; Kusek and Smiley 2014). For instance, Zhao's (2017) study of street vendors in Dali suggests that the insider position is sometimes counterproductive in establishing mutual trust with strangers. When he talked with street vendors in the local dialect, he was eyed with scepticism because they tended to conceive of him as a local official investigating them or a competitor intending to learn trading and avoidance skills from them. On the other hand, when Zhao spoke in standard Mandarin, the street vendors tended to perceive him as a journalist or writer and became more open to conversation.

Therefore, the researcher ought to limit his/her projection of 'insiderness' in some circumstances. The fluid boundaries of insider/outsider were particularly crucial when I was conducting ethnographic study in house churches or underground churches where church members were especially vigilant about outsiders. In the early stages of my research, I tried to gain access to one migrant worker's house church via an introduction from a Christian friend. In order to participate in this church as an "insider", I decided to identify myself as a "Christian seeker" (慕道) and only at a later stage openly identified myself as a PhD researcher after I had established mutual trust with other church members. However, the insider position did not sufficiently help me to establish mutual trust with the church leader and other Christian fellows, because some of the church members were suspicious about my identification and were therefore unable to be open with me. It was most challenging to pretend to be an "insider", because I found it hard to alter my disposition, emotions, manners, and behaviour in conformity with the "affective atmosphere" (Anderson 2016) of this church. For example, I was unable to conduct passionate prayer, as most Christian migrant workers did. In subsequent stages of the study, I made explicit my purposes and identification. As a result, they were very willing to accept my presence and thought that my research was very meaningful, which might have encouraged them to share testimony and stories with non-Christians. In such a context, being an outsider in this sense has two advantages. Firstly, to be sincere in the first place was crucial in conducting the investigation and establishing mutual trust in the churches, as many Christians would not be open-minded about dishonest people. Secondly, my identification as a PhD researcher from a British university and particularly my research area concerning geographies of religion often attracted attention in the churches, as many Christian migrant workers were interested in my research and voluntarily shared their stories with me.

However, in order to occupy a mediating position that reconciles insider/outsider status, I engaged in the possibility of attaining a more nuanced methodological agnosticism. Methodological agnosticism is an approach developed by Ninian Smart (1972) which describes a neutral, value-free position that scholars should adopt in the scientific study of religion. Since the 1960s, and in particular the publication of Peter Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), social scientists have endeavoured to safeguard the study of religion from theology by treating religion as a unique cultural phenomenon. In adopting this definition of religion, the researcher should, often for methodological purposes, suspend their personal judgements and make no comment about the truth and value of religion whilst engaged in research (Cox 2003). This standpoint for the study of religion was initially termed "methodological atheism" by Berger. However, Smart preferred the phrase "methodological agnosticism", given that it is not necessary to assert that religious faith is not truth as "methodological atheism" may imply. Therefore, "methodological agnosticism" can be summarised as follows: while acknowledging religion as "human interaction with a culturally postulated nonfalsifiable reality" from a scientific perspective (Van Beek and Blakely 1994: 2), the researcher of religion should not take a position in response to questions of the validity of religion but try to understand and interpret human religious behaviour. However, although "methodological agnosticism" was widely embraced for the scientific approach to religious study, it has received increasing criticism since the late-1990s, particularly from scholars employing post-structural and post-colonial approaches (Cox 2003). Post-structuralist scholars deny that it is possible to attain "objective" and reified knowledge of religion, and thus scholars must be inescapably situated in a specific space and time that ideologically shape their position (see Hufford 1999).

When employing methodological agnosticism in interviews, I avoided asking questions involving truth concerning participants' perspectives. For example, supernatural phenomena and in particular the Christian miracles play a crucial role in Chinese Christians' perceptions of the world. Many Church members consider China to be a "chosen" nation where miracles are not only possible, but also are increasingly common. Many Christians also believe in faith healing. Stories of conversion described in previous research (Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018) often begin with a non-believer suffering from a serious illness, then a Christian "lays hands" on the person and prays to cast out the physical ailment or demon. A significant proportion of Christian workers claimed that they had witnessed such miracles. In this sense, to be agnostic meant that I should place myself in the position of not having sufficient information with which to make a decision on the truth of their claims of miracles.

Although studying private religious experiences seems to validate the claim of insider status, some other researchers assert that the insider position needs to be abandoned when developing explanatory theories. Knott (2005) suggests that the scientific approach in the study of religion often privileges the outsider stance for the sake of attaining an objective interpretation. The social nature of religion is emphasised, in acknowledging that religion can be studied like other institutions and ideologies. Therefore, the aim of the scholar of religion should be to use the stance of methodological agnosticism to explain religious phenomena at a critical distance rather than by trying to 'get inside' the experience of religion. Notwithstanding the argument that scholars should observe religious phenomena at a critical distance, I do not reduce the stance of methodological agnosticism as a secular-naturalist-scientific epistemology which I intended to avoid. Methodological agnosticism does not mean seeing religion as an object and social phenomena to be

studied and interpreted by reducing theology to purely social dynamics and migrant workers' mechanical response to the social-economic environments they inhabited. In this sense, I also put significant effort into learning about Christian theologies and philosophies and participated in some Bible studies classes in the churches so as to understand the ways migrant workers made sense of the world.

Apart from these three positions of insider, outsider, and agnostic, I also emphasise the problem of the researcher's positionality, so as to incorporate reflexivity into the study of religion. This emphasis on reflexivity is largely dependent on developments in poststructuralism. For poststructuralists, meaning is not something possessed by specific objects or actions, but rather is the product of a series of relations which comprise the object or practice. In this approach, an allegedly objective stance can be criticised for its insufficient consideration of the effect of the researcher's position, as the label "objective" itself is associated with a power relationship that attempts to create artificial detachment in order to construct an illusory objectivity and in turn to generate authority (Ferder 2006). Instead, reflexivity underscores important factors such as identity, status and power relationships which scholars may be (unwittingly) involved in during the research process (Shaw 1995; Donaldson and Pui-Lan 2002). As Rose (1997: 308) argues, reflexivity critically denies the universal employment of a neutral position in addressing situating knowledge:

Reflexivity in general is being advocated by these writers as a strategy for situating knowledge: that is, as a means of avoiding the false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge. [...] It is crucial to consider the role of the (multiple) "self", showing how a researcher's positionality (in terms of race, nationality, age,

gender, social and economic status, sexuality) may influence the “data” collected and thus the information that becomes coded as “knowledge”.

In sum, the reflexive stance is a position which addresses the way in which all observations are inextricably interwoven with the self-referential statements of the researcher. Put simply, as Pillow (2003) suggests, to be reflexive is to be involved in an ongoing process of self-awareness that reflects upon how knowledge is produced. One of the most noticeable trends in the use of reflexivity is to increase the attention paid to the researcher’s subjectivity in the research process, such as in a focus on how who I am and who I have been affect data collection and analysis. Davies (2008:12) argues that reflexivity also addresses how to consider the dual nature of social research, in “that it depends both on some connection with that being researched and on some degree of separation from it”. Here, I realised that my identity, experiences, emotions and political and ideological stances may shape the ideas which I had when I went into the field and interacted with informants.

During the process of research, I developed close relationships with many Christian migrant workers and church leaders. For example, in the first month of the fieldwork, I regularly participated in volunteering work and daily affairs in Foxconn House church A, including cooking, church maintenance, preparing Sunday worship, and visiting Christian workers who were ill. Therefore, I gradually became one of the members of this religious community, and many church members regarded me not merely as a researcher but also called me “brother Gao”. However, this also posed ethical challenges, because when friendships are established between the researcher and the researched, then there is the potential to exploit the latter in order to collect data. To minimise this effect, I made

efforts to avoid “faking friendship” with informants and maintained friendly interaction with informants I had interviewed until I left the field. Gradually, I found myself being able to meet some of the pursuits and interests of my Christian respondents, such as helping them to hunt for jobs online. In general, establishing “guanxi” (interpersonal relations) was crucial in doing research in the Chinese context (see Chapter 9 for more discussion of guanxi). That is, doing research was also a process of co-producing an interpersonal network and reciprocal relationships. The church leaders and other Christian respondents actually welcomed me in working with them to promote the values of Christianity and therefore offered me much freedom to conduct tape-recorded interviews and observation. Yet, as we interacted more deeply with one another, some Christian respondents would from time to time invite me to be baptised. On such occasions, I normally explained to them that my research required a certain degree of neutrality and that I would consider the possibility of baptism in the future.

It is noteworthy that political context is one of the most important structural forces that may influence the positionalities of both the researcher and the researched. As Thøgersen and Heimer (2006:1) note, “doing fieldwork inside the People’s Republic of China is an eye-opening but sometimes also deeply frustrating experience”. Given its authoritarian regime, China would appear to present various restrictions on researchers who are intent on eliciting genuine views and experiences of local people. During the Mao era (1949-1977), the social sciences such as sociology, psychology, anthropology and human geography were viewed by the party-state as “capitalist academics” and “fake academics” that justify the hegemony of Western imperialism, and were removed from mainstream research. As field-based research was strictly controlled during this period, researchers and policymakers found it difficult to achieve an accurate picture of what was really going



on in the country (such as the disastrous outcomes of the ‘Great Forward Movement’). Since the reform and opening-up policy from the early 1980s, along with Deng Xiaoping’s advocacy of the restoration of the social sciences, the Chinese state has allowed more freedom for researchers. In the post-reform era, the state’s policy on religion has also been transformed from suppression to active governance (Yang 2005). In 1981, the Central Committee of the CCP released ‘Document 19’, containing basic policy on religious affairs in post-reform China, which emphasises that “respect for and the protection of religious freedom is the Party’s basic policy on religious issues” (Guo & Zhang 2015: 2187). Notwithstanding the more open atmosphere, some topics such as ethnicity and religion are still too politically sensitive for research in China to be possible (Thøgersen and Heimer 2006). In particular, in the eyes of the CCP, Christianity is often associated with “religious infiltration”, which refers to any activity or propaganda that may be used to “overthrow the regime and socialist system, undermine unification of the nation, control religious organizations and religious affairs, as well as illegally establish and develop religious organizations and strongholds of activity” (Guo & Zhang 2015: 2188). According to Yang (2006), Christianity can be divided into three “markets” in accordance with the degree of legitimacy afforded by state regulations: the white market, primarily the TSPM churches that legally operate but under state surveillance; the grey market consisting of some house churches that are legally ambiguous but subject to flexible governance by the local state; and the black market constituted by illegal underground churches. The present research covers these three kinds of churches.

In this sense, I had during my research to carefully negotiate the presence of state power so that both I and the participants needed to deal with the party-state’s discourses that define which topics can and cannot be talked about in order to ensure that the research

would not elicit unwanted political risk. Political factors sometimes imposed constraints on my access to certain fields. Carrying out research in the officially permitted churches normally required an introductory letter from the Chinese government or public institutions such as universities which a PhD student from a UK university cannot obtain. Thus, some church leaders, and in particular those of TSPM churches, were reluctant to participate in my research, although they were interested in its topic. Yet, despite government supervision, TSPM churches still have a large degree of autonomy in dealing with church affairs. Therefore, many TSPM church leaders who refused to personally participate in my research still allowed me to freely conduct interviews within their churches, as long as I did not break the law or spread anti-government propaganda. In some circumstances, I would conduct covert research as a normal visitor if interviews with church leaders were not necessary (and the ethics of covert research are discussed later). In underground churches, I risked suspicion of being a government agent, but this could be eliminated by establishing mutual trust and *guanxi*, as discussed above.

The political context can also produce an “atmosphere of self-censorship” in which both interviewer and interviewees need to be aware of which topics are “unspeakable”. Apart from political factors, Chinese culture is also characterised by power distance; that is, individuals often have high acceptability or unequal power distribution (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). This is reflected in hierarchical management structures and very powerful managers. Therefore, interviewees often tended to avoid offering negative comments, fearing that their involvement may become detrimental to themselves (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). To mitigate this effect, I carefully designed interview questions with different degrees of political sensitivity and observed interviewees’ responses to these questions. Through repeated experimentation, I found that most

interviewees could somehow be critical of the reality that they inhabited. They were reticent in commenting on the state's religious policy and the legitimacy of the CCP, but many were critical of specific social issues that were less politically sensitive; for example, those relating to social injustice and class exploitation. In particular, most migrant worker interviewees freely criticised the factory regime, and the injustices of the labour market and *hukou* system that devalued them, although they rarely associated these problems with the party-state. However, it is noteworthy that reticence concerning politically sensitive topics is not simply due to fear, but also a collectivist culture in which individuals do not want to undermine the image of the collectivity (Zhou and Nunes 2013). Overall, given that my research primarily focuses on the lived experiences of migrant workers rather than political issues, participants felt able to articulate their true thoughts and feelings. Moreover, I used various strategies to ensure the validity and reliability of the research, including being open and honest with participants, collecting as much data as possible and cross-verifying it, and integrating the analysis with the existing literature.

In order to be as reflexive as possible, my positioning as “agnostic” in both religious and political senses was particularly helpful in this study. Having studied at Newcastle University and completed extensive research on geographies of religion as well as often participating in Christian fellowship in the UK, I identified myself as a “cultural Christian”, a term utilised by Cao (2010: 18) to describe his positionality whilst conducting an ethnography of Christianity in Wenzhou, China, as “someone who appreciates the doctrine and the faith but has no personal commitment to the church”. As a “cultural Christian”, I participated a variety of church services and fellowships, listening to sermons, sharing everyday experiences with Christian fellows, studying the Bible, saying prayers, and even becoming one of the performers in a Christmas gala, like an

ordinary Christian practitioner would. However, I avoided participating in Holy Communion, which only baptised Christians are qualified to receive.

Moreover, being “agnostic” in this study could also minimise any political and ideological bias. Carrying out research into religion in China is unavoidably a politically charged process and requires reflexivity and self-consciousness on the part of the researcher. This in turn affects the politics inherent in religious scholarship and the stances which scholars take in interpreting religious activities. However, existing research into religion in China is dominated by two competing political stances: one which accepts an atheist ideology and serves as part of state propaganda (Yang, 2004), and another (which is considered to be mainstream) which privileges a politicised perspective in interpreting China’s religion. The former tends to legitimate the state’s religious regulations and secularization campaign, whilst the latter aims to criticise the Chinese state’s policy on religion and thus challenges the repressive situation where religion is concerned.

Yang (2004) suggests that research into religion in Communist China was first established in the service of atheist propaganda and religious control. This branch of scholarship, although accepting the ideological doctrine of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), includes two major forms of atheism: scientific and militant atheism. Scientific atheism was inherent in China’s 1919 Five-Four Movement, which embraced the European Enlightenment and sees religion as illusion or the false consciousness of the people that will wither away as society progresses. On the other hand, militant atheism regards religion as the ‘opium of the masses’, and by extension as a false political ideology that serves anti-revolutionary forces; thus, control over religion is necessary to

eliminate religion. Nevertheless, scholars of religion in China who believe in atheism primarily adopt scientific atheism, which offers a theoretical basis for the limited tolerance of religion rather than antireligious measures (Yang 2004; 2010).

In contrast, another branch of scholarship, particularly among those who publish in the English literature, often politicise issues of religion in China. As Cao (2010: 7) suggests, many researchers are more concerned with “moral clarity and an old political logic rather than the views of local believers”. These scholars often follow Marxist-inspired critical approaches which emphasise the political commitment of research. Such politicised stances nonetheless risk the reduction of religion in China to a binary construct of state domination and concessions to or the resistance of religious subjects.

In this sense, being “agnostic” means that I should move beyond these two political and ideological stances and let the data “speak for themselves”. In my view, there is no privileged explanation, and no political position and basis on which to prioritize one view as more correct; instead, all perspectives are discursively constituted, hence I emphasise the socially situated nature of knowledge. In light of this viewpoint, I do not presuppose that state power and neoliberalism are inherently hegemonic and thereby inimical to religion. In this sense, instead of asking migrant workers and church leaders about how they made sense of the political-ideological project imposed on Christianity, my ethnography put more emphasis on how they produced, consumed and interpreted Christian values and symbols. For example, in the interviews with church leaders, I would ask them how they operated in the church rather than how they responded to state regulation. In most circumstances, I viewed state power and the political-economic project of neoliberalism as a condition of being which migrant workers inhabit rather than

an all-compassing power structure to be resisted. In religious terms, to be agnostic does not mean reducing theological knowledge and migrant workers' religious experiences to simply "social phenomena" devoid of transcendence. I therefore reconcile the positioning of agnosticism with a postsecular critique in the interpretation of research data; while acknowledging the importance of theological knowledge, I treat transcendent experience (such as of the holy spirit, healing and miracles in this study) as unknowable and do not claim to possess any privileged approach to their explanation.

#### **4.2.4 Practical issues of ethnography**

##### **Access**

Gaining access so as to be able to collect data plays a crucial role in ethnography. It not only concerns the way researcher enters a place but also involves access to the social relations that take place there. In my research, I needed to gain access to Protestant churches in Shenzhen. In China, the Protestant church is not simply a public domain open to every individual, but is associated with the state's regulation of religion. Two types of Protestant church in China can be identified according to whether or not they are state-sanctioned: the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) Churches subject to state registration, and house churches or underground churches that operate outside of state surveillance. The house churches are often perceived as legally ambiguous or illegal according to state policy, thereby they often operate underground and are only open to one's acquaintances or those deemed trustworthy.

The first factor I needed to consider is gatekeepers, who control entry or police the boundaries of churches and their internal affairs. Before entry, I must know who has the power to make decisions on access, or who regards themselves as having the authority to secure or refuse access. My ethnography started in Sanzhuli Church, a TSPM church in

a “gospel village” which Hakka people had lived in for 800 hundred years. Despite the fact that most churchgoers were migrant workers, the church leaders (pastor and preacher) were aboriginal Hakka people. As a descendant of Hakka people<sup>10</sup>, I quickly attained the church leaders’ trust. I made my identity and research purposes clear to the gatekeepers and they were very willing to support my research. Meanwhile the most challenging part of the ethnography was finding and entering house churches, given their closed nature and distrust of non-Christian outsiders. It is noteworthy that the boundaries between TSPM churches and house churches are not necessarily impermeable, as some Christian respondents at Sanzhuli Church claimed that they often attended both TSPM and house churches. In this situation, the “snowball” sampling technique was useful. One Christian respondent introduced me to House Church A, an underground church located next to the Foxconn premises. House Church A was operated by two Taiwanese senior managers at Foxconn who were also interested in my research project, as we had common concerns in wishing to understand the Christian lives of migrant factory workers. Having got the gatekeepers’ permission, the relationship established with those people also influence the progress and subsequent course of the research, and thereby how to facilitate the relationships with the relevant people looms large in the process of ethnography. Having stayed at Foxconn House Church A for one week up to the point that we had established basic mutual trust, I started to conducted interviews with Foxconn workers assisted by the church leaders. However, I also kept in mind that the gatekeepers or sponsors could shape the conduct and development of the research, as the researcher may tend to be channelled in particular directions in line with their networks of friendship and territory. In this situation, I sometimes found it difficult to achieve independence from the

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<sup>10</sup> The name Hakka literally refers to “guest people”; they are a clan who migrated from the North to the South of China in ancient times.

gatekeepers who arranged respondents for me to interview. Therefore, I had to be constantly aware of whether or not I was limited by the horizons provided by a gatekeeper. Moreover, a researcher is often expected to be an “expert” who should be extremely well-informed with regard to the problems which arise and relevant solutions. In these circumstances, I tended to re-clarify the research purposes as well as the issue regarding whether my research can contribute to sort out the problems of organization or community to both gatekeepers and participants.

### **Sampling**

I used an intersectional analytical frame to examine migrant workers’ religion, gender, age and class subjectivities. This project was conducted with 52 Christian migrant workers (32 males and 20 females) and 8 leaders, pastors and preachers in Shenzhen’s 9 Protestant churches (including house churches and officially recognised churches) from September 2017 to March 2018. The migrant worker informants ranged in age from 17 to 60 years, of whom 17 aged between 20-29 could be classified as young migrant workers. As a small-scale study, this sample could not represent the diversity of rural migrant workers, but efforts were made to include different age groups, genders, places of origin, and religious denominations of informants. A majority of Protestant migrants were not explicitly conscious of their denomination, except for a few who identified themselves as Pentecostal. The official churches typically identified themselves with urban evangelism, while the rural migrant house churches often bore the legacy of a Pentecostal-style charismatic Protestantism due to their rural origins (see Kao 2009). The sampling was roughly in accordance with the demographic profile, where men constitute 65.1% of Chinese rural migrant workers. This study primarily focuses on migrant factory workers, who are normally defined as part of the working class in China. Approximately



two-thirds of the informants were working or had worked at Foxconn, while the remaining informants were workers at other factories or held other occupations, such as construction workers and security guards.

Table 4-2. Demographic information of respondents

Number	Gender	Age	Place of origin	Category	Number	Gender	Age	Place of origin	Category
1	F	42	Shannxi	worker	31	F	32	Sichuan	worker
2	M	46	Shichuan	worker	32	M	42	Shanxi	preacher
3	M	28	Guangdong	preacher	33	F	22	Shandong	worker
4	F	23	Meizhou	worker	34	F	50	Fujian	worker
5	M	34	Zhanjiang	worker	35	M	35	Henan	worker
6	M	42	Henan	worker	36	F	48	Guagnxi	worker
7	M	22	Meizhou	worker	37	M	34	Shanxi	worker
8	M	56	Hunan	worker	38	F	32	Sichaun	worker
9	M	30	Hunan	worker	39	F	43	Jiangxi	worker
10	F	35	Guangdong	worker	40	F	36	Henan	worker
11	M	28	Henan	worker	41	F	47	Shanxi	worker
12	M	56	Taiwan	church leader	42	M	21	Hunan	worker
13	F	34	Henan	worker	43	M	27	Jiangxi	worker
14	M	37	Taiwan	church leader	44	F	43	Shanxi	worker
15	M	27	Anhui	house church leader	45	M	35	Liaoning	worker
16	M	29	Shanxi	worker	46	M	30	Yunan	worker
17	M	40	Jiangxi	worker	47	M	28	Henan	worker
18	F	35	Henan	worker	48	F	27	Jiangxi	worker
19	F	43	Jiangxi	worker	49	M	24	Shanxi	worker
20	M	28	Henan	worker	50	M	26	Guangdong	worker
21	M	45	Henan	worker	51	M	45	Taiwan	church leader
22	M	50	Hongkong	factory director	52	F	27	Sichuan	preacher
23	M	32	Henan	worker	53	M	24	Jiangxi	worker
24	F	48	Henan	worker	54	M	40	Fujian	worker
25	F	28	Jiangxi	worker	55	M	42	Zhejiang	worker
26	M	36	Sichuan	worker	56	M	24	Hubei	worker
27	M	27	Shaanxi	worker	57	M	33	Liaoning	worker
28	F	25	Shandong	worker	58	M	44	Heilongjiang	worker
29	M	47	Henan	worker	59	M	35	Henan	worker
30	F	48	Henan	worker	60	M	27	Hunan	worker

## Interviews

The in-depth qualitative interview is the primary research method which I employed to collect first-hand qualitative data. The interview method, as Valentine (2005) comments, is generally believed to be sensitive to rich social realities. It is employed to understand a research subject's deep experiences and feelings, and to make sense of their own ideas and perspectives. The interview questions were primarily geared towards examining the

ways in which migrant workers experienced and interpreted religious beliefs in an everyday context.

Following Byrne (2004), I regard the interview in terms of a “discursive repertoire”; that is, the researcher and the researched develop a collaborative relationship and make sense of discursive meanings in a mutually interactive way (McDowell 1992). In this sense, certain kinds of mutual disclosure and the sharing of meanings are necessary in interviews. To this end, the interviews were semi-structured, in which researcher can set parameters to open discussion, or relatively unstructured akin to open conversations within or beyond the research topic. This means that in my interview schedule I only listed some broad research concerns and questions, as well as the questions asked to collect background information about the research setting,. As the interviews proceeded, I normally started from a few broad and general questions regarding their how they converted to Christianity. Then I tried to elicit more detailed descriptions from the interviewees about the situations I wanted to examine and asked them to express their own ideas, viewpoints and judgements. A mutual and conversational partnership in the interview was paramount for me, since I am a well-educated and culturally “mainstream” postgraduate student and I could not guarantee that my understanding of the interview data would accurately reflect the broad social, cultural and political time-spaces which condition migrant workers’ perspectives and experiences. So, it was necessary to allow ample room for interviewees to give statements and counterstatements in the joint construction of knowledge and viewpoints. To reduce my bias in interpretation, I shared my views, understandings and tentative conclusions with the interviewees. This rendered possible more in-depth exchanges of ideas. In sum, the interviews I conducted tended to involve an active process of mutual discussion and dialogue, rather than a passive Q & A session.

I also drew on the method of the narrative biographical interview which prevails in studies of migrants (Rosenthal 1993). That is, I conducted open interviews but guided participants to represent their life stories. Yet the results depended upon the participants' willingness to narrate what happened and which parts of the story were more meaningful than others. This method was employed to not only reveal what people have been through, but also how they narrate and interpret their own lived experience through the telling of stories about their lives. Although the interviews were unstructured, I outlined some open-ended questions about their migration history, conversion history, working life and living strategies in the cities. I paid particular attention to the life stage at which they converted to Christianity and participated in urban churches, and how Christianity impacted upon their experiences as migrants.

### **Ethical considerations in ethnography**

Although the goal of ethnographic research is to produce knowledge this does not mean that this goal should be achieved at all costs, and therefore the ethical issues surrounding social research must be attended to. It is generally recognized that there are five main aspects of ethical issues that need to be considered: informed consent, privacy, direct and potential harm, and consequences for future research.

#### **(1) Informed consent and the ethics of covert research**

It is generally argued that the people being researched must consent to be interviewed, where they make decisions based on the relevant accurate and comprehensive information related to the process. This means that participants should have right to withdraw from participation at any time. Informed consent was addressed carefully with participants and the nature of their involvement in the study was explained as well as the aims and

objectives of the research, using appropriate expressions that migrant workers could comprehend. If necessary, I would give an information leaflet to participants with various questions made clear. I confirmed that informed consent was sought from participants in terms of explaining to them the nature and purpose of the research and their right to refuse to participate in it and to withdraw at any time. This was presented at the beginning of the interview and all participants were requested to sign a consent form or to confirm consent orally to indicate their willingness to participate in the research. Moreover, all participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the research at any time without having to give a reason.

However, the paper-based consent form will not be very often used in a serious manner. In many circumstances, formally styled, paper-based consent forms may be associated with official state bureaucracy and considered to be “too formal”. Thus, the form can evoke unnecessary and unwelcome feelings of caution and nervousness. Also, most interviewees in China tended to keep their true names secret and thus were reluctant to give a formal signature on the forms. Hence in many cases I had to avoid using the formal paper document in order to maintain a comfortable atmosphere during the conversations. Nonetheless, I did ask for the interviewees’ oral consent for the interviews to be conducted and for me to use the data they contained. If they were also willing to sign the consent forms, participants would not be obliged to use their real names and may sign using a pseudonym or symbol. On the occasions in which I did use a formal consent form, the document concerned can be found in Appendix I.

However, in some circumstances I did conduct covert observation without referring to the principle of informed consent, in order to avoid the presence of the researcher

affecting the authenticity of the environment being studied and to cross-verify data in different research conditions (Calvey 2008). However, a variety of strategies were deployed to minimise potential negative outcomes of covert research activity, such as betraying trust and bringing harm to people and organisations involved in the research. In some house or underground churches, covert observation was conducted only in the phase of my entry into the situation – and once the church leader refused my research intent, I would terminate my research activities and abandon the material collected there. In one TSPM mega-church, I conducted semi-covert research; that is, I received the informed consent of every single interviewee individually but did not inform the church leaders of my research intentions. In this situation, I would limit my research to conducting interviews only. Moreover, to minimise any potential harm to interviewees, the interviews were conducted outside of this church and all information was kept confidential.

## **(2) Confidentiality and anonymity**

The information collected from participants can be classified as public information and that was secret or confidential, and hence a very important concern in ethnographic research is to define what is private or public. In my research context, I treated the participants as a meaningful research sample rather than as specific persons to be identified. Moreover, the researcher also needs to consider the public and private spaces in which interviews may be conducted. Both the process of the interview and the information from it should not be leaked by third-party or person.

The interviews took place in private spaces where the conversations would not be overheard, such as in the tea houses of churches. Audio-recordings, transcripts and field

notes were digitalised at the earliest possible opportunity and hard copies and original audio-recordings were destroyed immediately after they had been digitalised and stored in password-protected spaces. All information has been anonymised through the use of codes and/or pseudonyms and the removal of specific information that may render participants or others identifiable. Completed consent forms were stored in a safe place (a locked filing cabinet in my private accommodation).

### **(3) Direct and potential harm:**

Given that I investigated how Christians workers made sense of their situation of exploitation in the factory, I needed to clearly consider if my questions would create stress or provoke anxiety, especially when I was evaluating the workers' lives. In some circumstances, being subject to research can create or worsen the anxiety of people who are already in stressful situations, and therefore research may be regarded as unethical in this sense. To overcome this ethical challenge, I remained alert throughout the interviews to any signs of discomfort, such as shown in facial expressions and body language, and changed the direction of discussion or chose to terminate the interview if it appeared that participants were experiencing discomfort. Another potential area of harm could be the consequences of the publication of ethnographic accounts, which may open the participants' behaviour to public scrutiny. Exposing them to publicity can impact on the reputations of individuals, organisations, and locations, as well as hurting the feelings of those involved. The solution employed in this thesis was to treat the individuals and institutions studied as abstract objects to minimise the directional effect from my study. In the ethnographic writing, I therefore always use pseudonyms.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Reconstituting the neoliberal subjectivity of migrants: Christian theo-ethics and the migrant labour regime**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine the connections between the secularist-neoliberal governance of migrants and Christian theo-ethics. Regulating migrant labourers has been one of the primary mechanisms of the state's secular and neoliberal governance. This chapter therefore focuses on the “actually existing” workings of this neoliberal migrant regime and in particular its everyday encounters with locally based ethical agents. Explorations of “actually existing” and “variegated” neoliberalism (Brenner & Theodore 2002; Ong 2007) have increasingly focused on how neoliberal governance and subjectivities are assembled and negotiated through grounded political-economic realities and locally based social agents. In particular, migrant labourers have been viewed as the “object-targets” through which neoliberal subjectivities and ethics are materialised, maintained, and reproduced (Pun & Lu 2010; De Neve 2012; Buckley 2013). Therefore, how to manage the bodies of migrant labourers – to optimise their economic utility while diminishing their labour costs – has been a crucial task for the neoliberal agenda (Ong 2007; Buckley 2013).

However, recent studies of the geographies of religion have emphasised the role of faith-based activities and religious values that can open up new sets of logics and processes that defy the dominant subjectivities normalised by neoliberal ethics (Cloke and Beaumont 2013; Williams 2015; Cloke, May and Johnsen 2011; Cloke *et al.* 2019). In particular, as Cloke *et al.* argue (2019), theo-ethics (e.g., the Christian values of *agape* and *caritas*) and their translation in faith-based praxis not only actively resist neoliberal subjectification that ignores care for others but also create possibilities of *hopeful* re-enchantment in an age of neoliberal uncertainty. In this sense, religious ethics and values are crucial in understanding the operation of neoliberalism in quotidian encounters with ethnically flavoured agents. This chapter therefore contributes to this discussion by exploring the connections between the neoliberal governance of migrants and Christian theo-ethics. First, I examine how neoliberal governance and subjectivities are materialised through the locally based disciplinary labour regime in Shenzhen, China. Second, I investigate the lived enactment of theo-ethics in the everyday praxis of care and justice for marginalised migrant workers and how theo-ethics can rework neoliberal subjectivities.

Nonetheless, both neoliberalism and theo-ethics are highly culturally variable and need to be contextualised within specific political, economic and social entanglements. In this chapter, I will situate the analysis of neoliberalism and theo-ethics within China's place-particular autocratic and authoritarian governance and its moral ground on state-enforced secularism. Unlike in liberal and pluralist societies, neoliberalist ideologies are often incorporated into China's state developmentalism and the autocratic rule that produces docile and governable subjects (Qian and Florence, 2020; Qian and Guo 2018; Gao, Qian and Yuan 2018). Therefore, neoliberalism is complicit in China's secular ideologies, in



which hegemonic discourses of reason, efficiency and progress can override religious and humanist ethics . The collaboration of the authoritarian state and neoliberalism is particularly evident in Shenzhen, a paradigmatic Chinese city epitomising the country's neoliberal reform (Pun and Lu 2010). According to the records, approximately 70% of the city's total population are migrants, classified as non-residents and lacking the urban citizenship necessary to receive welfare and public services under the Chinese *hukou* system. This apartheid-like *hukou* system, together with the disciplinary factory system, has created a highly exploitative migrant labour regime that aims to produce durable, governable and self-reliant migrant bodies and minimise their labour costs and consumption of welfare. However, I also suggest that this neoliberal migrant labour regime is constantly changing in line with the negotiation between autocratic power and neoliberal logic. After the 2010 Foxconn suicide event in which 18 young migrant workers attempted suicide because of alienation and spiritual emptiness, the neoliberal migrant labor regime has switched from coercive discipline to active governance that regulates migrants' psychological subjectivity.

It is against this background that this chapter discusses how Christian theo-ethics can open alternative ethical spaces beyond the subjectivity endorsed by the secular state and neoliberalism. In response to the Foxconn suicide event, many faith-based organisations (FBOs) have emerged, in line with the nationwide "Christian fever", to provide care and spiritual support for vulnerable migrant workers. The simultaneous flourishing of Christianity and neoliberalism in Shenzhen has created a social niche for faith-based praxis and the quotidian performance of theo-ethics. The Christian theo-ethics of love, care, and equality based on brotherhood/sisterhood not only create an ethical space that enables migrant workers to navigate their sense of alienation and depression but also offer

a means for reconciling religious and humanist ethics to enable collaborative work with factory workers. In particular, Christian theo-ethics of transformation and Christian entrepreneurship have been translated into a new faith-based praxis that goes against the militarised factory regime. I argue that, although theo-ethics oftentimes co-produces neoliberal governance by either ameliorating neoliberal subjectivity or drawing on neoliberal logics *per se*, it nevertheless creates possibilities of more hopeful spaces and hybrid subjectivities beyond secularism.

## **5.2 Neoliberal subjectivity, migration and theo-ethics in China**

Instead of viewing neoliberalism as a fixed set of economic reforms that produces homogenising political results and social transformation, considerable efforts have been made to explore the hybrid and variegated character of the “actually existing” processes of neoliberalisation (Brenner & Theodore 2002; Ong 2007). In this formulation, neoliberalism has been described as an economic hegemony suturing a top-down market-oriented restructuring with the activities of everyday life (Barnett 2005) or as a logic of governing citing market utility to justify socioeconomic regulation and the curtailment of social welfare (Peck & Tickell, 2002). Neoliberal governance therefore creates new “ontological conditions-of-being” (Jean and Comaroff 2000: 239) for subject formation, under which individuals are encouraged to see themselves as self-managing, autonomous, and entrepreneurial subjects in accordance with the requirement for “governable but alienated” subjects in neoliberal orders (Kipnis 2007: 385; Ong 2007). This particularly manifests in the workfare regime, in which the state is actively involved in the promotion of competitive, flexible and precarious labour regimes tailored to the footloose nature of global capitalism (Peck & Theodore 2001).

In conjunction with this, a growing body of research has focused on migrant labourers as “object targets” for neoliberal governance that facilitate and justify the global division of labour and transnational movement of capital (Pun & Lu 2010; Ong 2010; De Neve 2012; Buckley 2013). This line of research indicates that regulating the bodies of migrant labourers is viewed as one of the primary mechanisms of neoliberal governance, as neoliberalism heavily depends on the calculation of both the utility and bodily needs of human beings and the process of subjectivisation through which neoliberal ideologies are articulated.

First, the neoliberal governance of migrants often operates through a scalar and differentiated politics that reconciles the structural power of a deregulated market with a locally situated mechanism of discipline (Ong 2010; Gill 1995). It decontextualises the labouring population as placeless free subjects at a global scale but simultaneously delineates a new social hierarchy that differentiates segments of the population based on economic utility in the name of “market civilisation” (Hardt and Negri 2000; Gill 1995). In the situated assemblage, neoliberalism is not a standardised apparatus but sometimes works in tandem with autocratic agendas in the pursuit of rational optimising. In India and Malaysia, for instance, “neoliberal thinking is directed toward the promotion of educated and self-managing citizens who can compete in global knowledge markets”, while cheap labourers are excluded from the neoliberal ethics of self-authorisation (Ong 2007: 6). Instead, those who are viewed as less neoliberal subjects (e.g., low-skilled workers) are often the victims of more coercive regulation and discipline utilised to shape their neoliberal adaptability. This is also illustrated by labour camps (Buckley 2013) and factory dormitories (Pun 2010), which are deployed by some autocratic regimes as

neoliberal spatial politics to accommodate and govern migrant workers' everyday lives and hence diminish their labour cost.

Second, the hegemony of neoliberalism is not simply maintained through a common economic logic but circulated and reproduced through the moulding of particular subjective forms and the manipulation of belief, desire, and affect (Cloke *et al.* 2019; Anderson 2016; Qian and Guo 2018). This is particularly manifested in the neoliberal state's discourses of desirable labouring subjects as the basis of citizenship and social inclusion, carefully marking the undesirable "others" who are denied protection (Varsanyi, 2008). In this cultural–ideological superstructure, migrants' value, worthiness and eligibility for welfare are defined primarily in terms of their productive bodies and their industriousness and economic potential rather than their political participation (McDowell, 2004). On the other hand, Anderson (2012) argues that neoliberalism relies on a manipulation of collective feelings that shapes individuals' conception of hope and their desired future. This affective politics often entails self-destruction and *immaterial labour exploitation*, which is "increasingly automated by technologies of self-regulation, targets, and a normalised gig economy in which 'get the job done' mentalities have come to legitimatise sequential servitude to the 'next task' and downgrading of working conditions" (Cloke 2019: 57).

Many scholars have argued that the political-economic transformation in post-reform China is a contingent integration of neoliberal logics and techniques into its authoritarian governance, despite the discrepancies between China's reform and ideal neoliberal restructuring (Zhou *et al.* 2019; Wu 2010; Zhang, 2012; Ong, 2007; Pun & Lu, 2010; Kipnis, 2007; Qian, 2018). This is supported by the following evidence: the market as a

dominant mechanism in the optimisation of capital accumulation; the state's creation and promotion of a flexible labour regime; the production of spatial class differentiation; and the state-propagated norms of self-improvement, individual responsibilities, competition, and work ethic. Harvey (2005) emphasises that the ultimate goal of neoliberalism is not the market-oriented reconfiguration but rather the restoration of elite forms of class power. This argument resonates with Ong's (2007: 6) observation that the neoliberal regime in China privileges some self-enterprising groups while marginalising others; in this regime, "the vast majority of Chinese people outside [the loop of the neoliberal ethos] are not groomed for this kind of self-authorisation, but serve as a vast reservoir of cheap labour power frequently abused by self-enterprising elites". In particular, Kipnis (2007) argues that the state-propagated discourse of *suzhi* (quality) embodies this neoliberal logic of class differentiation. In most circumstances, *suzhi* equates with one's economic utility defined by market value and human capital. The *suzhi* discourse is therefore understood as a "blame the victim" governing technique, e.g., labelling rural migrants as having low *suzhi* ascribes their marginality to individual quality while obfuscating the fact that the state/capitalist alliance is the very source of institutional marginality (Anagnost, 2004; Jacka, 2009; Qian and Guo 2018). In this sense, *suzhi* discourse actually de-politicises class and other hierarchical differences that legitimate structural inequality through neoliberal ideologies. Overall, instead of arguing about the extent to which China is neoliberal, it is more productive to view neoliberalism as "a set of malleable technologies and practices" being reconfigured in a local socio-economic environment (Zhang 2012).

Some scholars have noted that neoliberalism is not a dominant force that has a direct effect on shaping the conduct of individuals but rather is reproduced and negotiated through an actually existing assemblage of techniques and ethics (Williams 2015; Cloke

et.al 2013). This line of research highlights the role of social agency in the reproduction of neoliberal ideologies and ethics. In this way, religion (including religious values, actors and organisations) has been viewed as an alternative force that can subvert, resist and rework the subjectivities and ethics normalised by neoliberal dominance (Williams, 2015). Religion is becoming increasingly prominent in the public sphere, as the vacuum created by the neoliberal state with respect to welfare and social services is being filled by FBOs (Williams, 2015). Some commentators interpret these faith-based activities as self-serving acts of charity that provide an outlet for liberal guilt and morality or as the incorporation of religion into the political ethos of state-led governmentality. Therefore, the public engagement of religion has been interpreted as a by-product of neoliberalism serving the state's goals of retaining faith-based civil forces to delegate the risk of welfare provision (Buckingham 2009; Hackworth 2012). However, the perspective of co-option might obscure the imperatives of ethical values and registers in subject formation and the ethically attuned politics that animates more hopeful imaginations, subjectivities, and praxes as alternatives to neoliberal norms (Cloke *et al.* 2019). Therefore, in the burgeoning geographies of postsecularity, religion has been re-theorised as an ethical and self-reflective project that co-constitutes the values and ideologies of secular and neoliberal modernity (Cloke *et al.* 2019; Gao, Qian and Yuan 2018; Williams 2015).

Here, Cloke's (2010) notion of theo-ethics is helpful for emphasising the formation of ethical subjectivity beyond secularism and neoliberal metrics and the role that theological notions play in shaping the behaviour of faith-motivated actors (Williams 2015). Theo-ethics is not equivalent to conventional theologies or religious values; rather, "it follows an emerging post-phenomenological approach to religion which focuses on conceptualising the lived embodiment of religion" and highlights the way lived religiosity

or spirituality is experienced and performed through faith-motivated praxis (Williams 2015: 195).

Building on arguments made by Cloke (2010; Cloke *et al.* 2019; Cloke and Beaumont 2013) and Williams (2015), theo-ethics provides at least three ethical and political possibilities, especially in the releasing of new ethical energies that reconcile religious and secular subjectivities. First, theo-ethics creates opportunities for the assimilation and mutually reflexive transformation of religious and secular values. Theo-ethics emphasises the change from orthodox faith and ecclesial practice to the performative and embodied interpretation of theologies to reconcile the ethics of transcendence with this-worldly care and public engagement (Cloke and Beaumont 2013; Williams 2015). Moreover, theo-ethics moves beyond both religious and secular fundamentalism towards the more hybrid formation of faith-related identity and practice based on the pursuit of common good (e.g., the Christian value of *agape*). For example, theo-ethics serves as a postsecular rapprochement in which religious and non-religious actors come together to provide care for excluded and marginalised people (Cloke and Beaumont 2012). Second, theo-ethics may serve as active resistance to neoliberal subjectification, which relies on self-to-self ethical relations and is therefore indifferent to the “other”. Theo-ethics is premised on the critiques that neoliberal secularism implies an indifference to care for others and a broad disavowal of any possibility and hope beyond the market-state’s reach (Blond 1998; Cloke 2010). The neoliberal form of concern for otherness is constrained by a material logic and rationale and therefore fails to include the exotic other – “others are typically kept at a geographical and representational distance, press-ganged into the role of perpetual victims to be observed through societal lens of moral detachment and ethical indifference” (Cloke 2010: 229). Instead, theo-ethics involves a call to love others, devoid

of rational calculation and social expectations that impose conditions on the recipients. Third, theo-ethics may create an alternative affective politics of hope that cuts through the precarious and cruel optimism of neoliberalism. It provides new imaginations and hope in life contained in the name of God but not confined to that name (Cloke *et al.* 2019). Theo-ethics places a greater emphasis on religious or spiritual states, such as love and suffering, than on the truth and story of God. However, there are few studies examining how this affective capacity for hope, desire, justice, and equality are brought into being in faith-based praxis. Nevertheless, a more critical account of theo-ethics is needed to focus on the discursive formation of theo-ethics within specific contexts (Williams 2015). In light of the above, this chapter reflects on the specific economic and political conditions in which theo-ethics can convey ethical agency and produce more hopeful and progressive spaces.

### **5.3 Migrant workers' subjectivities under neoliberal governance**

#### **5.3.1 Exploitative labour regime**

In this section, I will specify how neoliberal logic and subjectivities are materialised through the locally based disciplinary labour regime in Shenzhen. In Shenzhen, a high-pressure production regime and exploitative labour relations are deployed to govern migrants' bodies so that labour costs and labour protections can be substantially reduced. Under the *suzhi* discourse, rural migrants are often regarded as subjects with low market value and competitiveness, which therefore legitimates the coercive discipline imposed on them to reinforce their adaptation to a neoliberal order. This is particularly the case in Shenzhen's manufacturing factories, including Foxconn's factories, where disciplinary techniques such as partnerships with vocational schools, intensive pre-work training, compulsory overtime, strict surveillance with monetary penalties and collective



dormitories work jointly to produce docile migrant labourers. For instance, to meet the need for young and productive labourers, many factories engage in business partnerships with vocational schools that “dispatch” students to work as trainees in the factories or directly recommend graduates for formal jobs. As one migrant worker named Hui remarked, the vocational school guaranteed him a job as a technician at Foxconn after graduation, yet the job he received did not meet his expectations because Foxconn allowed limited opportunity for him to practise the technical skills he learned, and he simply repeated the same operation to test the mobile phone models. Other assembly line workers were subject to more coercive discipline standards. As one Foxconn worker stated, a slogan reading “Outside the laboratory, there is no high-tech but only executive discipline” was posted on the wall of his shop floor, which vividly expressed the management philosophy at Foxconn. On Foxconn’s assembly lines, workers have to finish every action in seconds, and the time is carefully calculated; if they fail to meet this standard, the workers are condemned for dragging down the productivity of the assembly line. Moreover, to keep the assembly line working uninterruptedly, the workers are not allowed to go to the toilet until the line leader temporarily takes over the position.

However, it is not the regulatory discipline but rather the refashioning of migrant workers’ subjectivity that most efficiently maximises productivity. For example, Foxconn adopted an ideological campaign to shape migrant workers into autonomous and self-responsible subjects, aiming to turn a worker “into his own slave driver” (Thompson, 1963: 356). The founder of Foxconn, Terry Gou, continually propagated the teachings among staff and workers that “A harsh environment is a good thing” and “Suffering is the identical twin of growth”. The master production schedule at Foxconn has as its basic unit the assembly line, and each unit and worker is required to be self-responsible for the quality and

productivity within a specific work procedure. At the beginning and the end of the work day, the line supervisors often give lectures to production workers emphasising the production targets and the importance of a professional attitude. Workers are repeatedly reminded that they are responsible for every expensive electronic product and piece, and any mistake will cause unexpected damage. Thus, it is ideologically justified to punish the workers with monetary penalties if they fail to act in an autonomous and self-disciplined manner.

It is therefore common for migrant workers to feel incarcerated and alienated within this hyper-exploitative labour regime. Jincheng, a 37-year-old assembly line worker, noted that in contrast to the exploitative and difficult conditions at other small manufacturing factories in Shenzhen, the experience of working at Foxconn was more programmatic and repressive:

I couldn't adapt to Foxconn's management culture, the militarised management. I had worked at some small factories with worse working conditions than Foxconn's, but I didn't have such depressed feelings. They emphasise that every worker on the production line is not allowed to have any personality. You don't need to be concerned with the most appropriate operations that you often need to think about at the small factories. In Foxconn, the only thing you need to do is to strictly follow the SOP (standard operating procedure) they designated and repeat the actions... Sometimes you cannot catch up with the speed of the work because of tiredness on the night shift, so the products will pile up and the line head often comes to screw you. Working at Foxconn often makes you feel that you have no dignity, and your willpower will be gradually worn away.

Indeed, the long-term depression wrought by the alienation and exploitation experienced by migrant workers ultimately exploded, as in 2010, when 18 young workers attempted suicide by jumping from the production facilities at Foxconn; 14 died. Therefore, although neoliberal labour regime heavily depends on the bodies of migrant labourers as a site for capital accumulation (Buckley 2013; Kipnis 2007), the corporeal and affective life of migrant workers also in turn limit the capacity of the reproductivity of this labour regime (Pun & Lu 2010; Anderson 2016). It is in this sense that the neoliberal labour regime evolves from the disciplinary power to less coercive biopolitics that fosters particular durable labouring subjects.

### **5.3.2 Post-tragedy era: from discipline to neoliberal governance**

The Foxconn tragedy drew media attention nationwide and abroad to the working conditions and welfare of China's migrant workers. Not only the Chinese central government but also several Foxconn customers, including Apple and Hewlett-Packard, participated in the investigation independently. The overwhelming denouncement impelled both the state and manufacturing factories to collaboratively re-adjust the governance regime of migrant workers. In the post-tragedy era, the labour regime has therefore evolved from disciplinary regulation to a less coercive, but no less hegemonic, neoliberal governance, which aims to cultivate both durable and governable labouring subjects.

As I discussed above, one distinction of China's neoliberalism is its integration into the authoritarian regime. This is particularly the case in the state's crisis management of the Foxconn suicide event. One of the state's first responses to the crisis was to reclaim its

autocratic power over the labour regime from the realm of the free market. This resulted in a power configuration resembling a coalition between the state and capitalists. For instance, a former Taiwanese senior manager at Foxconn, Evan, a Christian himself, remarked:

The State Council sent officers from Beijing to Foxconn to manage the crisis. They said, first, the successive suicides must be stopped; otherwise, they would stop the production of Foxconn.

To mitigate the labour conflicts, the state started to re-emphasise the enforcement of labour laws protecting migrant workers' rights but continued to exhibit a certain level of tolerance of the violation of labour rights in exchange for capital accumulation. For example, since 2010, Shenzhen has witnessed more effective enforcement of labour laws and labour contracts, especially in terms of increasing workers' wages, limiting their workload and improving their working conditions. However, notwithstanding the labour costs being borne by the manufacturing sectors, the denial of migrant workers' access to the urban welfare system remained unchallenged. Moreover, the state also made efforts to reduce the enormous size of the migrant worker population that Foxconn accommodates to a level within reach of the state's effective regulation. Former Foxconn senior manager Evan explained:

The state council said, they didn't want Foxconn to be so huge. Currently, Foxconn has more than one million staff and production workers [in mainland China]. First, it will be difficult to manage such a huge network of migrant workers, especially if they are mobilised [to protest or resist the state]. Second, there is a significant proportion

of Chinese people with unhealthy mental states. [If too many people concentrate on Foxconn], suicide will create a kind of atmosphere that provokes more successors.

In this sense, the neoliberal agenda in China is not to create a deregulated sphere of free-market but rather “a set of malleable technologies” (Zhang 2012) that the state can constantly reconcile autocratic power and logics of deregulation in the service of the state developmentalism (Ong 2010). On the other hand, Foxconn also deployed a series of coping measures to prevent suicide, including installing suicide-prevention netting and asking employees to sign legally binding no-suicide pledges with government acquiescence. However, the most substantial change took place in Foxconn’s management model. In tandem with the state’s emphasis on migrant workers’ mental health, Foxconn deployed a new form of biopolitics to differentiate and cultivate desirable workers. In the post-tragedy era, the discourse of *xinli suzhi* (psychological quality) has been created as a new hegemonic criterion that defines a worker’s value in terms of not only productive bodies but also their psychological endurance of exploitation. This criterion indeed functioned as a new model of inclusion/exclusion in the labour market. In response to the suicide crisis, a set of regulatory techniques, such as strict surveillance of workers’ emotional state, psychotherapy consultation, and pre-work psychological evaluation, have been introduced to precisely distinguish the “dangerous” workers from the normal. A retired senior manager at Foxconn, Chan, who previously served as a director of one factory, explained:

Quan: What new measures have been adopted in response to the suicide event since 2010? I heard that Foxconn launched a psychological campaign, is it true?

Chan: Yes, too many. First, every production unit was required to identify those who had psychological problems. So, the front-line managers must pay attention to their workers' emotions and behaviour.

Quan: How did Foxconn treat them if they were identified as unusual?

Chan: The front-line managers were required to keep close contact with them. For example, if I am a group head who manages 20 people, I should pay special attention to those workers with eccentric personalities. If a worker isn't on duty abnormally, you should immediately contact him and ask him about his circumstances... For those who had serious psychological problems, to the extent that they cannot regularly work, we would persuade them to leave the job.

In this context, *suzhi* discourse is in essence a "blame the victim" neoliberal technique (Kipnis 2007) that ascribes suicides to workers' own psychological quality and durability to exploitation. In addition to strict surveillance of workers, Foxconn also made efforts to scientifically profile and improve workers' psychological quality. Shortly after the suicide event, Foxconn launched a large-sample psychological investigation and psychotherapy programme in cooperation with Shenzhen's two hospitals and the Shenzhen Health and Family Planning Commission. The investigation indicated that approximately 8% of Foxconn's workers had a psychological disorder (primarily depression) or post-traumatic stress disorder precipitated by the suicide event (Fang et.al. 2012). During this campaign, 629 workers at the Foxconn Longhua campus received psychotherapy or psychological counselling, among which 181 were classified as high-risk workers who had made suicide attempts (Fang *et al.* 2012). However, this psychological campaign can be interpreted more as a crisis management and governance technique premised on the logic of rational optimising than as a long-term project aiming

to substantially improve workers' psychological wellbeing. For example, 1000 production workers and staff who were identified as having good psychological quality were trained as "psychological assistants" to provide counselling and care to other



Figure 5-1. Mental nets installed in the Foxconn dormitories to prevent suicide  
Source: pictured by the author

workers. In this sense, workers were encouraged to be autonomous and self-responsible subjects so that the labour costs of improving workers' psychological quality could be successfully channelled to the workers themselves. Foxconn subsequently set up a "care hotline", namely, 78585, which is phonetically similar to "please help me, help me" in Mandarin, to provide counselling services or help to workers. However, the extent to which this hotline can help workers solve problems is doubtful, as the hotline

receptionists can do nothing to address or coordinate the structural conflicts that many workers often complain of, such as excessive overtime and conflicts with their line leaders. Instead, the 78585 hotline has become an outlet for releasing the feelings of repression and dissatisfaction that workers encountered in the workplace. As former senior manager Evan commented:

Foxconn claimed that every worker was welcome to call 78585, regardless of what problems they have. Some workers called 78585 when they were unhappy, but basically the reasons they called were strange, for example, “I don’t want to have a night shift”, “I asked for a leave, but the workshop director didn’t approve”... But workers indeed need a channel to express their dissatisfaction despite the unreasonable requests.

It is noteworthy that the psychotherapeutic practices Foxconn adopted did not aim to improve workers’ wellbeing and welfare *per se* but rather served as a technology of subjectivity to manage workers’ bodies and emotions and thus cultivate ideal labouring subjects more durable under exploitation. This is consistent with Rose’s (1990: 257) argument that “[psychotherapeutic] technologies for the government of the soul operate not through crushing subjectivity in the interests of control and profit, but by seeking to align political, social and institutional goals with individual pleasures and desires”. Although Foxconn’s governing regime has switched from coercive discipline to more flexible neoliberal governance, the ultimate aim of fostering both governable and self-governing labouring subjects on the basis of the logic of optimisation has remained unchanged. The neoliberal labour regime has increasingly reproduced through the



manipulation of desires and affects of migrant workers, which leads them to a more durable self-exploitation (Anderson 2016).

In sum, I suggest that neoliberal governance was reproduced and materialised in the locally based labour relations in Shenzhen. In particular, the regulation of migrants' bodies epitomises the neoliberal logics of rational optimising, which demands the refashioning of migrant workers' subjectivity to feed into capital accumulation while simultaneously diminishing labour costs and workers' consumption of welfare. This resonates with recent studies of neoliberalism and migration (Buckley 2013; Qian and Guo 2018), which reported that migrants' bodies offer an important site for the reproduction of neoliberal subjectivities. However, it is noteworthy that the agenda of neoliberalism is complicit with China's secular ideologies and autocratic power in aiming to produce docile and governable subjects even at a cruel human cost.

#### **5.4. Negotiating neoliberal domination through Christian theo-ethics**

The alliance of the autocratic state and neoliberalism has worked to create spaces of neoliberal domination, which left not only noticeable gaps in welfare and social support for migrant workers but also led to a spiritual void and psychological vulnerability. In this section, I will elaborate on the way that Christian theo-ethics opens up space for migrant workers to negotiate with neoliberal domination.

##### **5.4.1 Filling the gap: theo-ethics and social and spiritual support**

In Shenzhen, faith-based communities, such as Protestant churches or other religious organisations, have become increasingly involved in providing both spiritual care and social support for migrant workers. This has particularly been the case since the Foxconn

suicide tragedy, after which many Protestant house churches started to target migrant workers for both evangelisation and spiritual care, among which Foxconn House Church A and B are two typical faith-based communities predominantly constituted by migrant workers. Although the Chinese state often exerts strict control over both religious activities and NGOs, these FBOs nevertheless enjoyed a more relaxed policy, as the FBO interventions at Foxconn filled a gap in social support and welfare left by both the state and Foxconn. Foxconn House Church A, for instance, suggested that it had long enjoyed the government's acceptance. The government has neither responded to their application for registration nor taken coercive actions to shut down the church. Interestingly, some FBOs or churches were established and organised by Foxconn senior managers themselves, who were able to negotiate with local officials to implement the state's religious policies in a practical way. For example, Foxconn House Church A was established in 2011 by Foxconn's Taiwanese senior managers, Chan and Evan (mentioned above), in response to the 2010 suicide tragedy. According to the church's records, Foxconn workers constitute 55.4% (72 of 130) of the churchgoers. When migrant workers outside of Foxconn are considered, this figure reaches approximately 80%. Foxconn House Church B was spontaneously organised by Foxconn workers, and it has developed from a small congregation into a church with more than 100 members, most of whom are migrant workers.

These churches offer migrant workers social and spiritual support in various ways. First, they provide migrant workers with an emotional space built on the Christian theo-ethics of love, brotherhood/sisterhood, and equality, which contrast the excessive workloads and coercive and hierarchical management at the factories. For example, the church leader of Foxconn House Church A, Chan, claimed that the church intended to create an

atmosphere of love and equality in which migrant workers could regain respect and the sense of home they were deprived of in the workplace. Zhiqiang, a 35-year-old migrant worker who had worked at a small factory in Shenzhen, recalled his experience of being humiliated by his boss and how the church offered him emotional comfort:

There was one time I was extremely angry because my boss deliberately withheld some of my wages when I quit the job. I really wanted to give him a slap at that time... Brother Chan invited me to his home. When the door open, brother Chan and his wife welcomed me with smiling faces, and all [fury] disappeared. They sincerely said, they would help me find a new job and offered a space for storing my baggage until I settled down at a new place.

In Foxconn House Church A, it is also common to see Foxconn staff members, production workers, line leaders and senior managers chat harmoniously with one another during the fellowship, which rarely happens at Foxconn. For many migrant workers, the church is conceived of as a comfort zone in which they can unleash their feelings and confide their distress and the private emotions that they do not share elsewhere. Through church involvement and services, migrant workers gain recognition and comfort from faith-based communities.

Second, the Christian theo-ethics of brotherhood/sisterhood also serve as a spiritual bond that integrates and unites the social relations of Christian migrant workers. This is particularly exemplified by Foxconn House Church B, which was established by migrant workers themselves. In 2011, a small group of Christian Foxconn workers came together to form a fellowship driven by their common aim of transforming Foxconn through, as

they claimed, “Jesus’s love”. As one of the current church leaders, Hui, said, they aimed to unite every single “lamb of God”—Christian migrant workers who came from different origins and made a livelihood at Foxconn and nearby factories. Hui noted that it was difficult for rural migrants to survive in an unfamiliar place; therefore, Christians should come together to help one another first and then they could make a difference by spreading their love to other non-Christian workers. In 2014, they established their house church in a rented apartment financially maintained by more than 100 Christian workers. This house church is affectionately celebrated as the “workers’ home” and provides social support for migrant workers from a variety of social backgrounds, Christian or otherwise. It provides free accommodations for job-seeking workers, facilitates the sharing of information about jobs and housing, and donates money to workers with serious illnesses. In this sense, Christian theo-ethics facilitates a form of mutual help and, by extension, self-empowerment within this marginalised group whose members are deprived of urban citizenship.

Third, Christian theo-ethics offers a means for reconciling religious and humanist ethics to work collaboratively with workers who suffer from depression and other psychological or emotional problems. Because Foxconn’s psychotherapeutic practices primarily focused upon reinforcing workers’ psychological capacity for exploitation, they did not significantly improve the workers’ mental wellbeing. In this circumstance, Foxconn’s “Care Centre” and 78585 hotline formed a partnership with Foxconn House A to help the psychologically vulnerable workers. The church leader Chan explains how they work collaboratively with Foxconn:

They know our existence, and we indeed have a close relationship with them. Although they aren't Christian, they understand and accept the core values of Christianity. When they [psychotherapists] found a worker who attempted suicide, they would talk to him first. If it doesn't work, they would ask the worker if he is willing to go to the church. Many of our Church members were recommended from the 78585 hotline and the "Care Centre". Those who intended to commit suicide complained to us: "I want to live on, but I don't find any significance that inspires me live on".

The workers' complaints in this quotation indicate that although Foxconn's psychotherapy may prevent workers from committing suicide, it fails to address migrant workers' quest for hope and meaning in life and thus cannot give them spiritual fulfilment in the face of their programmatic and alienating factory life. Instead, Christianity provides migrant workers with not only a religious worldview and cosmology but also a form of communal life, opening new possibilities for them to put the chaotic universe into order. The 25-year-old worker Xu was referred to the church by the Foxconn "Care Centre" in 2013. He told us that he had overcome the shadow of depression and felt more *tashi* [mentally secure] now because God was with him. He emphasised that the Bible verse "we love because He first loved us" touched him particularly and helped him get through his difficulties. Christianity therefore serves as a form of "spiritual healing" that offers an alternative to neoliberal psychotherapeutic technologies. In this sense, a theo-ethics of common good (e.g., love and care for others) can cultivate a more hybrid cultural identity and faith-based praxis by recombining both a religious and secular ethics of care and thereby create an affective capacity for hope in migrant workers (Cloke *et al.* 2019).

#### **5.4.2 Redeeming the factory through the theo-ethics of transformation**

At Foxconn, the militarised and bureaucratic management has given rise to an aggressive culture based on “the law of jungle” that defines relations between rank-and-file managers and production workers and even among production workers themselves. When rank-and-file managers are pressured regarding assignments and orders from above, they often channel this pressure and negative emotions to assembly line workers at the expense of workers’ dignity. In particular, *diaoren* (屌人), a form of verbal violence involving blaming and sneering at others with dirty words, is prevalent in the workshop. Fear of being blamed and punished has produced mutual distrust among production workers—some workers pass the buck to each other when they make mistakes. Ironically, personal abuse is even celebrated as a valuable personality trait signalling one’s capacity for disciplining recalcitrant workers, contributing to a better chance of promotion. Former Foxconn senior manager Evan reflected on Foxconn’s management culture and explained how personal abuse was justified as reasonable:

[Terry Guo] is an authoritarian CEO; he completely dominates the company. He requires his subordinates to execute his orders without any questions. I think this kind of management is quite problematic. For example, when problems occur, managers tend to abuse their subordinates. This atmosphere came from Terry Guo himself. It has become a kind of culture that people treat each other with derogatory language and even some very embarrassing dirty words, for example, “Why can’t you do this? Are you waiting to die?” This is considered reasonable because everyone did so and they even thought that the more aggressive the language, the better. So, they unwittingly lost their ability to respect others.

However, for the leaders of Foxconn House Church A, Chan and Evan, Christianity can revitalise the humanist ethics suppressed by Foxconn's abusive management culture. Therefore, one of the core aims of the church is to transform the "atmosphere" at Foxconn through love and to bring the gospel to workers and staff. In one sermon, church leader Chan reiterated the four important principles that the church members working at Foxconn were encouraged to follow and practise: (1) standing up and lighting the factory; (2) being an influence; (3) becoming fishers of men (Matthew 4: 19); and (4) transforming the atmosphere.

The first principle means that Christian Foxconn workers and staff should neither conceal their Christian identity nor isolate themselves from non-Christian workers and staff; instead, they should avow their Christian identification and thus enlighten others by performing a Christian's responsibility. Chan explained that many Foxconn managers were Christian, but they were reluctant to acknowledge themselves as such because they feared not only political reprisal but also that they would fail to represent what a Christian should look like at Foxconn. However, for Chan, it is time to arouse all Christians to stand up and take their responsibility of redeeming the factory through "love".

The second principle refers to the fact that a Christian worker should influence non-Christian workers through their faith-based practices. For Chan, a Christian worker should exhibit leadership in the workplace regardless of his/her position. As a devout Christian worker, Chan thought that a Christian worker should exhibit the virtues of a Christian worker, such as being hardworking, helpful and trustworthy, so that non-Christian workers could feel the positive influence of Christianity. It is therefore common

for many Christian Foxconn workers to cover other workers' shifts or willingly undertake a greater amount of work to reduce colleagues' workloads.

The third principle comes from the *Bible* and suggests that Christian workers should bring the gospel to other workers so that non-Christians can be brought to God's refuge. Many Christian workers think of evangelisation as not only their inherent commitment as a Christian but also a way to bring peace to non-Christian workers. After the Foxconn suicide event, Christian migrant workers were encouraged to wear faith-based T-shirts with slogans that conveyed ethics of love and care, such as "love never ends" and "love is about trust". These slogans did not aim to propagate the Christian faith explicitly but rather to increase the visibility of the Christian ethics of love in a more acceptable way. For Chan, wearing a Christian T-shirt was a way not only to bodily practice his faith but also to produce "positive energies" (*zhengnengliang*, 正能量) for non-Christian workers. Zhicheng, a 34-year-old Foxconn worker, told us how he was affected by the Christian evangelisation and subsequently converted to Christianity:

It was one day in 2011, I was hanging out at the factory. I suddenly saw two workers wearing the same T-shirt with a verse, namely, "love never ends", written on it. It struck me, I had never seen such a verse at Foxconn before. It made me think about whose love never ends. I guessed it's something about Jesus because I heard it from Hongkong broadcasting before... They finally led me to this Church.

According to the records, approximately 300 workers have been baptised at Foxconn House Church A since 2010, though only 72 of them remain due to high job mobility. However, for Chan, many workers at least found a spiritual retreat when they were



working at Foxconn. The overall aim of the former three principles is ultimately to transform the atmosphere of Foxconn. This aim can be interpreted based on Chan's words: "There is no abuse, blame and depression anymore and workers don't need to fear".

Overall, the theo-ethics of transformation and its faith-based praxis have created an ethical space that undercuts the aggressive and abusive "culture" at Foxconn. However, somewhat different from Cloke *et al.*'s (2019) and Williams's (2015) argument that theo-ethics can create the possibility of active resistance to neoliberalism, the theo-ethics of transformation in this study is better understood as an ethics of remedy that ameliorates rather than fundamentally challenges neoliberal subjectivity. Following Cloke *et al.* (2019), I argue that the faith-based practices in essence implicate into the economic and political conditions in which particular theological discourses and ethics are interpreted and translated.

#### **5.4.3 Translation of theo-ethics into Christian entrepreneurship**

Christian theo-ethics does not merely contribute to reworking the disciplinary factory regime but is also salient in reshaping labour relations at the factories owned by Christian entrepreneurs, who apply Christian ethical vocabularies in enterprise management and production. For example, Hong Kong Christian entrepreneur Brother Li runs a food factory with approximately 250 workers, approximately 20 of whom are Christians. Li is enthusiastic about integrating Christian ethics into his business principles and management philosophy, which aim to improve working conditions and workers' spiritual wellbeing on the one hand and to cultivate manageable and loyal workers on the other. Li described how he translated the Christian values of love and care into the management of his factory:

Quan: How does Christianity influence your management of the factory?

Li: I tried to evangelise my workers, but I thought that it shouldn't be achieved by a hard sell. I just sowed the spirit of Christianity among them; when to harvest is not dependent on me but on Jesus... They knew their boss is Christian and I wanted to let them realise that they weren't being exploited... Our management is more humanistic than many other factories. First, the culture of our company is to respect others. Every staff member should be respected by virtue of his responsibility to the company rather than his rank, whether a cleaner or a cook. Second, we are not allowed to abuse others. Our staff basically don't speak dirty words. When someone makes a mistake, our managers look at the mistake itself, but not the person. Third, because I have a family, I also need to consider the families of the workers. So, the husbands and wives were supplied with special dormitories. [At Foxconn's dormitory, male and female workers are strictly divided.] I found many workers had to get up early to send their children to Guanlan town for school, so I arranged a special car for them and they didn't need to wait for the bus and slept one hour longer... They are all the Christian values—care and love for the disadvantaged group.

Li's management ethics also manifests in his strategy of introducing Christianity as a form of leisure to fulfil workers' quest for a communal life. To some extent, the Foxconn suicide tragedy could be ascribed to migrant workers' lack of access to leisure and their sense of incarceration within the factory regime. Therefore, Li places heavy emphasis on the role of leisure in improving workers' wellbeing. To support this, Li transformed the factory canteen into a house church that accommodates various communal leisure activities. However, Li's factory house church is not an institutional one characterised by

collective rituals and preaching but an “unofficially sacred space” (Kong, 2001) for communal activities such as musical performances, dancing, singing and fellowship. Every Monday evening, approximately 40-50 workers, Christians and non-Christian, voluntarily participate in the fellowship, singing hymns and other popular gospel songs. Moreover, Li also introduced public square dancing (Guangchang Wu 广场舞) to the church as a form of exercise and entertainment. Li recruited a professional dancer to modify the square dance and gave it a Christian spin, calling it “gospel dance”. One worker frankly told us that he did not believe in Christianity, but he enjoyed participating in the Christian fellowship because he always felt joyful and relaxed while listening to the hymns. Likewise, many other workers recounted that one of their first and most beautiful impressions of factory fellowship was the singing.

The translation of Christian theo-ethics in everyday management has in turn fostered an affective politics of hope and belonging (Cloke *et al.* 2019) among workers and staff, who exhibit a high degree of loyalty to the factory. As Li claims, his company has maintained a very low rate of turnover, as many workers have stayed at the factory for many years because of their optimism about the future of the factory, even though the wages had always been substantially lower than Foxconn’s. A 34-year-old female worker named Lifang and her husband have worked at Li’s factory for 6 years. She positively commented on the factory as follows:

Although I don’t know much about Christianity, I can feel that it has great influence on the atmosphere of our factory. We won’t intrigue against each other because our boss has set a good model for us. What we think about is how to collectively get the work well done. I like this atmosphere where we feel happy and relaxed.

Li's Christian entrepreneurship appears to contrast with the highly exploitative labour regime. Indeed, Li was enthusiastic about investing in workers to improve their skills and quality:

I particularly emphasise providing job training for workers. I would finance them to attend technical training courses such as chemical examination, quality control, and machinery maintenance. They [the courses] are all useful for their job and career. I paid all the tuition fees... I would consider their future: if they are eager for self-improvement, I will invest in them.

However, it is noteworthy that it is the loyalty of staff and workers that prevents this investment from being risky, as investing in workers' quality can be stably materialised in productivity. Although Foxconn also offers job training, it is only limited to quick pre-work training, as the company cannot guarantee the return on investment due to high job mobility. In this sense, Li's Christian entrepreneurship follows a new logic of rational optimising. I therefore suggest that Christian theo-ethics cannot be simply understood as the antithesis of neoliberal logics (Williams 2005); instead, it also draws on neoliberal logics to persist and flourish. This is not to argue that religion is co-opted into neoliberal logics of production and management but that theo-ethics of Christian entrepreneurship contributes to a more humanist, hopeful and hybrid mode of neoliberalism.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

Theoretical work on neoliberal governance and subjectivities has often outpaced the empirical examination of the situated workings of neoliberalism and its encounters with

ethical agents. This research has shown the ways in which neoliberal governance and subjectivities are performed and materialised in locally based labour relations and simultaneously how neoliberal domination is negotiated and contested by faith-based praxis and theo-ethics. The flourishing of neoliberalism in China is not a singular process that produces standardised subjectivity; rather, it is implicated in the authoritarian regime, creating a new condition of being for hybrid and contested subject formation. It is in the context of this transformation that FBOs and theo-ethics have emerged as ethical and reflexive projects of neoliberalism. This resonates with Ong's (2006: 4) view that neoliberalism is not a "dominant structural condition that projects totalising social change" but rather is played out through a carefully situated assemblage of motion and contingency, governing technologies and ethics.

In sum, this chapter makes two contributions to the geographies of neoliberalism, migration and religion. First, this chapter provides new understanding of how neoliberal governance are circulated and reproduced through migrants' bodies and subjectivities. I argue that the neoliberal logics of rational optimising demands not only the coding and differentiation of migrants' bodies but also the refashioning of migrant workers' subjectivity so they become governable and durable labouring subjects. In particular, I bring the research of migrant labourers into dialogues with recent discussion on the affective politics of neoliberalism (Anderson 2016; Cloke *et al.* 2019). In this study, psychological and psychotherapeutic technologies were utilised to enhance migrants' affective capacity for exploitation. Moreover, under the neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics, migrants' affective life becomes "object-target" for the state's efforts to reconcile its neoliberal and autocratic agendas. Thus, future research needs to be attentive to migrants' affective life through which various forms of power operate and contest.

Second, this chapter has grounded and advanced the discussion of theo-ethics and neoliberalism (Cloke 2010; Cloke *et al.* 2019; Williams 2015). Christian theo-ethics in this study opens spaces of agency for mobilising social services, reconciling religious and humanistic ethics, transforming the work space, and providing a new management philosophy representing an alternative to neoliberal logics. This research suggests that Christian theo-ethics not only negotiates the neoliberal economy and governance but also co-constitutes the latter. Theo-ethics cannot be separated from the neoliberal condition of being through which hybrid expressions of faith-through-praxis are made possible. However, different from Cloke *et al.* (2019) and Williams (2015) who view theo-ethics as an active resistance to neoliberal governance, I argue that theo-ethics also contributes to a more humanist and hopeful neoliberal order. Therefore, future research needs to move from the co-option/resistance model to specific contexts in which new religious subjectivities are engendered.

## Chapter 6

### **Becoming Christian workers: embodied theologies, faithful subjectivities, and technologies of the self**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 5, I have discussed how religious institutions and the theo-ethics they enact can open up spaces of hope, care and love for migrant workers and reconstitute neoliberal subjectivities. In this chapter, I further examine how Christian migrant workers constitute their religious subjectivities and religious bodies through theologies-by-praxis. As discussed in chapter 2, the postsecular critique argues that religion should not be reduced to social dynamics falling outside the domains of self-interpretation and theological knowledge (Holloway 2013). Although geographies of religion have moved the focus from simplistic categorisations of religion to religious subjects and meanings (Knott 2005; Gökarıksel and Secor 2009; Finlayson 2012; Olson *et al.* 2013), this subject-focused research intensively engages with how subjects and religious identity interact with various power relations, within which “deficient understandings of theology have undermined attempts to generate nuanced knowledges regarding religious subjects” (Sutherland 2016: 322). This chapter therefore contributes to this line of inquiry by

examining how the knowledge of faithful subjectivity can be informed by more sophisticated understanding of theologies and postsecular ethics (Holloway 2013; Sutherland 2016). First, I emphasise the importance of the embodied knowledge of theologies and the affective presence of transcendence in the formation of faithful subjectivity. As Holloway (2013) points out, it is through bodies and affective techniques that faithful sensibilities and the sacred can be corporeally felt. However, theology involves not simply discursive and embodied knowledge but also about subjects who contextualise it (Dittmer 2007). In this sense, theologies need to be understood through praxis, and reflexive practice in particular social-spatial contexts (Sutherland 2016). Second, therefore, I highlight the day-to-day reflexive practices of migrant workers and particularly their ‘technologies of the self’ (Foucault 1988) in response to a neoliberal labour regime, through which embodied theologies are translated and negotiated and the faithful subjectivities are constituted.

On the one hand, by analysing the preaching, sermons, and rituals of both house churches and TSPM churches, I suggest that religious institutions offer migrant workers a regime of embodied knowledge that directs them in how to feel and make sense of their religious bodies and transcendence. The institutional knowledge of Christian bodies is contextualised and brought into migrant-worker communities, emphasising the theology of valuable and self-mastering Christian bodies, a “new self”, and the mediumship of the Holy Spirit. It is through this embodied knowledge and sensation that transcendent and faithful sensibilities are corporeally felt. On the other hand, these embodied theologies have been reflexively adopted by migrant workers as “technologies of the self” to constitute desired ways of being in everyday practices of work, healing and health, and self-interpretation. These technologies of the self can be understood as involving the



migrant workers' project of self-transformation into faithful, virtuous and superior subjects in face of an exploitative neoliberal labour regime endorsed by the secularist state and capitalism (as discussed in chapter 5). Although migrant workers' self-transformation through embodied theological discourse often overlaps with the state/capitalist agenda to produce the docile, productive bodies of migrant workers, this embodied theology nevertheless enables a more hopeful, self-valued and morally superior subject that conditions and reframes the inferior subjectivity inflicted by neoliberalism.

## **6.2 Embodiment and the formation of religious subjectivities**

The importance of the body and embodiment as a site for examining the formation of human subjectivities and the negotiation of power and social relations has been commonplace in the fields of social science and the humanities (Connell 2005; Turner 2007). As Bartkowski (2005) observes, existing scholarship on religious bodies and subjectivities has primarily focused on two lines of inquiry: (1) symbolic representations of the religious body, or how religious teachings and ethics discursively shape particular forms of desired bodies; and (2) the way lived, embodied, and performative practices produce religious subjectivity and modes of selfhood. The symbolic depiction of the body serves as what Charles Taylor (1988) calls moral frameworks, which specify the normative conditions for appropriate bodily practices. Yet bodies can function as both object-targets of and agents for religious meanings, since bodily practices may subvert and recreate power structures (Bartkowski 2005). In this chapter, I address both the semiotics of the Christian body through which contextualised theologies are felt and made sense of, and the lived and embodied praxis through which faithful sensibilities are reflexively constituted.

Existing research on religious bodies and subjectivities is dominated by social constructionism, which argues that our bodies are embedded in sociocultural matrices that offer us the categories and knowledge with which our subjectivities are shaped (Turner 2007). Both Marxism and poststructuralism views human bodies as social artifacts shaped by political, cultural and economic processes (Vásquez 2011). For Marx, bodies become objectified in material activities (particularly in the capitalist model of production) and historical conditions such that human beings can make sense of themselves and attain certain kinds of consciousness. Bodies are not only lived in material relations but also shaped by the ideologies that mould particular forms of bodies in congruence with capitalist production and accumulation. In the light of this, the Christian asceticism that sees bodily practices of hard work, self-discipline, and the control of desires as a sign of glory and salvation (Weber 1920) is much more a historically and socially constructed ideology, which entrenches and sanctifies capitalist social relations. This line of thinking was exemplified and reformulated by E.P. Thompson (1963: 355-356) in his cultural-materialist account of religion and working-class in 19th century England. Thompson argues that Methodism, with “its elevation of the values of discipline and of order as well as its moral opacity”, served as an ideological self-justification for the capitalist mode of production, which requires the enforcing of the productivity of human labour by regulating the docile bodies of workers. Thompson describes Methodism as a “moral machinery” that could turn a worker “into his own slave driver” through an imposed “inner compulsion”. Post-structuralism is more concerned with how bodies constitute particular forms of subjectivities. While admitting that bodies are object-targets for power and domination, Foucault (1978) suggests that bodies also constitute the social field in which governance and the micro-physics of power operate. For Foucault, power is not localised in and exercised by particular subjects but rather

forms and operates in the chains and relations of bodies. Bodies are therefore crucial sites for what Foucault theorises as the logic of governmentality, in which power often operates through the creation of subjectivities or certain desired bodies. He points out that “it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals” (Foucault 1980: 98). The Marxist and Foucauldian accounts of bodies and subjectivities have been echoed in Chapter 5 regarding how neoliberalism produces normative subjectivities and body forms. However, migrant workers’ religious subjectivities cannot be simply understood as social artifacts of neoliberal economics, governance and power relations. Based on the postsecular critique, fuller knowledge of religious bodies and subjectivities requires an analysis of not only power relations but also “subjective interactions with theology, and how this process engenders difference and change, creating hybrid religious subjectivities” (Sunderland 2016: 322).

Recent research in the geographies of religion suggests that theology and religiosity are not doctrinal knowledge transmitted by institutions but involve the affective capacity to sense the transcendent in the body (Holloway 2013; Olson *et al.* 2013; Sunderland 2016). In Olson *et al.*’s (2013: 1423) study of the religious subjectivities of Christian-affiliated young people, they contend that young people’s perception of “authentic” Christianity and transcendence is valorised through religious embodiment; that is, “constructing the body as the space in which faith might smoothly extend beyond traditional religious spaces”. Holloway’s (2013) discussion of affective techniques of religion and the cultivation of faithful dispositions provides powerful insights into the embodied nature of theology and religious subjectivities. For Holloway, theology does not consist of the credal and doctrinal elements of belief that directly shape particular religious subjects,

but instead “being religious, spiritual or faithful is enacted through many different registers of emotion and affect” that emerge in the performance of religious practices (2013: 205). He therefore emphasises the assemblage, a relational space that creates affective atmospheres of the sacred. The religious or spiritual subject is generated through what he calls “the *patterning* of ritual space-times”, “the outcome of an assemblage of heterogeneous materialities and immaterialities: text, talk, bodies, objects, architectures, atmospheres of mood, smell, touch and sound, rhythms and emotion combine and interact to realise the ritual space-time”. These patterns of ritual space-times therefore impinge on which affective registers and religious dispositions are presented, encouraged and reconfirmed. In particular, Holloway emphasises the Christian disposition of hope as an affective technique and an “ethos of engagement with the world” (Anderson 2006: 692) as part of the production of faithful and pious subjectivities. Drawing on philosopher John Caputo, Holloway suggests that Christian subjectivity is made hopeful through the defeat and self-transformation of bodies such that they can relate to the body of Christ, the site of hope which provides “the setting for the events that will transform the flesh of those laid low by suffering” (Caputo 2007: 75).

Notwithstanding both theological knowledge and embodiment as important sources of religious subjectivities, the subject may redefine and reframe the theology and its spatial imaginations through praxis (Sutherland 2016):

[I]t is through the subjective agency of religious people that theology is reproduced in increasingly hybrid forms. Theology is not solely a top-down matter, but something that the subject can interact with in the day-to-day in order to make sense of and

formulate a response to their circumstance, interacting with both the affective and the discursive resources of religion (Sutherland 2016: 325).

Sutherland's framing of theology as praxis underscores how the affective and discursive nature of theology is negotiated and reworked through reflexive practice. In particular, both Holloway (2013) and Sutherland (2016) highlight what Foucault (1988) calls "technologies of the self" as an important form of reflexive practice that brings theology into ways of being and engenders more hybrid subjectivities and agency. Foucault's (1988) latter works about technologies of the self in essence deal more directly with how new subjectivities can be attained through practices that redefine relations to oneself. According to Foucault (1988:18), "technologies of the self" arose within the ethics of Judeo-Christian tradition regarding "how one should live", referring to what "permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality." For example, through bodily practices such as penance and confession, Christians can confirm the truth about themselves, which therefore constitutes themselves as faithful and virtuous subjects. Foucault's insights are substantially adopted by anthropologist Talal Asad (1993) in his book *Genealogies of Religion*, which examines the relationship between disciplinary practices and virtuous Christianity in medieval monasticism. Asad (1993) argues that obedience and self-denial cannot be simply understood as suppressive practices imposed by religious discourse; instead, the monastic technologies of the self create self-applied strategies to "construct and reorganise distinctive emotions — desire, humility, remorse", such that Christians can re-order their souls and sharpen their emotional capacity to attain sacredness and religious virtues.

### **6.3 Embodied theology and the production of faithful-hopeful subjectivities**

In Chapter 5, I have shown that the neoliberal labour regime has devalued migrant workers as docile and governable labouring bodies. Since the Foxconn suicide event in 2010, the families of the dead have each received approximately 250,000 RMB in compensation; therefore, the “affective atmospheres” of despair and in particular the discourse that “workers’ lives are only as valuable as 250,000 RMB” has been widely spread among migrant workers. Apart from translating the theo-ethics of love and care into faith-based praxis, as I will show in this chapter, the institutions of Christianity also reframe their theologies regarding bodies in response to the neoliberal regime that devalues migrant workers. I suggest that the religious institutions produced a regime of embodied theology that directs migrant workers how to feel and make sense of their bodies and subjectivities. Following Foucault (1988) and Holloway (2013), I suggest that the institutional enactment of faithful subjectivities is subject to both the discursive production of bodies (knowledge) and the relational patterning of affective bodies (space). It is through both embodied knowledge and the affective space that faithful-hopeful subjectivities can be felt and embodied.

#### **6.3.1 Valuable bodies**

The theology of valuable Christian bodies can be understood as a form of discourse that may reframe migrant workers’ inferior subjectivities. In both the Pentecostal house churches and TSPM churches I investigated, the discourses of “old bodies” and “new bodies” are dominant in the preaching and fellowships. As Holloway (2013:209) suggests, the faithful Christian body is achieved through “another body – the ‘Good News’ of the

body of Christ, its crucifixion and its resurrection”. In this study, the body of Christ not only constitutes one of the most important epistemologies of the religious teachings but is also utilised as an appealing concept to empower migrant workers. In the teachings of these churches, Christian bodies are viewed as the property of God, which means that their bodies are born from but also belong to God. This teaching essentially opens up a new horizon for migrant workers to re-interpret their bodies. Via the connection to God’s body, their bodies become valued and meaningful. For example, in one sermon of the Foxconn House Church A (Pentecostal), the pastor emphasised that:

How precious we are! Our bodies belong to God. We are God’s property. “I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me”. There are two most important things in our life: God values us, and we follow God... When we submitted ourselves to God, we will enter a new phase. “Dark am I, yet lovely [in the eye of God]”. When I first believed in God, I had a bad past, a very negative self, and did many things that God didn’t encourage. So, we will perhaps immerse in self-denial. That’s true, dark am I, but I am lovely in God’s eye. This is a very beautiful announcement. “I am a rose of Sharon, a lily of the valleys”. On the barren land, we are the most lovely, precious followers in God’s eye. When we immerse in the love of God, we will look on ourselves very differently. If you are still entangled by an unbearable past and a negative self, I tell you: make an announcement in front of God. We should look forward. Every day is different, with God’s new grace.

Moreover, the churches often teach their adherents that Christian bodies are holy because God made them, and everything God makes has a purpose. The discourses of the valued and holy body are apparently appealing for the migrant workers whose bodies are

devalued as machine-like labourers under the factory regime. In other words, migrant workers can attain sense of recognition in the eye of God.

However, it is through Christ's body – the incarnate and personalised image of God – that the discourses of the valuable body can be corporeally felt by many migrant workers. The churches repeatedly emphasise that Jesus would always bear the sufferings for them, because Jesus died for them on the cross. Therefore, according to the churches' teachings, migrant workers' bodies are valuable in the sense that they are worth Jesus dying for. During one sermon at Guanlan church, the pastor contended that Jesus not only loves and invests in Christian fellows but also expects them to take care of Jesus's investment:

Look at the cross, you will know how valuable your life is to Jesus. We often neglect the fact that Jesus always values us, loves us. Don't think about how much we can gain from Jesus but think about how to be the property that Jesus likes. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine". We are loved by Christ.

In this sense, the discourses of the valuable body are made sense of through the connection to Christ's body. The truth of the Christian body cannot be separated from rituals such that it can be emotionally felt. As Holloway (2013: 209) notes: "the event of the crucified and resurrected body therefore is told (in sermons, in texts, in hymns, in prayers, and so on), performed (in communion, in baptisms, and so on) and present again and again (in the continual performative casting of these techniques) in the Christian faith such that the event of this body is impressed and expressed in the hopeful disposition of faithful bodies". In Foxconn house Church A, the end of the sermon was often accompanied by a collective prayer, which required the participants to repeat and speak



out the “truth” through saying their prayers one after another. For example, a woman worker, Lijuan, made an announcement during the collective praying:

God, we thank you, because I’m your property. Thank you for seeing us as treasure.

God, I’m willing to be the property that you are pleased with. There are so many cages that constrain us during our life, God, we count on you to renew us ...

### **6.3.2 New self**

Although the Christian faithful subjectivities rely on the truth of the Christian body (the truth regarding the body’s belonging to and connection with Jesus), the formation of the desired Christian body is nevertheless played out through particular embodied practices and techniques, especially through a defeated and transformed body. The theology of a “new self” (新我) among the migrant workers’ churches addresses this idea. In my study, both house churches and TSPM churches emphasised the discourse of the transformed body, advocating that pious Christian subjects are characterised by a “new self” who has defeated the constraints of flesh and desires.

However, instead of negating bodies as obsessed with desires and sex and therefore viewing them as a spiritually unimportant obstacle to spiritual purity as in the monastic principles of early Christianity (Foucault 1988), the theologies of these churches contend that the body matters because it is not only the palace where God’s spirit resides but is also a battlefield between the flesh and holy spirit. Although TSPM churches and some Pentecostal house churches hold different epistemologies concerning what the holy spirit is and how it operates (to be elaborated on later), they both recognise the dualism between

flesh and holy spirit and that only through the transformation to a “new self” or “new body” can a new form of virtue and freedom be attained.

These embodied theologies are particularly manifest in two themed sermons, namely “Holy Spirit and Flesh” at Foxconn House church A and “Freedom and Commandment” at Sanzhuli church. For example, in the sermon “Holy Spirit and Flesh”, the church leader distinguished two forms of bodies: the body of salvation and the body of victory. The former is related to the redemption of a sinner’s body because of Christian faith, while the latter is associated with the battle between the holy spirit and flesh. The church leader Chen explained in the preaching:

We need the “Good News” of Christ because of the sins in our bodies. We need redemption. That’s the reason Jesus came to the world. He undertakes all sins for us. What’s the method of salvation? We can be justified by faith. We’re saved not because of our wisdom, the kind things we did, but because of the faith... We’re saved [because of faith], but we also need to have a victorious body (得胜). What’s the victorious body? If we have faith, we still have bad manners and often gamble. That isn’t victorious but rather being defeated by the flesh. We should defeat sins, devil, flesh, and desires. What’s the approach to victory? We shall count on the law of the holy spirit. Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8: 1-2). Therefore, this is the battle between flesh and Spirit ... Our bodies are often occupied by two voices. For example, when we get off work, one voice persuades you to go out to look for fun while the other persuades you to go to the church, the home of God. What should we choose? We do not live according to the

flesh but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires, but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8: 4-6) ... We shall sentence our flesh to death so that we can be victorious.

The church leader further elaborated that the Christian body consists of the flesh and the holy spirit, and only through sentencing the old self to death can one be transformed into a victorious body and attain life and peace (see Figure 6-1). In this sermon, the church leader outlined particular forms of flesh that Christians need to defeat, including:

Sexual immorality: loyalty to marriage and family.

Impurity and debauchery: misbehaviour, improper language and manners; indulging oneself and disregarding the other's eyes.

Idolatry: worshipping any image that men make for themselves. "Idolatry also refers to what occupies your minds, such as film stars, soap operas, and smartphone".

Hatred and discord: quarrelling with or offending others, and particularly the conflicts between workers and supervisors in the factory: "when conflict occurs, control your mouth and stop quarrelling, even though you have a grievance. If you won the quarrel, be cautious because you might be occupied by the flesh. God will redress an injustice for us."

Fits of rage: cannot control one's temper.

Jealousy: feeling unhappy when someone is better and luckier than you.

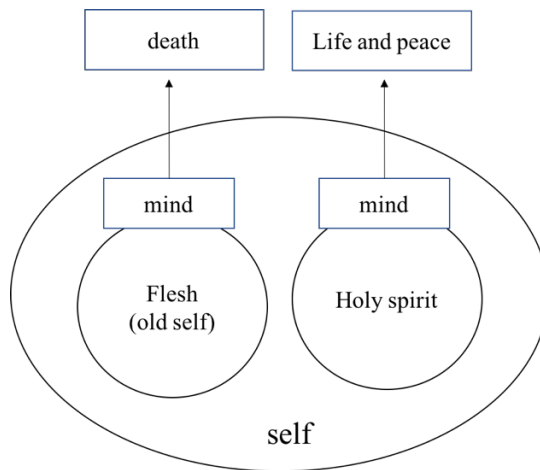


Figure 6-1. The Christian body as a battlefield

Source: Remade from PowerPoint presentation of the Sermon of Foxconn House church A

The church leader concluded that only through breaking out the cage of these forms of flesh can they attain a victorious self and a real kind of freedom. This embodied theology is echoed in Caputo’s (2007) notion of the risen body in Christianity that allows a new kind of agency to freedom:

The risen body is freedom from this body of flesh and death ... It is a body whose powers of agency have been extended or allowed to run to completion beyond all the limitations imposed by flesh. It instantiates the event of agency, the agency of the event, without restriction, in a body of pure action, vision, light, intelligence, and power, in which these qualities, the qualities of these events, are released or put on display, allowed free play in exemplary fashion (2007: 81-82).

The teaching of freedom is one of the central topics in the theologies of both TSPM-Evangelical and House-Pentecostal churches. In another sermon at Sanzhuli church, namely “Freedom and Commandment”, the pastor provided a more detailed explanation

of the understanding of freedom. In the preaching and fellowship in the Sanzhuli church, migrant workers are encouraged to be aware of the distinction between “spiritual freedom” and “bodily freedom”: the former is applauded as ethical and good, in contrast to the latter. The pastor Li believes that doing whatever you want could not be counted as real freedom because your options are controlled by your desires. Instead, he argues that “freedom is that you are not dominated by bodily desires and that you have options not to do what is not good”. Li’s notion of bodily freedom can be understood as a kind of negative freedom, which refers to the absence of external obstacles to desire-oriented choice and action. Instead, the pursuit of “spiritual freedom” is in line with the spirit of positive freedom, which Manhood (2001: 207) understands as “the capacity to realise an autonomous will, one generally fashioned in accord with the dictates of ‘universal reason’ or ‘self-interest’, and hence unencumbered by the weight of custom, transcendental will, and tradition”. In this sense, the theology of the ‘new self’ provides encouragement that it is by overcoming the constraints of the flesh that Christians can attain true freedom.

### **6.3.3 Embodying the Holy Spirit**

Although the embodied theology provides migrant workers with a regime of knowledge regarding their bodies, it is through the mediumship of the Holy Spirit that this knowledge can be sensed and validated. Despite acknowledging the Holy Spirit as a medium of faith, both the TSPM churches and some Pentecostal house churches have different epistemologies concerning the way the Holy Spirit relates to and operates on bodies. The TSPM churches typically identified themselves with urban evangelism, which is intellectual and text-centred, while the rural migrant house churches often bore the legacies of a Pentecostal-style charismatic Protestantism due to their rural origins (see Kao 2009).

Some Pentecostal house churches such as Foxconn House churches A and B particularly emphasise the Holy Spirit as the mediumship of being a faithful Christian as well as experiences and feelings as central to the faith. These churches highlight the “work of Holy Spirit” (圣灵的作工) on the body such as speaking in tongues, healing, miracles, the sign of God, and the joy that arises from the possession of Holy Spirit. This is exemplified by practices such as sharing experiences of the miraculous healing of their bodies and the Holy Spirit guiding and empowering them to get through life’s difficulties. The concept of Holy Spirit is appealing for migrant workers who prefer to make sense of God through embodied practices and emotional narratives. Some migrant workers even see the Holy Spirit as the validation of their faith in God. For example, the worker Zhengcheng remarked that:

They [the church] told me every human being has spirit, I testified to this by my own experiences. Many people may know the existence of God, but they don’t believe. I didn’t believe either until one time the Holy Spirit possessed my body. Once there was a time I mysteriously felt very touched. It’s amazing. I felt I was possessed by the Holy Spirit. I always felt very touched suddenly when I was walking. I would be seized with a sudden impulse, very joyful, and couldn’t help laughing or being touched to cry. I felt I was so intimate with the Lord.

However, the TSPM churches may hold a milder and more conservative theology of Holy Spirit in congruence with the state’s discouragement of religious fundamentalism that may threaten social stability. Despite acknowledging the force of the Holy Spirit, the TSPM churches normally contend that it is unpredictable and not subject to any ritual and

practice. In 2010, the theological journal *Tianfeng* operated by the TSPM Association published an article entitled “The reflection on charismatic movement”, which could be viewed as representative of the stance of official churches. The author, Wang (2010), also a pastor, argues that: (1) The embodiment of Holy Spirit is not equated with and restricted to the supernatural phenomena such as speaking in tongues and miracles but resides in everyday life; (2) Holy Spirit cannot be produced, manipulated and directed by a Christian; (3) Miracles are not necessarily the work of Holy Spirit but are sometimes enchanted by devils; (4) Experiences of being possessed by Holy Spirit, if they occur, do not equate with a sign of spiritual development; (5) The teachings of God are more important than passion on Holy Spirit.

One way in which geographers of religion can interpret the Holy Spirit is to locate the cause of these bodily sensations instead of reducing it to a question of whether supernatural phenomena are neither something nor nothing (Holloway 2006). The Holy Spirit may “not exist as a real material thing, but at the same time”, it “possessed and haunted them [the adherents], and thus is in certain senses real” (Holloway 2006: 185). In one prayer meeting at Foxconn House Church B, the 31-year-old worker brother Gao claimed that he once received the grace of the Holy Spirit. The prayer meeting is the most affectively loaded congregation conducted in an enclosed room at Foxconn House church B every Wednesday evening. In one prayer meeting that I participated in, all those present were required to kneel in a circle to say the prayers in loud voices. The church organisers directed and formalised the conduct and procedures of the ritual, encouraging participants in linking hands and hugging from time to time. Apart from praying, the participants were also guided to sing collectively, accompanied by certain rhythmic comportment. Joy arising from this occasion is usually expressed by passionate prayers with shouting and

even crying, which was affectively felt by some participants as the possession of the Holy Spirit. Brother Gao told me how he connected to the Holy Spirit in this meeting:

The director asked us to open our mouths, to speak in tongues ... Guided by the director, one brother was hugging me. He was praying for me with crying. I didn't feel any embarrassment but felt that we all returned to a state of purity and love. At that moment, I was recalling my past – why I followed God. I didn't believe in God before and relied on my own to try to acquire recognition, but I failed. I'd done a lot of jobs, internet bar receptionist, street vendor... but they all failed. When I first started my career, I found that society had no love, was full of darkness. It's God who gave me the confidence to continue ... So, I opened my mouth to follow the singing, a very touching song. Then, I felt something like electricity coming down my body. My body started to be slightly paralysed, like being shocked by electricity. When I continued following the rhythm of the song, I found that my mouth was moving automatically, uttering a sound like "lala, lala, lala" ... My tongue was moving so quickly, automatically.

Brother Gao believed that the sound of "lala, lala, lala" he experienced was a sign of speaking in tongues and the grace of the Holy Spirit. As Holloway (2013) argues, the presence of transcendence and the formation of faithful subjects are affective responses in particular patternings of ritual space-time: disciplinary guidance, an enclosed room, atmospheres of mood, touch, and sound, and memories are assembled such that the intensive feeling of the sacred is corporeally sensed. In this sense, I agree with Holloway (2013) that the theology of valued bodies, the new self and the Holy Spirit in this study is an embodied process through which doctrinal knowledge of the self can be represented



and legitimated. Yet, theology is not simply about how doctrinal knowledge is affectively felt but also about how it is ‘lived’ in praxis in order to constitute a desired way of being (Olson *et al.* 2013; Sunderland 2016). Therefore, in what follows I focus on how theology is reframed in praxis through “technologies of the self”.

## **6.4 Technologies of the self and the transformation to faithful-virtuous subjects**

In this section, following Foucault (1988), I further elaborate on how Christian migrant workers constitute themselves in an active fashion, through “the technologies of the self”. Embodied knowledge of Christianity in essence not only directly shapes the particular normative bodily images of migrant workers, but also provide a mode or a form of relation to the self that enables them to refashion themselves into the desired subject. However, as Foucault (2007: 291) argues, technologies of the self are “not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group”. In this sense, the religious subject interacts with the way individuals reflexively formulate a response to their lived circumstance. In what follows, I illustrate how this embodied theology is incorporated into the migrant workers’ project of self-transformation into faithful-hopeful subjects in response to neoliberal subjectivity.

### **6.4.1 Christian ethics of work and self-mastery**

For Foucault (2007), ethics involves not simply codes of principles or rules regarding “right” or “good” for action but are a matter of self-relation. Although ethical self-constitution is conditioned by moral codes, Foucault (2007: 263) understands “ethics” as “the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself”, and “how the individual is

supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions”. As I have discussed above, the Christian institutions’ propaganda of “victorious bodies” provides a set of moral codes regarding self-control over the flesh. For Christian migrant workers, these theological and ethical teachings do not simply concern how they restrain themselves; instead, the everyday practices of Christian ethics provide an approach to attain self-mastery, a status that is necessary in establishing a personalised and intimate relationship with God.

In Chapter 5, I have described the high-pressure production regime and exploitative labour relations in Shenzhen, and particularly in the factory of Foxconn. For many Christian migrant workers, the exploitative labour regime and regulatory discipline in the factory are not a matter of class domination but rather about how they master and position themselves in relation to God. When I asked what he thought of Foxconn’s regulatory rules, the 38-year-old worker Liu told me that he never bothered about the rules and regulations in the factory, as the “world” was dominated by foreigners (waibangren 外邦人) but ultimately it was under God’s control. Therefore, Liu said, the matter was ultimately about how you saw yourself in the face of the regulatory rules in the factory. For Liu, a kind of humiliation is even acceptable: “The purpose of work is to glorify the Lord. If you have this attitude, you can remain peaceful no matter how they treat you.” The teaching that the purpose of work is to glorify God is widely accepted by migrant workers who regard themselves as “God’s workers,” meaning that they are working for God, not for capital. It is because of this kind of relation that, for many migrant workers, the domain of work is not so much a material power structure but rather a question of how they act upon themselves (such as having the proper attitude toward work in line with Christian ethics and theology).

It is against this backdrop that a contextualised theology and ethics of “*benfen*” (本分) emerged among migrant workers. In line with how Christian workers see themselves in relation to work, the word “*benfen*” (本分) frequently appeared in the interviews. *Benfen* literally refers to a duty or obligation that God arranges or a normative set of decent behaviour required in one’s position. Christian workers believe that it is their *benfen* to work heartfully, since they are working for God and all will ultimately appear before the judgement of Christ. Wang, who had worked in Shenzhen’s factories for 15 years, was viewed as a devout and senior Christian in the church. He explained how a Christian worker performs his/her *benfen*: whether your wage was calculated by the hours of work or the number of products, and whether or not the managers engaged in surveillance, Christian workers ought to work with full spirit because “you need to make a confession before God one day”. Wang has often taught young migrant workers that they should exhibit the virtues of a Christian worker, such as being hardworking, trustworthy and helpful, and that Christians should embrace peace and tolerance rather than rage and complaint. For example, another young female worker, Liu, argued that Christians should have a different way of seeing themselves so that they could attain peace and tolerance at work. She understood *benfen* as the position that God arranges:

People should focus on themselves. If the world doesn’t have a division of labour, how can we survive? So, people doing their own work is *benfen*. God created us and gave us a different position and wealth in accordance with your ability. I also want to be a manager, but in fact I don’t have the ability for that position. So, just do the work well in your own position.

In this sense, the Christian work ethic that manifests in the discourse of glorified work and *benfen* in this study is integrated into migrant workers' project of self-mastery, a project regarding how to act upon and see themselves in godly desired ways.

In I have discussed above , the embodied theology of the churches encourages migrant workers to take control of the flesh and particularly emotional impulses such as those related to discord and fits of rage. These Christian doctrines and teachings are appropriated in the context of work and everyday life, and migrant workers believe that it is the self-discipline of bodies that contributes to the formation of the new self. Therefore, despite the aggressive culture prevailing among the working-class at Foxconn, Christian migrant workers rarely resist their managers through confrontational practices and aggressive language. For many Christian workers, quarrelling with or offending line managers and other workers are viewed as signs of losing control over one's flesh, which God would be displeased with. For example, the 27-year-old worker Tiansheng considered the disciplinary regulation in the factories as God's training. It is through the proper management of emotional impulses that he can establish a personal relationship with Christ:

The person who belongs to the flesh cannot hear the voice of living God. If you can't control your emotional impulses, you won't be able to feel the spirit of God and the joy and peace either ... So, a true Christian shouldn't complain and his [or her] life should be always positive. You need to understand God's work and why he did this for you. Everything has a reason, so I could get benefits from the difficulties and bad circumstances I encountered. For example, the line-leaders always attack you [with verbal violence], they can help you shape your personality. I used to have a very bad

temper, but now I have become very gentle. That's because I defeated the environment around me and defeated the flesh that took over me. It's ultimately the relationship with Christ but rather the relationship with the world.

In such circumstances, although the Christian ethics that emphasise benfen, self-mastery and self-control of the flesh are partially integrated into the state and capitalist project of the production of docile and productive bodies, I do not consider this contextualised theology as simply a co-option into neoliberal governance. Instead, it is through submission and docility that Christian migrant workers transform themselves into faithful subjects who may reframe their exploitative experiences. Moreover, as I discuss in what follows, this embodied theology also enables a more hopeful and morally superior subject in response to neoliberal vulnerability.

#### **6.4.2 Faith healing, Holy Spirit and grace**

Apart from self-mastery, healing is another technology of the self that Christian migrant workers utilise to reconfirm their faith, enhance their ability to cope with suffering and establish a personal relationship with Christ. Because of the Chinese *hukou* household registration system, rural migrant workers are deprived of their citizenship and welfare rights in the city. In Shenzhen, rural migrant workers have limited access to the resources of public health care and medical services that only urban citizens are eligible to enjoy. Therefore, it is no wonder that some Christian migrant workers turn to faith healing to cure themselves when they fall ill.

In many circumstances, both TSPM churches and house churches recognise the validity of faith healing in coping with disease. What these churches call "faith healing" often

refers to cures accomplished in the name of the Holy Spirit and Christ. As a commonly recognised religious practice, faith healings are often conducted individually or collectively, involving a set of actions including prayer, penance, and participating in sacraments. However, most Christian migrant workers do not deny the utility of scientific methods such as medical treatment in addressing illness or disease, but simultaneously believe that only through faith and God's cure can medical treatments take effect. For example, when I asked one migrant worker what he thought of faith healing, he answered: "I think it's wrong to think that Christians do not need to take medicines. As medicines exist, they must be God's invention. So, God often cures you through the assistance of medicines."

In the book *Healing in the History of Christianity*, Porterfield (2005: 9) suggests that "the basic dynamic [of healing] that begins to explain how Christianity has actually worked to make people feel stronger and find relief and comfort is the personal relationship that believers experience with Christ". This is also illustrated in my study, where some sick migrant workers view faith healing as the relief of suffering and a sense of hope that enhances their ability to cope with diseases, although they also aspire to the grace of God who performs miraculous cures for them. Yang is a 37-year-old Foxconn worker who was diagnosed with uremia in 2011 and needed to receive dialysis treatment in hospital to clean the blood once a month. However, Yang had to work continuously at Foxconn to pay the significant medical expenses. Yang frankly admitted that he had converted to Christianity a few years ago to search for healing from God. Although his symptom had been continually worsening, as he said, his faith had not been diluted. Instead, he suggested that God enabled him to be fearless in the face of the disease:

When I laid down on the sickbed, I didn't have fear any more because of God. I have nothing to rely on now [except God]. Relatives are afraid you will borrow money from them. The parents are afraid you cannot be cured. The spouse is afraid you involve her in trouble. The supervisors are afraid you cannot work. The doctors are afraid you cannot pay the medical fees on time.

However, much more commonly, faith healings are experienced and testified by Christian migrant workers in their coping with ailments such as colds and fever. Many migrant workers believe that they can get cured through faith healing and therefore do not need to visit a doctor if they have ailments. They have often pointed to the curing of ailments as evidence of the power of Christian faith and the gift of the Holy Spirit. For example, the 32-year-old worker Zhenjie told us of his experience of faith healing:

Zhenjie: Since I graduated from occupational school, I haven't paid a penny to doctors. I haven't visited a doctor all these years, although I have also had some ailments from time to time. But I don't encourage other Christians to do so, because not every Christian can receive this kind of grace from God ... There was a time I had a fever but I didn't visit a doctor. The fever lasted for one week and my roommates encouraged me to visit a doctor. I thought I have a strong faith in God, he would cure me, I didn't need to seek help from a doctor.

Quan: So, you thought visiting a doctor would weaken your faith?

Zhenjie: No, they are not incompatible. I just believed that I didn't need a doctor. I had a strong faith that God would definitely cure me. I had such confidence. So, I prayed

and hoped God could listen to my prayer ... God eventually cured me. Not everyone has such grace from God. I think I have such ability, the ability to experience the work of the Holy Spirit. Because when the Holy Spirit comes to live in our bodies, we shall be cured. [Zhenjie opens the Bible] Jesus said: "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you." So, thanks to God, it's the faith that cured me.

In this quotation, Zhenjie believed that he was cured because of his strong faith and the work of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, he considered this as the distinctive grace of God. This is consistent with Porterfield's (2005: 4) argument that Christian healings "represent only a fraction of what Christians have experienced and meant by healing". This is also illustrated by another Christian worker, Li, who celebrated the curing of an ailment through healing as a sign of power in God's arrangements, and therefore accepted it as part of religious life. Li told me how he successfully quit smoking through faith healing and God's special gift. Like Zhenjie, Li did not seek any medical assistance but rather relied on faith healing when he once got severe flu:

When I recovered from the flu, I just realised God not only cured me but helped me quit tobacco. After I recovered, I continued smoking but surprisingly I couldn't feel the flavour of tobacco anymore. It's tasteless. So, I haven't smoked since then ... I had prayed before God and hoped he would help me quit smoking. It is out of expectation that God helped me overcome smoking through the flu.



### 6.4.3 Superior and valued subjects

In this chapter, I have shown how the religious institutions create a regime of embodied knowledge that tells migrant workers how and what Christian bodies are valued. In this section, I further suggest that this embodied knowledge and truth are mobilised by migrant workers to constitute a superior and valued self in their everyday praxis, which contrasts with the state-propagated discourses of cheap labour and the low *suzhi* (quality) of rural migrants.

Firstly, migrant workers utilise Christian ethics and discourses to re-imagine themselves in relation to “others” and therefore to establish social-religious distinctions. Migrant workers normally accept the churches’ teaching that a Christian is valuable, and therefore assume a moral and spiritual high ground compared to non-Christians who they label as “foreigners” (外邦人). This is manifestly evident in Christian worker’s assumptions of superior subjectivities over people who engage in Buddhism, Taoism and popular religions (such as ancestor worship). Many Christian migrant workers believe that they are “chosen” and “blessed” by God and only Christians inclusively enjoy access to ultimate truth and salvation. This distinctive and superior Christian subjectivity can be illustrated by Liang’s understanding of what it is to be “chosen”:

Lord said: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, I will have chosen whom I will have chosen”<sup>11</sup>. It’s God who determines whom will be chosen. So, people will never know whether he/she will be chosen [to be a Christian], it’s not dependent on us rather than on God. It’s not people who find God. In our society, many people are

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<sup>11</sup> The original phrase in Bible should be: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (Exodus 33:19).

finding “gods”, but in Christianity God will find us. This is the difference: in other religions, people attempt to find their gods through, for example, their own practices or doing good. But only we Christian are found by God.

Apart from being “chosen”, many Christian workers also emphasise the distinctiveness of the Christian rhetoric of morality, and in particular confession and repentance in merit-making and the cultivation of the ultimate, transcendent good. For many Christian workers, being Christian means being morally superior and good. For example, as the 24-year-old woman worker Xueyi said, unlike other religions, especially Chinese popular religions that people turn to for utilitarian reasons, Christians emphasise repentance and the inner reflection of sins:

To be honest, Christianity is the best religion in the world. If you committed sins, you can seek relief by going to Buddhist temples. Whatever sins they committed, they felt more relieved by asking Guanyin (a Buddhist god) for protection ... So, Buddhist, Taoism, worshipping *guanyin*, they all told you which gods could help you. But for Christians, if you commit sins, you will feel guilty. If you don't repent and renew yourself, how dare you go to the church?

As Richard Madsen (2007) argues, “in contrast to Christian philosophy that absolutises the notion of goodness (as a quality identified with God), there is no clear distinction between good and evil in either the Confucian tradition or the Daoist classics” (Cao 2009: 56). This forceful Christian moral rhetoric, as Cao (2009:56) points out, “lends tremendous power to the self-justification of Christian identity”. As Yang (2005) suggests, in sharp contrast to popular religion that has been stigmatised as feudal superstition and

a synonym for backwardness by the state, Christianity is associated with developed West and cosmopolitan modernity. In this sense, Christian workers' imagination of themselves as superior religious subjects is partly justified by the state's devaluation of popular religion as feudal superstition.

Moreover, for some migrant workers, the superiority of Christian subjectivity is not only understood in an ethical sense but is also corporeally sensed as spiritual power. The 42-year-old rural migrant worker Jun told me that he was excluded by some of the villagers who practiced popular religions in his village because he thought that God was the mightiest entity. Therefore, Jun suspected that some of the villagers might be afraid of his God who overshadowed the images or idols they worshipped:

In my village, some of my friends haven't got along with me any more after I believed in Jesus. They rarely invite me to their homes because, if I enter their house, their idols don't dare to appear. I have the Holy Spirit in my body, which is more powerful than their idols. So, they might be afraid of me, exclude me. You know, our God is the only true God, and their idols are devils. Devils cannot defeat righteousness. People are the same, they are dominated by devils so they exclude me.

Secondly, this re-imagination of the superior Christian subject is utilised to negotiate with state-propagated discourses of *suzhi* (quality), which stigmatise rural migrants as uncivil and low-quality subjects. In this sense, Christian migrant workers seek to construct themselves as distinctive subjects within the larger group of migrant workers. As Cao (2009: 56) points out, "Protestant belief played an important and visible part in the making of Chinese citizenship and the reform of immoral social practices such as

gambling, opium, smoking, concubinage, child-brides, and prostitution in the early Republican period.” Nowadays, for many migrant workers, Christian faith enables them to keep the label of “low suzhi” at a safe distance through self-transformation into morally superior and valuable subjects. Many Christian workers repeatedly emphasise that they are different from non-Christian workers due to their obedience to Christian ethical principles and their pursuit of transcendent ends that transform them into civil subjects. In migrant workers’ interpretation, suzhi is associated with a set of technologies of the self, including good manners, politeness, dedication to work, and mastery of desires, which distinguish them from non-Christian workers:

[Wang:] For non-Christian workers, because they don’t believe in Jesus, they are more calculated. For example, if the workshop supervisors don’t oversee them, they will just lie there [on the working platform] and work slowly. But we Christians are different, we just work silently, no matter if supervisors are overseeing or not. They often loaf on the job: going to the toilet frequently, going out to smoke and drink tea. So, we are very different from *wangbangren* (foreigners or non-Christians), although I don’t deny that some of them are also very dedicated.

[Zhibo:] I want to let them [other workers] know I am Christian, I am different. For example, I never talk dirty. You know, they often talk dirty and this became a matter of common practice in the workshop. Some of the colleagues thought I am different.

[Tianci:] First, to be people with self-cultivation, you need to treat others kindly. Because God is kind, you need to live out the image and personality of God. Second, you need to manage yourself, many Christians rarely smoke, drink and never gamble.

Every time my colleagues or supervisors invite me to KTV [karaoke] or drink, I refuse. But I will explain to them, I am a Christian.

In this sense, Christian migrant workers adhere to an different interpretation of *suzhi* (quality) from that in the state's discourse, emphasising self-disciplined bodies in tandem with their reading of Christian ethics and doctrines. Although migrant workers' project of self-transformation does not challenge the hegemonic state and public discourse, it nevertheless sets conditions for the processes of neoliberal subjectivation (Mahmood 2005) by reconstituting the devalued and inferior labouring subjects into morally superior and faithful-virtuous subjects.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

In response to the postsecular critique that religious subjects cannot be reduced to simply the outcome of power relations (Holloway 2013; Tse 2014; Sunderland 2016), the aim of this chapter has been to investigate how religious subjectivities and religious bodies interact with theologies-by-praxis, and how this process engenders more hybrid subjectivities. By reconciling the Foucauldian approach that emphasises the discursive formation of the body and Holloway's (2013) affective presence of transcendence, this chapter therefore highlights not only the embodied knowledge of theology but also how it is translated into the praxis of migrant workers. In response to the argument that the body is the primary site through which faithful disposition, piety, and transcendence can be achieved (Holloway 2006; Olson *et al.* 2013), I suggest that migrant workers' project of self-transformation through the discourse of *benfen*, valued and superior Christian subjects, and the theologically-mediated interpretation of the self is corporeally felt and negotiated in their lived experiences under the neoliberal labour regime.

In this study, the migrant worker's bodily interpretation of piety, faithfulness and virtue cannot be separated from the "regime of embodied theology" through which religious institutions tell them how to corporeally feel and understand what is a valued and desired Christian body. However, following Sunderland (2016), I do not understand religious subjects as simply determined by this affective and discursive knowledge that shapes particular forms of religious personhood. Instead, this embodied theology is often negotiated and reframed by subjects' responses to their circumstance in praxis. For example, embodied theology is contextually interpreted in migrant workers' everyday life, deployed as the "technologies of the self" to reconstitute the inferior subjectivity devalued by neoliberal labour regime. In this sense, I further highlight the co-production of religion and neoliberalism (Williams 2015), since neoliberalism offers a space of praxis through which not only are theo-ethics translated but also migrant workers reflexively consume these religious meanings. Overall, the embodied theology and migrant workers' "technologies of the self" need to be further examined in relation to their intersectional subjectivities, in particular their negotiation of masculinity, female agency, and adulthood. I discuss these issues in the following chapters.

## Chapter 7

### **The aspiration for moral manhood: Christianity, class and migrant workers' negotiation of masculinities**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine the formation of Christian and moral masculinity by focusing on the intersection of religion, class and gender among rural migrant workers in Shenzhen. By bring postsecularity into dialogue with the critical geographies of masculinity, this chapter aims to answer how postsecular subjectivity may emerge through the intersectional constitution of religion, class and masculinity. In the past two decades, Connell's (1995) original concept of hegemonic masculinity has been addressed by geographers as an analytical frame to explore the plurality of masculinities and the power relations in which masculine subjects are enacted and lived (Hopkins and Noble 2009). Geographies of masculinities have focused on not only the representations of masculinities but also how masculinities are utilised as a *strategy* to claim power and respectful subjectivity in particular contexts (MacDonald 2003; Nayak 2006; Hopkins 2006; Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2016). This line of inquiry has offered two important insights. First, previous research has shown the complex relations of different masculinities and therefore recognised the agency of subordinated and marginalised groups who lack economic resources and institutional authority but draw on regional or cultural resources to claim power (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This is particularly manifested in studies of "protest masculinity" constructed by resisting or deviant practices among local working-class or ethnically marginalised men (MacDonald 2003;

Walker 2006; Nayak 2006). This pattern of masculinity is often a response to deep feelings of powerlessness and insecurity (Walker 2006), which Connell (1995: 111) likens to a “tense, freaky façade, making a claim to power where there are no real resources for power”. In this sense, masculinities may become a space of agency to reclaim a “respectable” and culturally superior subjectivity and, simultaneously, a site where marginalisation takes place (MacDonald 2003; Nayak 2006). Second, the geographical study of masculinities highlights the relational and intersectional nature of masculinities (Berg and Longhurst 2003; Hopkins and Noble 2009; Hopkins 2018; Messerschmidt and Messner 2018). This approach is not simply about how masculinities interact with other social categories (i.e., class, ethnicity, and religion) but is also about “capturing the messiness of layered subjectivities and multi-dimensional relations in particular localities” (Hopkins and Noble 2009: 815) that jointly constitute the institutionalisation of gender relations. However, although the plural, relational, intersectional approach to masculinity has been considered in the geographical agenda, less attention has been paid to how religion and morality shape the formation of masculine subjectivity (Gökarıksel and Secor 2017). In particular, the issue of how religion and morality can create an alternative pathway for masculinity formation and thereby open dialogical spaces for transforming, reworking and even subverting normative subjectivities and homogenising forms of masculinity has been substantially underexplored.

To address this gap, this chapter draws attention to the intersection of gender, religion, and class among male Christian rural migrant workers in Shenzhen and the formation of what I call “moral manhood”. It specifically focuses on how Christian workers strategically deploy existing religious and moral discourses to construct their masculine



subjectivity and thus question and come to terms with—and sometimes reinforce—the dominant and hegemonic masculinities. In the countryside, rural Christian men’s masculinity, which has relied on their commitment to and headship of local rural churches, has been increasingly marginalised and unattainable in the context of China’s economic reform, in which “capable” and productive masculinities have become dominant. However, as these individuals became migrant workers in urban workplaces and particularly in Shenzhen’s global factories, such as Foxconn, they have been subject to a militarised and hierarchical management regime of labour. The factory floor is therefore dominated by two conflictual sets of masculinities: the hegemonic and hierarchical masculinity characterised by coercive management and verbal violence among rank-and-file managers and the “protest masculinity” among production workers who utilised rebellious and aggressive practices to defend their deprived masculinity. For Christian workers, Christian ethics and discourses enable them to construct a morally superior manhood to negotiate with the dominant masculine power and an alternative space beyond the dichotomy of dominance and resistance. This chapter looks beyond the working sphere to examine how Christian morality influences migrant worker men’s familial and gender relations. In this regard, Christian migrant workers seek to construct a distinctive “godly manhood” and soft patriarchy that emphasise divine marriage and men’s headship as an alternative to the hegemonic and patriarchal masculinity defined by Chinese familial values and secular ideologies. I suggest that migrant workers’ performance of moral manhood is itself hegemonic as it is conditioned by a set of normative religious moralities and conducts; nevertheless, it serves as a tactical alternative for migrant workers to reframe their marginal experiences and claim a meaningful way of being a man that may psychologically empower them. In this sense, Christian migrant workers’ masculinity formation can be understood as a process of

autopoiesis or self-cultivation into pious subject beyond the secular-humanist account of autonomous and emancipatory personhood (Mahmood 2005). In this chapter, I also underscore the intersectional and relational formation of Christian migrant workers' moral masculinity, which is assembled through a subaltern subjectivity aspiring to meaningful manhood, self-reflection on class positionality, and theological interpretation of gender relations. This chapter is an effort to bring the critical geographies of masculinity (Peter and Noble 2009) into dialogue with the literature on geographies of Christianity by highlighting the religious and moral reflexivity of masculine subjects.

## **7.2 Masculinities, class, and religion: towards an intersectional approach**

Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity is perhaps the most influential contribution to studies of men and masculinities and provides a useful theoretical framework for analysing patriarchy and gendered hierarchies, class and labour politics, and racial and ethnic differences. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 832) formulated hegemonic masculinity as the normative pattern of practices of being a man, which "required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men". They further argued that masculinities are not fixed personality traits inherent in the body but rather configurations of practices subject to social action and specific social settings.

Nevertheless, the concept of hegemonic masculinity is subject to criticism. Early criticisms focused on the ambiguity of the concept, especially with regard to what and who actually produces, represents and enacts masculinities (Wetherell and Edley 1999; Whitehead 2002). Another strand of critique argues that Connell's conceptualisation

implies the logics of political determinism, under which masculinity has become a normative, taken-for-granted patriarchal practice, while making the actual practices, self-representation and embodiment of men themselves invisible (Beasley 2008; Christensen and Jensen 2014). In response to these criticisms, Connell and Messerschmidt have acknowledged the need for geographical and scalar analysis to combine the societal process of representation and men's everyday performance (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Messerschmidt 2012; Messerschmidt 2015). They argue that admired masculine conduct may be exalted by institutions at the society level (e.g., church, social media, and state) and embedded in specific social environments at the local level, such as school and the workplace. Masculinities can be purely discursive constructs that do not necessarily coincide with the lives of any actual men but nevertheless shape how men position themselves in the locally specific construction of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, instead of viewing masculinities as structured by one set of ruling ideas and thus exercised only through patriarchal relations, recent studies on masculinities have identified structures of relations in which different masculinities (such as subordinate, complicit and marginal masculinities) interact and compete (Hopkins and Noble 2009).

Geographers' contributions to this field lie in the spatial dimensions of masculinity and "explore not simply how masculinities are played out in different spaces, but how those spaces shape the very nature of the experience of masculinity, and how it articulates with other key dimensions of social relations" (Hopkins and Noble 2009: 814). These contributions are particularly apparent in research on the cultural representation of masculinities (Jackson 1994), male identity and embodied practices (Longhurst 2000; Berg and Longhurst 2003; Barber 2016), youthful Muslim masculinities (Hopkins 2006), and non-normative and queer masculinities (Gorman-Murray 2013). This line of research

has focused on the relations among space, subjectivity, and relationality, moving towards a situated, relational, and intersectional formulation of masculinities (Hopkins and Noble 2009; Van Hoven and Hörschelmann 2005). In this geographical research, masculinities are conceptualised as *strategic*, where men perform and position themselves in particular contexts by drawing on discursive resources (Hopkins and Noble 2009; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; McDowell 2003).

Masculinities are not simply about the multiple representations of men but are also implicated in material relations and hierarchies. Therefore, attention has also been paid to how masculinities interact with economic transformation and class subjectivities, especially for men in precarious and marginal positions (McDowell 2003; McDowell, Rootham and Hardgrove 2014; Nayak 2006; Lin 2013). The increasingly dominant role of service economies in the employment market has produced a hierarchy of eligibility based on idealised serving bodies, disadvantaging working-class masculinities (Haywood & Johansson 2017; McDowell, Rootham and Hardgrove 2014). The masculinities of disadvantaged working-class men are often constructed in opposition to the hegemonic definition of masculinity that equates manhood with being materially successful and capable (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This is exemplified by “protest masculinities” or “marginal masculinities”, which marginalised men utilise to open a dialogical space with mainstream society and state power through deviant behaviours such as being tough, rebellious and violent, thereby restoring their lack of power or maintaining their cultural, regional or ethnic privilege (Cheng 1999). Similarly, Nayak’s (2006) research on working-class young men in post-industrial Northeast England elaborates how “spectacular masculinities” of white male excess enable young men to accrue a form of body capital that reinforces the boundaries of working-class culture and subjectivities.

Further research should explore how masculinities become not simply a form of domination but also the arena in which marginalisation takes place.

However, despite the acknowledgement of a variety of social categories and relations (such as class, ethnicity, and sexuality) that interact with masculinity formation, religion and morality have been underexplored within this literature, with the exception of a few important studies on Muslim masculinities (see Gökarıksel and Secor 2017; Hopkins 2006, 2008). Hopkins's (2006) early work demonstrates that youthful Muslim masculinities are influenced by a contradictory narrative of gender relations that challenges the stereotypical representation of Muslim men as patriarchal by highlighting the Islamic principles of gender equality and simultaneously relies on gendered expectations of women as the guardians of religious authenticity or appropriateness. Gökarıksel and Secor's (2017) recent research on Muslim men's embodied practices and, in particular, their looking-desiring nexus suggests that Islamic masculinities are never pre-programmed by universal Islamic knowledge and practices but are instead contingent and multiple, strategically navigating the regulation of acceptable manhood and sexual desires to publicly perform Islamic piety in different moral spatialities. However, compared with Muslim masculinities, Christian men's masculinities and their relation to religious ethics and morality have received scant attention. Some theological and biblical studies have noted that the emphasis on virtue and the ability to control one's passions and desires marks manhood in Christianity (Stewart 2016; Krondorfer 2009). In terms of gender roles and rations, it is also controversial whether Christian doctrines and ethics (i.e., the theological discourse of men's headship) maintain a symbolic patriarchy. For example, Brusco's (1995) research on the evangelical movement in Latin America suggests that the morality of asceticism blocks men's consumption and the behaviours

that mark masculinity in Colombia, such as drinking, smoking, and gambling, essentially domesticating men and enhancing female status. In particular, the Christian ideal of men's headship is not simply a mystification of male domination; it potentially strengthens men's material and emotional ties to their wives (Gallagher and Smith 1999). Christian discourses of gender may create a "soft patriarchy" that maintains men's privilege but simultaneously highlights their responsibility and love towards their wives (Heath 2003; Gallagher and Smith 1999). Nevertheless, the theological discourses and moralities of being a man are interpreted through the performative practices of "place-making, the negotiation of social identities, and the formation of political boundaries, including in geographies where theological analyses do not seem relevant" (Tse 2014: 202). In other words, religion research should move beyond institutional beliefs and teachings per se to the ways religiosity and ethics are "lived" and practised in the realms of everyday life and embodied experience (Tse 2014). This chapter therefore examines how lived and embodied experiences of religion influence religious men's everyday performance of masculinities and focuses on how religious masculinities come to terms with uneven and hierarchical power relations.

To achieve these goals, instead of focusing on single axes of difference, an intersectional analytical framework is deployed to capture how masculinity, class, and religion mutually form and shape one another. As Hopkins (2017:1) recently argued, "Intersectionality is not only about multiple identities but is about relationality, social context, power relations, complexity, social justice, and inequality". In other words, the concept of intersectionality should be used ethically and politically and should be viewed as a dynamic process in which different structures of power position themselves. It emphasises dynamic forces rather than categories, gender performance rather than genders, lived religious practices

more than religious principles, and economic exploitation rather than class (Christensen and Jensen 2014). Thus, the power relations of masculinity may vary for different identities, such as class, religious, and ethnic identifies, as well as within men. Some scholars argue that masculinity is itself intersectional and relational, emphasising the need to differentiate external masculinities (patriarchal power relations) and internal masculinities (power relations between masculinities), which allows a multifaceted and complex analysis of power (Christensen and Jensen 2014; Messerschmidt 2012). Despite men maintaining patriarchal power, other social categories may either reinforce or subvert male privilege. In this sense, the intersectional approach is sensitive to the complex processes by which some masculinities become hegemonic and others are relegated to the margin.

### **7.3 Contextualising working-class masculinities in China**

Although masculinities are relational and anti-essentialist, it is necessary to outline the representation of men and, in particular, working-class masculinities in China to situate the research in a specific discourse/power relation. In Chinese cultural tradition, *wen* (literary) and *wu* (martial) are often viewed as historically hegemonic models of Chinese masculinity (Louie 2002). Confucius and Guan Yu were icons of *wen* and *wu*, respectively, for most of the history of imperial China (Louie 2002). The former is associated with intellectual power under imperial China's civil official system, while the latter represents physical power and the virtues of loyalty (*zhong*) and righteousness (*yi*). In the Maoist period, "class struggle" required socialist workers to be masculine; they were characterised by a revolutionary impulse and political pureness, and women were even pressured to dress and act like men (Brownell and Wassertrom 2002; Lin 2013). During this period, the political representations of Chinese masculinity were dominated

by masculine socialist workers, who were depicted as masters of the country (Lin 2013, 2017). Working-class people enjoyed not only high social status and class superiority but also social security and welfare provided by the state. However, the hegemony of working-class masculinity has declined with the post-Mao modernisation following the launch of the “reform and opening-up” policy in 1978. As Song and Hird (2013: 12) suggest, “with the redistribution of wealth and power and the emergence of the nouveau riche in postsocialist society, masculinity [in China] is increasingly being defined in terms of money, bearing remarkable similarities with the discourse of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ in the West”. The hegemonic masculinity that focuses on career, competition, and material acquisition is in congruence with the Chinese state’s project of developmentalism and secularism that uphold reason, efficiency, progress, and the pursuit of material prosperity as the overriding ideologies of society (Van der Veer 2012). In other words, being a modern, civilised, and productive subject has become a normative personhood that is required by China’s unfinished project of modernisation.

In the post-reform era, tens of millions of rural-to-urban migrant workers (or peasant workers, *nongming gong*) have become China’s new working class. They constitute the major labour forces in manufacturing, construction and mining and are considered the most marginalised groups in state and media discourses. In state propaganda, the idealised manhood of migrant workers is defined in terms of productive, willing, hard-working, self-reliant bodies contributing to urban development (Qian and Guo 2018). Depicting migrant workers as a marginal but self-reliant group politically contrasts the state’s “generosity” in its limited welfare provision for migrant workers while obfuscating the fact that the state is itself the producer of institutional marginality. These presentations of



(male) migrant workers legitimate the highly exploitative “migrant labour regime” in China, which maximises their labour utility (Qian and Guo 2018).

## **7.4 Performing moral manhood: the negotiation of religiosity and marginality**

### **7.4.1 Leaving the villages in search of masculinity**

In approximately the past three decades, China has witnessed a noticeable revival of all forms of religion and has especially witnessed “Christianity fever”. According to the Global Christianity report released by the Pew Research Center, there were at least 58 million Protestants in China in 2010, representing an almost tenfold increase over a period of 30 years. Unlike early Christianity, which was mainly an urban evangelising movement in the West, China’s Christian revival fundamentally took root in rural areas. According to the officially recognised data, most Christians are concentrated in rural areas (Huang 2014). However, this scenario has begun to change as tens of millions of rural Christians have thronged into cities in search of better incomes and livelihoods. I suggest that this broad social change has had strong impacts on the masculinity and subjectivity formation of rural Christian men.

Accordingly, rural churches have undergone a drastic loss of young members because the majority of rural “surplus labourers” have become seasoned rural-urban migrants, leaving only the children and the elderly (particularly elderly women) in the churches. However, some devout rural Christian men have faced a dilemma regarding whether they should stay in the village and continue serving their church or go to the city like most of their peers. Jinjie, a 35-year-old Christian man from rural Jiangxi Province, was one of the church leaders in his village. He explained the difficult situation he had faced:

Christianity was quite flourishing before, particularly in the late 1990s. There were dozens of churches around at the peak, but now only several are left. Now all the young people have gone out to *dagong* (doing employed jobs), especially for labour-exporting provinces like ours, so the church became very salient... Apart from preaching to the old people, I was also responsible for the preaching work in several other churches nearby. There must be some men looking after the church and especially the old people so that God will bless us.

Jinjie's narrative implies that the role of Christian men in local churches is indispensable, especially in the face of the decline of rural Christianity, which meant that fundamentally, only women and the elderly remained in the churches. In these circumstances, Jinjie believed that Christian men should take the primary responsibility (i.e., in terms of leading the churches and looking after the old), which conforms to the principle of men holding the headship of the churches in Christian teachings. Additionally, for Jinjie, Christian men's active performance of their headship of the church is crucial to attain God's blessing. It is not surprising that the church leadership in China, whether in a house church or an officially recognised church, is homogenously composed of men even though women constitute the majority of Christian adherents. Despite men's divine role as the heads of the church, according to Jinjie, only a few Christian men were willing to stay and lead the rural churches.

Nevertheless, being a Christian man is still a marginalised identity as Christians are essentially a minority whose values are sometimes incompatible with the popular religions, such as ancestral worship, that prevail as the mainstream in rural society. In

particular, the Christian kind of manhood that privileges religious devoutness is not understood by most non-Christian villagers, who define men's value primarily by their labouring capacity. This was particularly the case in the reform and opening-up period, in which leaving the villages to *dapin* (fight for one's own career) became the marker of "capable" masculinities. Jinjie told me how this hegemonic discourse labelled him as less masculine or even "abnormal" in the village and therefore pushed him to join the group of rural migrant workers:

If you always stayed in the village, *waibang ren* (foreigners, referring to non-Christians) would humiliate you and say, "These Christians, they can live without labouring". In their stereotypes, only old women or the most disadvantaged people would believe in God. They always looked at you with this judgement. Other villagers said, "You are young. Why do you always go to church?"... So I had to go out to *dagong*; I also need to feed my family.

Like Jinjie, many other Christian migrant workers that I interviewed described the always-irreconcilable tension between becoming a devout Christian man and, in the this-worldly sense, a "capable" man. In many circumstances, being Christian men in rural society was often at odds with the secular and hegemonic definition of "capable" men. As they said, rural Christian men were often conceived of as "honest men without capability" (*laoshi mei benshi*, 老实没本事). As Van der Veer (2012) argues, the anti-religious ideologies in China are part and parcel of the state's secularist project to produce a modern, national identity of Chinese people. Therefore, rural Christian men's masculinity, which relied on their commitment to and headship of local churches, has become increasingly unattainable under the hegemonic masculinity of "capable" men as

secular values such as material acquisition and successfulness have become an overriding consensus among rural men in the post-reform era.

#### **7.4.2 Negotiating hegemonic masculinity in the urban workplace**

When Christian men go to the cities like other rural migrant workers, they join one of the most marginalised social groups in contemporary China and experience the “double exploitation” of state regulatory power and highly unjust labour relations (Pun 2005). First, under China’s apartheid-like *hukou* system (household registration system), rural migrant workers are treated as inferior citizens and are deprived of the right to permanent settlement in the cities and access to most of the public welfare enjoyed by urban residents. Second, they are subject to exploitative and precarious labour regimes that maximise their productivity and simultaneously minimise labour costs and their consumption of welfare (Pun 2005).

This is particularly the case for migrant workers working in Shenzhen’s manufacturing sector for companies such as Foxconn, the world’s largest contract electronics manufacturer. Foxconn deploys a set of regulatory techniques, such as collective dormitories, compulsory overtime and strict surveillance, to produce productive, docile workers. As Foucault (1988: 18-19) argued, the technique of production relies on not only “the modification of individual conduct” but also “the technologies of the self” that shape “how an individual acts upon himself”. This is manifestly evident in Foxconn’s regulatory techniques, which are notoriously characterised by militarised and masculine management.

On the one hand, the hierarchical management and coercive control of workers at Foxconn have produced a hegemonic and militarised “culture” that legitimates unquestioning acceptance of the hierarchical power relations and simultaneously degrades the dignity of the lower working-class men. Foxconn’s grassroots management system is divided into different assembly lines supervised by 2 or 3 group leaders and deputy group leaders who are responsible for production assignments, and each assembly line is divided into 3 to 4 sub-lines with 20 or 30 workers and 3 sub-line leaders (who are responsible for surveillance and quality control) per sub-line. Under this hierarchical order, migrant workers’ practices are subject to strict discipline. For example, they need to obtain a supervisor’s permission to go to the toilet and constantly experience supervisors’ verbal abuse and even punishment if they violate the rules or make mistakes. This situation has given rise to an abusive and aggressive culture characterising the relations between rank-and-file managers and production workers. When rank-and-file managers feel pressure (e.g., because of an intensive production assignment) from above, they often channel this pressure and their negative emotions to assembly line workers at the expense of the workers’ dignity. This is reflected in the culture of *diaoren* (屌人), a form of verbal violence involving blaming and sneering at others using dirty language. The 27-year-old male worker Jincheng complained to me:

Sometimes when you are sleepy, especially on night shift, you would slow down a little bit. So, the products would heap up in front of you. The line leaders would immediately come to scold you for dragging down the speed... Before the beginning of the work every morning, the line leaders would give lectures to us about the production assignment and the rules. Basically, he was scolding us during this time... I felt I had no dignity.

However, this masculine and hierarchical management is often challenged by working-class men, who attempt to resist this hierarchical power relation by performing aggressive and rebellious masculinities. Many male workers use verbal violence to speak out against the abuse from the supervisors and therefore to defend their masculinity. However, the culture of *diaoren* prevails even among workers themselves. This is because the fear of being abused and punished has created mutual distrust among production workers; some workers pass the buck to others when they made mistakes. It is common for workers to quarrel with one another over who made the mistake and who should take responsibility. In Foxconn, there are two dominant forms of conflictual masculinities: the hierarchical and hegemonic masculinity among rank-and-file managers who use verbal violence and punishment to discipline workers and the protest masculinity (Connell 1995) among production workers who utilise rebellious and aggressive practices to defend their dignity and interests.

However, Christian male workers struggle not only with the marginalised and deprived masculinities inflicted by the exploitative labour regime but also with how to act in accordance with Christian moralities in the face of the culture of *diaoren*. Zhicheng is a 32-year-old Christian man who had worked at Foxconn for 7 years. He was promoted from an assembly line worker to a sub-line leader in 2017 because of his experiences and diligence. However, he resigned the position of sub-line leader shortly after his promotion because, as he claimed, he had to constantly struggle between God's laws and the laws of Foxconn. Despite his intention to keep the aggressive and abusive culture at a safe distance, he could not escape the discourses of normalised masculinity that defined how a male leader should act. In a Christian fellowship among Foxconn workers in one

Pentecostal church, Zhicheng shared with other Christian workers the difficulties he encountered shortly after his promotion:

Zhicheng: A girl (worker) said to me that she wanted to go to the toilet. We normally had a ten-minute break at 3 pm and now it was 2:45. So I politely responded, “It’s nearly 3 o’clock, you can take a break 15 minutes later”. The girl suddenly became extremely angry. It scared me, out of my expectation. I froze there, not knowing what I should say. Our line leader witnessed this scene.

Li (Christian male worker): The line leader scolded you?

Zhicheng: Yes, he said, “You shouldn’t let your workers deter you, you shouldn’t let her go to the toilet, it’s just 15 minutes”. I thought a while, said, “She is a girl, perhaps she was on her period and felt mood swings”. The line leader replied, “You shouldn’t act like that—consider the workers’ feelings. If you continue acting like this, being a *laohaoren* (one who tries to never offend anybody), you aren’t able to manage the workers”. I was thinking, if I acted coercively, it went against Bible’s teachings. The Bible teaches us to be benevolent and considerate of others. So, sometimes I had no ideas.

Long (Christian male worker): The Bible teaches us that God is not only merciful but also righteous. So, you should obey the rules first. But you can talk to her after work.

Zhicheng: I did. I tried to explain to her, but she gave me a very unpleasant face and said, “Stop! Don’t talk!” She disliked all managers.

Long (Christian male worker): In my opinion, you should stick to the principles, but you should try to let them know you are different. You can follow the principle in the workplace and simultaneously be a kind Christian in everyday life. Try to care for them with love, to understand them.

Ironically, for low-status managers, being aggressive and coercive was even viewed as a valuable asset that signalled the male supervisors' capacity to discipline recalcitrant and rebellious workers and contributed to a better chance of being promoted. The response of Zhicheng's line leader implies that the hierarchical masculinity was largely hegemonic as aggression and coercion were part of the normative personhood required by Foxconn's militarised management. In contrast, both Zhicheng and Long agreed that a Christian man should be considerate and caring of other workers' feelings and, in particular, those of the women workers. However, they also admitted that this sometimes conflicted with the principles of justice (that factory rules apply to each worker equally), though Long thought this conflict was not irreconcilable. Nevertheless, they both pursued an idealised Christian manhood characterised by moral righteousness that involved how they treated other people and spoke respectfully of supervisors and workmates in accordance with God's principles. The Christian workers' interpretation of manhood echoes what Mcsheffrey (1998) calls the "respectable masculinity" held by some low-status Christian men in British public service who sought to control their misbehaviour and to avoid offences to others in their exercise of power to maintain "godly conduct". However, what is defined as "morally right" in Christian language is not fixed but is individually interpreted by Christian men in particular contexts. Therefore, it is better understood as a



grounded *strategy* that Christian workers utilise to establish a form of respectable and civilised masculinity (Hopkins and Noble 2009).

Another Foxconn worker, Zhang, explained to me why working-class individuals tended to fight against each other and why obedience to Christian moral principles was important for a Christian man:

Zhang: There are many people at the bottom of our society. You must fight and compete for the limited resources. But it's more competitive among our underclass.

Quan: Why do you think so?

Zhang: How many people can enter the ruling class? Most of the people from the countryside are struggling at the bottom. Do you know that the bottom of society is a mire?

Quan: Yeah, I agree.

Zhang: You need to struggle, powerlessly. So there are two kinds of people at the bottom of society. First, some people who undergo cruel exploitation became crueller in response. If others bullied them, attacked them, they would accumulate the hate and impose it on those who are weaker than them. But for the second kind of people, if others bullied them, they could sympathise with those who had been bullied. They aren't willing to bully those who are weaker. They won't impose their pain on others.

Interviewer: So, you think you should be the second kind?

Zhang, Yes, but society also has this kind of people.

In this quotation, Zhang described himself as part of the underclass like other rural migrant workers at Foxconn and therefore showed great sympathy for those workers who were struggling to escape the “mire”. Despite this, he refused to follow the “jungle law” at Foxconn in which the weak served as prey for the strong because a Christian man should at least sympathise with others’ pain. Thus, male Christian workers sought to map out a distinguishing manhood in accordance with what is moral and immoral and therefore to discursively construct a socio-religious distinction within male workers themselves. Male Christian workers normally classified their non-Christian workmates as *waibangren* (foreigners) who were assumed to be less engaged with moral principles. Compared to non-Christian workers or supervisors, they often assumed a moral and spiritual high ground because of their obedience to Christian moral principles.

First, unlike some non-Christian workers who sought to defend their deprived masculinity through rebellious practices, male Christian workers instead placed considerable emphasis on tolerance and self-disciplined bodies in tandem with their reading of Christian ethics and doctrines. In particular, controlling emotional impulses is of great importance for Christian men. Compared to their non-Christian workmates, male Christian workers rarely quarrelled with their supervisors or workmates. The 39-year-old male worker Dong considered good manners to be a marker of a mature male Christian. As a retired soldier, he previously often quarrelled with others because he could not tolerate anything he thought was unjust. However, after he converted to Christianity, as

he remarked, his bad manners were much more controlled, and he rarely quarrelled with others. While talking about the prevalence of verbal violence at Foxconn, the young worker Liqiang commented, “We are different from other non-Christian workers. We Christians shouldn’t talk dirty; we need to guard our mouth and tongue”. In this sense, Christian men’s exertion of self-control, tolerance and proper manners is consistent with both *wu* masculinity, which requires self-discipline and self-control within a set of codes to achieve self-transformation, and *wen* masculinity, which emphasises proper manners in the pursuit of being civilised and respectful subjects.

In addition to their emphasis on self-control, male Christian workers actively construct their distinctive Christian manhood by performing a hardworking, helpful, and reliable image. For many male Christian workers, the factory life offers an opportunity to practise their commitment to God. In particular, the Christian teaching of “living like Christ” frequently came up in the interviews. Male Christian workers simply applied this teaching to their everyday lives and work and believed that being hardworking and helpful was consistent with a good Christian image. It was this distinctive way of living that distinguished them from non-Christian workers and enabled them to attain a meaningful and morally superior manhood:

Dong: I often tidied the dormitory for the rest of my (male) roommates. We Christians should have proper habits. It is also my responsibility to let *waibangren* see the image of Jesus Christ, to influence others, to let them know having Christian faith is a good thing. At least we could let them realise that Christians have a clear understanding of what is proper.

Fuqiang: If you don't believe in God, you only look at your current circumstances. For example, if your supervisor or boss isn't on surveillance, you will be less dedicated to your work. But we Christians always work silently and wholeheartedly regardless of whether supervisors are on surveillance. We won't loaf on the job like other workers often do when supervisors are away.

In this sense, Christian workers sought to create an elevated subject position by constructing a morally superior and distinctive manhood to fend off and negotiate with the aggressive masculinity among both rank-and-file managers and production workers. Nevertheless, they rarely challenged the suppressive labour regime. Moreover, Christian workers' emphasis on tolerant, civilised and self-disciplined male bodies even legitimated the hierarchical power relations in the factory setting as it reinforced the discourses of productive, docile and non-rebellious bodies. It is noteworthy that the workers also exhibited a clear consciousness of their class position. For example, many workers referred to themselves as the underclass. However, this form of class subjectivity appears to be concerned only with their moral relationship with other non-Christian working class people and is therefore non-radical and uncritical of the broader material inequalities they experience.

### **7.5 Christian morality and gender/familial relationships**

While moving away from the working spheres that define masculinity through hierarchical power relations, gender/familial relationships are also crucial in understanding the formation of Christian migrant workers' masculinity. Christian migrant worker men can be divided into two groups according to whether they are single or have a lover/spouse. The former struggled to reconcile Chinese traditional values (e.g., filial

piety) and familial obligations with Christian moral subjectivity in their negotiation of singleness, while the latter sought to construct an alternative patriarchal (or soft patriarchal) masculinity based on male headship in relation to women.

### **7.5.1 Religiosity, singleness and the imagination of godly marriage**

In the Chinese context, being single carries largely negative connotations as getting married at a “suitable” age is viewed as a hegemonic cultural norm in Chinese society (Lin 2017; Kong 2010). Single men experience “double marginalisation” inflicted by both heteronormative social stigma and traditional familial values in Chinese society (Kong 2010). This is particularly the case in rural society, where lineage and familial ethics are deeply rooted. In traditional Chinese cultural values, men’s masculinities are highly associated with their capacity to fulfil familial values and obligations. “Capable” masculinities are manifested in not only men’s role as the “breadwinner” but also their performance of passing the family name to the next generation (Lin 2013). Single men are therefore often stigmatised as less “capable” for failing to perform their expected gender role.

However, the Christian way of being single and the Christian interpretation of marriage are often at odds with Chinese traditional familial values and obligations that necessitate marriage as a compulsory part of filial piety and family-based masculinity. Instead, many Christian single men emphasise that marriage is holy, a gift from God, and central to the community of faith and that it cannot be reduced to the utility of continuing the family line (传宗接代). Male Christian migrant workers are often more cautious than non-Christians in seeking a potential spouse as a set of Christian values shapes their image of a “suitable” lover/spouse. Christian men therefore have, as our interviewees claimed,

different definitions of and higher requirements for “suitable” lovers/spouses than *waibangren* (non-Christians). I suggest that migrant workers’ divine imagination of marriage somehow justifies their status of being single and creates a discursive power to pursue self-directed choices of “godly partners” unhindered by traditional Chinese familial norms and secular values.

Lidong is a 32-year-old single man from rural Henan Province who had worked at Foxconn for 8 years. He noted that most of the young men his age in his village were married, and his parents often pushed him to find a spouse. It is unsurprising that his parents pressured him as men in their 30s are often seen as disadvantaged under the heteronormative cultural norms in China (Lin 2017). In 2015, his parents arranged a *xiangqin* (blind date) for him and asked him to return to the village to meet the woman they had chosen. However, Lidong was reluctant to attend the *xiangqin* because, as he claimed, he did not want to find a *waibangren* as his partner. He ultimately did not attend the *xiangqin* his parents arranged, making an excuse that his mobile phone was out of order. Lidong’s resistance was considered highly offensive to his parents because he failed to exhibit filial piety towards his parents: “My father hated me because of this. He said I didn’t listen to him and made him really lose face. My father said the villagers would gossip about us and considered us to be arrogant people”.

Like Lidong, many other Christian men insisted that they could not accept a *waibangren* as a wife. This was not simply because of the requirements of biblical doctrines but also because they saw *waibangren* as less self-constrained and less reliable than Christians. For example, the 27-year-old worker Ma, a member of one Pentecostal house church, believed that non-Christian women often viewed men superficially, defining the quality

of a man through his material success more than his inner self-cultivation. Before converting to Christianity, he had pursued a non-Christian woman. However, the woman ultimately did not accept him because, as he believed, the woman was not satisfied with his economic circumstances. Moreover, the emphasis on sexual purity in Christian morality shapes Christian men's image of a "proper" woman. Many Christian men believe that Christian women are more loyal in marriage than non-Christian women because of their adherence to premarital chastity and their common Christian faith. According to my ethnographic work, some Pentecostal house churches in which rural migrants were concentrated put more emphasis on the imaginary boundary between Christians and *waibangren* in comparison to the officially admitted churches because their legally ambiguous or illegal status required them to be more self-enclosed and vigilant in terms of the entry of non-Christian members, who were believed to be less trustworthy. In contrast, official churches were more open to non-Christian members because of their legal status. This difference may potentially influence Christian men's imagination of and interaction with non-Christian women.

Many Christian men thought that the ideal lover/spouse must be God's arrangement and gift and that only a "blessed" relationship could be a perfect match. However, the Bible does not specifically address what constitutes the right spouse. In one male fellowship of Foxconn workers, they discussed how they would know when they had found the right spouse. Several single Christian men suggested that they were often careful or hesitant to enter an intimate relationship because they could not confirm whether she was part of God's arrangement. For example, Yu was a 35-year-old male Christian worker who had remained single, although he had dated several potential lovers. Yu emphasised that

finding a suitable spouse was not dependent on individual desire but rather on both *yuanfen* (destiny) and God's will:

You need to look at *yuanfen*. You can't know when God will arrange a partner for you, so what you need to do is to seek God's will carefully, pray more, and make your spiritual life more mature. When *yuanfen* comes, you will eventually meet the right lover.

What Yu refers to as "*yuanfen*" was originally a Buddhist word referring to the destiny or fate that brings people together, but it has become a popular word to describe the supernatural forces determining gender relationships. When used in the Christian sense, "*yuanfen*" implies that a marriage is predetermined by God and that individual agency is less relevant. For Yu, being single was even considered a test of his faith by God. The process of waiting not only was a motive to undergo purification but also helped him develop maturity. This is reminiscent of Mahmood's (2001) study of single Islamic women who utilise the discourse of "blessed marriage" to justify their self-directed autonomously chosen goals. For single Christian men in this study, Christian moralities appear to offer them an autonomy beyond the family-based masculinity defined by the Chinese traditional cultural norms of familial obligation and filial piety, but also enhance their capacity to endure and persist in the face of marginal singleness.

### **7.5.2 Male headship and gender relationships**

It is common for young male Christian workers to find a spouse/girlfriend at church. Many churches that migrant workers attend not only encourage marriage between believers but also serve as "marriage agents" for young Christian workers. For example,



in one house church next to Foxconn, the church leaders organised a series of single fellowships or outdoor activities to help young Christian workers meet each other. Some Pentecostal house churches emphasise the sharing of testimonies and emotional experiences of Christian couples, while some officially recognised churches tend to organise sermons or fellowships to teach Christian couples to build a strong marriage in line with their common faith and biblical values. Zhiqi, a 35-year-old worker and father of a 5-year-old child, met his wife at one fellowship. As Zhiqi recalls, though he first indicated interest in his future wife, other church members helped him to elicit a response. Once relationships are made public, the churches arrange a fellowship on love/marriage, which offers guidance on marriage and family relationships.

For many male workers, Christian values therefore play a crucial role in shaping their understanding of ideal manhood or the role of husbands in relation to their wives. Of particular importance is migrant workers' interpretation of the view of "men as the head" in Christian doctrines. In my interviews, some Bible verses were frequently quoted and interpreted by Christian male workers to describe men's headship, such as "Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord" and "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior" (Ephesians 5:22-23). Some feminist scholars interpret the notion of male headship as a form of patriarchy that maintains a symbolic structure of male dominance and justifies female subordination as the "order of creation" mandated by God (Ruether 2001). However, in this case, male migrant workers' understandings of male headship are not simply an affirmation of traditional views within the patriarchal discourse of Christianity. I suggest that Christian migrant men's efforts to maintain and balance the husband's symbolic headship with pragmatic egalitarianism in everyday life imply a transformation from a secular

patriarchal masculinity to a morally legitimated “Godly manhood”. The Christian men workers consciously distinguish themselves from secular masculinity and men’s domination through a soft patriarchy that emphasises responsibility, self-reflection, mutual submission, love and emotional intimacy with their wives. These ideas of men’s headship challenge as well as justify and reinforce a hegemonic and patriarchal masculinity.

The view of male headship is particularly appealing to migrant workers seeking to construct a strong moral and spiritual manhood. The male Christian workers commonly expressed the belief that men had been given a divine role and received higher power than women. However, they did not simply equate men’s higher power with men’s dominance. An example of this can be found in Zhiquan’s ethical-theological account of the relationship between male headship and gender equality:

Zhiquan: In a worldly sense, men and women’s status in the family is often dependent on their capability, particularly how much money they can win. But it’s different for Christian couples. Because we have a common faith, we are equal regardless of how much money each one earns... However, the man is the headship of the family. Men have been given the role as the head by God.

Quan: How do you think of the relationship between gender equality and men’s role as the head?

Zhiquan: I think they are consistent. They are established on a common faith, so the ultimate goals of the husband and wife are consistent. Men’s headship emphasises that

men should take more responsibilities than women. If you look at Genesis in the Bible, God asked Adam to take a lot of responsibilities. For example, God asked Adam to name all the animals and manage the Garden of Eden. Given that Adam couldn't manage these affairs alone, God took one of Adam's rib to create Eve to assist him. God arranged Eve to assist Adam in performing his divine role. So, the wife should assist her husband and help him better perform his role.

Zhiquan's statement suggested that God designed men differently from women because Adam was created first and God then created Eve to assist him. He considered this order of creation an indication and symbol of men's headship. For Zhiquan, it was a divine arrangement that women must assist men and bolster men's masculinity for the better performance of men's headship and responsibility. Zhiquan's narrative resonates with Heath's (2003:436) argument that by justifying wives' role in helping "men to be men", Christian understandings of gender "promote a hegemonic masculinity that allows men to be involved husbands and fathers while maintaining their privilege as men". However, Zhiquan did not simply equate this symbolic headship with men's domination. In Gallagher and Smith's (1999) study of the evangelical ideas of men's headship, Christian men constantly balanced and negotiated between symbolic male headship and pragmatic egalitarianism to maintain a Godly distinctive masculinity. Likewise, Zhiquan underscored that male headship and gender equality are consistent in Christian teachings. First, he emphasised that gender equality is inherent to the spouses' common faith in God. Moreover, for Zhiquan, the Christian gender relationship seemed morally superior to secular definitions because of the irrelevance of a couple's capability or economic status. Second, Zhiquan did not question the view of male headship but related it to the moral

requirement to take more responsibility than women. In other words, taking the primary responsibility is related to the divine role of men's headship.

Although some migrant workers did not deny the "actually existing" inequality in their gender relations, they insisted that Christian morality enabled them to be more self-reflective on their misbehaviours. For example, the 40-year-old Christian worker Fuqiang frankly admitted that he sometimes behaved dictatorially to his wife, particularly in relation to the issue of decision-making in marriage. However, he was self-conscious of this and had made efforts to correct his behaviours in line with Christian teachings:

Sometimes I have masculinist (*da nanzi zhuyi*) behaviours at home. If my wife wouldn't listen to me, I would get angry sometimes. But I knew it was a bad habit and needed to be changed. It's perhaps influenced by my father. My father is typically a masculinist, and I would inevitably follow his qualities a little bit. After I converted to Christianity, I knew that the wife shouldn't be subordinated to the husband. You need to love your wife.

This quotation demonstrates that Christian discourses enable migrant workers to shift from hegemonic patriarchy to self-reflective, soft patriarchy. However, this form of soft patriarchy is not necessarily less hegemonic as it justifies the wife's submission to the husband through religious ideologies. For example, the worker Lidong insisted that male headship and, in particular, the wife's submission to the husband is practically justified in building a harmonious marriage:

The Bible says submitting is blessed. My experiences tell me that it's reasonable. When I'm wrong and my wife still submits to me, I will know that my wife has sacrificed for me. So I will reflect upon myself and realise why I'm wrong. Instead, if my wife is against me overtly, it will make the situation worse and bring conflicts.

Somewhat different from Fuqiang and Lidong's interpretations of men's headship as self-reflection, a few Christian workers, particularly the Pentecostal men who prioritised the "holy spirit" as a source of authority, emphasised "mutual submission" as a reconciliation of men's headship and equal partnership in Christian teachings. For example, the 41-year-old male worker Liu believed that husbands and wives are united into one flesh and thereby should submit to one another under the guidance of the "holy spirit": "Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies because they are one flesh... If any conflicts occur, no matter who compromises first, the holy spirit will remind you of this [one flesh]".

Most informants agreed that loving their wives was an important manifestation of men's headship. They appeared to embrace the stereotype that men were commonly less able than women to discuss emotions, but Christian wisdom could enable them to be emotionally sensitive and enhance their intimacy to wives, which distinguished them from "worldly" men. One of the Bible verses they frequently mentioned was "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen" (Ephesians 4: 29). Thus, many male workers viewed speaking with good words as a pearl of Christian wisdom and an indication of expressive masculinity that enabled them to be more

sensitive to women's subjectivity. For example, one married worker suggested the following:

Men and women are different. This is God's law... So, [Christian] men should consider women's feelings. The Bible teaches us to communicate with love. Women usually love hearing a nice word. If you praise her every day, how pretty her dress is, she'll be happy. A man can judge how much his wife loves him (without hearing nice words), but a woman can't. Women need to feel through what you have said.

Above all, Christian migrant worker men sought to construct a morally distinctive and soft patriarchal masculinity that was different from the patriarchy and male domination in the secular sense. However, this type of soft patriarchy maintains its hegemony as superior to secular patriarchal masculinity because its emphases on responsibility, self-reflection, love and expressiveness do not challenge the dichotomous understanding of the gender order and difference that maintain men's privilege.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented Christian migrant workers' narratives and performance of masculinities in Shenzhen in the context of neoliberal economic transformation. This chapter fills an important gap in existing geographical scholarship regarding how Christian masculinities are lived and performed in everyday life by working-class individuals. I have examined how migrant worker men employ Christian discourse and ethics to construct and perform morally meaningful manhood in their negotiation of social change, exploitative labour regimes, and gender/familial relationships. Being a Christian migrant worker is not only about living a moral and godly life but also about how

Christian men reposition themselves in relation to class and hierarchical power structures as well as gender relations. By deploying an intersectional, relational, and situated approach to masculinity, this study makes two contributions to the geographies of masculinity and religion.

First, this chapter brings the geographies of Christianity literature into dialogue with the study of masculinities. On the one hand, Christianity provides migrant workers with ethical impulses and theological discourses to negotiate the hegemonic masculine subject institutionalised by the suppressive and hierarchical factory labour regime. Intuitively, migrant workers' emphasis on moral manhood appears to reinforce the state's/capitalism's discourse on hard work and compliance with rules as virtues and manifestations of valued and encouraged qualities. Christian morality also enables migrant worker men to construct a godly manhood in gender/familial relationships, but this godly manhood is itself hegemonic. This research also highlights that migrant workers' constitution of moral manhood cannot be separated from the hierarchical power relations and particularly the politics of migrant labour under the capitalist restructuring of the Chinese economy. To further the argument that masculinity is also a site where marginalisation takes place (McDowell 2003; Nayak 2006), I suggest that it is the structural and intersectional power relations rather than religious morality itself that lead to the marginalisation of Christian working-class men.

This chapter therefore raises concerns about how moral masculinity can open up the possibility of empowerment and agency for marginalised men beyond the resistance practices claimed by "protest masculinity". Unlike non-Christian workers, who construct their "protest masculinity" through rebellious practices, Christian migrant workers'

performance of moral manhood is apparently non-confrontational. As Mahmood's (2005) ethical reflection on Muslim piety suggests, agency and empowerment may not rely solely on the production of counter-subjectivity; subject formation is a process of autopoiesis or self-styling, involving multiple negotiations with dominant values or norms. In this sense, moral masculinity in this study cannot be understood simply as hand-in-glove with the politics of subject formation of the state/capitalist project; it also opens a possible space for agency in which migrant workers can claim a meaningful way of being a man and thus psychologically empower themselves (Cloke *et al.* 2019; Gao, Qian and Yuan 2018; Gao and Qian 2019). Echoing Hopkins' (2006) study of Muslim youth masculinity, I suggest that religion and morality create a relational space in which men reposition their marginal experiences and reimagine the ways they are seen by others. In this sense, moral masculinities are better understood as a technique of self-refashioning into morally distinctive subjects in "doing" gender.

Second, this research responds to recent calls for a global comparative study of masculinities. In particular, this study responds to Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) emphasis on the relationship between globalisation and masculinity and especially how multiple patterns of masculinities are performed and configured in locally situated contexts. In this research, Christian masculinity, Chinese masculinity, and working-class masculinity are never globally homogenous, nor do they mechanically combine to form a new masculine subject. In this sense, migrant workers' moral manhood is better conceived of as an embodied strategy and a way of being in response to the dominant social, cultural and political imaginaries in China, understood through discursive practices and individuals' quests for ethical and meaningful subjectivity.



## Chapter 8

# Rethinking postsecular feminism: intersectionality and the religious agency of women migrant workers

### 8.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the constitution of women Christian migrant workers' religious subjectivity and agency. In particular, I draw on recent debates about post-secular feminism regarding to the extent to which women's subjectivity and agency can be conveyed through and supported by religious ethics and piety and how women's agency can be rethought beyond the limitations of Eurocentric and secular humanist theorising (Mahmood 2005; Braidotti 2008; Vasilaki 2016; Cloke *et al.* 2019). As I have proposed in chapter 2, an intersectional approach may open up new orientations to the comprehension and grounding of both multiple power relations and postsecular subjectivity and agency. In this chapter, therefore, I examine this inquiry empirically by looking at women migrant workers' intersectional experiences of religion, gender, migration, and familial relations.

Since the reform-and-opening-up policy was introduced in 1978, Chinese rural migrant women have been placed at the forefront of the encounter with global capitalism and the international division of labour (Pun 2005). This transformation has not only produced a more flexible and intensive sexual and class exploitation of migrant women but also opened up the possibility for the formation of new forms of female subjectivity (Zhang 2014). Existing discourses in scholarship tend to link Chinese rural migrant women's

subjectivity to the power of state-socialism, global capitalism and familial patriarchy, which collectively produce institutionalised domination over rural women migrants (Pun 2005; Ong 2007; Gaetano 2008; Jacka 2013). This line of thought normally situates migrant women's subjectivity in a domination-resistance dichotomy, implying that women's agency solely or primarily relies on oppositional practices and the production of counter-subjectivities. For example, Pun (2005) describes rural migrant women "as a specifically Chinese subaltern, [which] embodies the dual process of domination and resistance and is marked by various forms of collaboration, transgression, and defiance that together come to make up its complex, dissident, and heterogeneous subjects". On the one hand, following the ideas of postsecular feminism, I therefore reflect upon this normative-secularist understanding of women's subjectivity that situates women's agency within the domination-resistance dichotomy. On the other hand, however, rather than mapping out new forms of religious agency, I argue that postsecular feminist critique needs to carefully consider the pattern of intersectionality in which both the "matrix of domination" (Collins 2000) and postsecular subjectivity and agency are engendered and interweave.

In the empirical sections, I propose to understand Christian migrant women's subjectivity within the intersectional "matrix of domination" woven by the state's hegemonic discourses and ideologies, urban-rural dualism, the legacies of traditional familial and patriarchal culture, the gendered disciplinary labour regime, and the patriarchal institution of Christianity, which work hand-in-hand to produce the subaltern femininity of migrant women. I suggest that Christian migrant women indeed experience multiple marginalisation in rural society under the overwhelming patriarchal lineage of culture and within the patriarchal Christian institution *per se*. In the urban workplace, as I have

discussed in Chapter 7, the hierarchical management and coercive control of migrant workers operates through a hegemonic “culture” of masculinity that encourages aggressive practices and verbal abuse. Here, I further analyse how this disciplining of workers’ subjectivity is linked to the production of sexed bodies and feminine identity. In this sense, as discussed in Chapter 2, intersectionality therefore serves as the “object-targets” for social power and constitutes a “matrix of domination” that cannot be challenged by simply subverting a singular oppression force. On the other hand, this chapter also focuses on the extent to which new religious subjectivity and agency are made possible within this intersectional power structure. I therefore examine the intersection of gender and familial experiences in which Christian piety might open up the possibility for reworking the way the power of denomination operates. I observe that the women migrants’ emphasis on the authority of feeling, emotion, and experience in some Pentecostal-style churches not only offers them a “comfort zone” to negotiate with labour alienation but also redefines the institutional religious spheres where men have traditionally been dominant. Women migrants’ agency is also manifest in their efforts to Christianise family relations through marriage and evangelisation so as to redefine the power dynamics within the family. However, these kinds of agency are not achieved through confrontational practices but rather through performing docile, hardworking, tolerant Christian femininities, and particularly pious ways of life. Overall, while acknowledging the postsecular feminist account of religious agency that emphasises the embodiment of ethical norms and self-realisation beyond counter-subjectivities (Mahmood 2005; Braidotti 2008; Vasilaki 2016), I argue that postsecular feminism needs to be attentive to the intersectional power in which new religious agency and subjectivities are enabled or thwarted. In this sense, the critical theory of postsecular feminism should pay heed to the intersectional power and multiple social inequalities that

condition whether or not and the extent to which new religious subjectivities can have counter-hegemonic effects.

## **8.2 Women migrant subjectivities and post-secular feminism**

The last two decades have witnessed the burgeoning of feminist studies of migration, with focuses on not only women's specific migration pattern, experiences, and subjectivities but also how gender interacts with the wider spatial politics of difference, mobility and labour in an era of globalisation (Dwyer 2000; Willis and Yeoh 2002; Silvey 2004; Gaetano and Yeoh 2010; Silvey 2013). This line of scholarship has shifted from studying women migrants as a distinct research category to studying the gendered being of migration, and in particular how gender as a system of practices or ideology permeates every aspect of the migration experiences and power relations. Instead of viewing gender and gender relations as a dichotomous variable that shapes the mobility and pattern of migration, critical feminist migration researchers argue that gender is better understood as a constitutive element of migration, given that "the structures that precipitate migration flows and shape the economic experiences of all migrants are [themselves] gendered" (Nawyn 2010: 142).

Central to feminist migration studies is inquiry into women migrants' subjectivity and identity politics. Migration involves the displacement and mobility of subjects through space and place, which requires feminist scholars to attend to the tensions around identity, belonging and grounded embodied practices. Gender identities and subjectivities are crucial to an understanding the social networks of migrants' lives, the emotional boundaries of the migrant community, and issues of exploitation and inequality under the global labour regime (Silvey 2004). However, as Silvey (2004) suggests, feminist

concerns with migrants' subjectivities is distinct from the approach to identity that emphasises the political implications of cultural differences. Attention to subjectivity is more sensitive to migrants' views of who they are, delving into how the performative production of gender is implicated in larger social institutions and structures (Silvey 2004: 9).

Drawing upon Connell's (1987, 2007) gender relations theory, one strand of research has highlighted the way migration can maintain, challenge, or reconstitute the fixed basis of gender power relations, and in particular patriarchy. Early research engaged in a critique of patriarchy, seen as a sociocultural structure that privileges the masculine over the feminine (Halfacree 1995). Gender inequality is evidenced in the new international division of labour that shapes gendered patterns of migration. For example, the growing "third world" rural-to-urban migration was prompted by increases in light manufacturing activity driven by foreign direct investment. Some studies have explored whether or not migration can reconstruct women's subjectivity and therefore alter patriarchy, as women migrants might gain empowerment and agency through participation in the labour force in host places (Boyd and Grieco 2003). For example, Lee (1998) studied the Chinese "*dagongmei*" (young female rural migrant workers) and demonstrated that migration experiences such as working on a production line reconstituted their sense of self and provided them with a relatively independent, romantic lifestyle and adulthood in contrast to the dominant familial patriarchy of Chinese rural society, despite their bodies being highly disciplined and inscribed within the factory labour regime. Similarly, Pun (2005: 56) argues that Chinese female migrant workers were not passive objects of the patriarchal family, as they were "either kept detached or had attempted to subvert the familial grip of power". Nevertheless, there are more complicated relationships of

dominance and subversion which require feminist scholars to focus on cultural conditioning and the possibilities that enable women migrants to negotiate with patriarchal power structures.

In this sense, the regulatory power of the state and global capitalism is better understood to operate in tandem with the patriarchal culture of labour, which together discipline and produce the offshoring and feminisation of labouring subjects (Silvey 2013). It is generally acknowledged that femininity is articulated, imagined, and engineered in the disciplinary practices of the global migrant labour regime, since it is always linked to the making of good workers characterised by docile, tolerant, and hardworking bodies (Pun 2005; Ong 2010). For example, given its interest in reinforcing the export of labour, the Philipino state depicted and hailed domestic maid workers as “new national heroes”, contributing to the discourse of the ideal worker as self-sacrificial, individualised, and hard-working (Rodrigues 2002; Pratt 2012). In particular, the ideology of motherhood that encourages women migrant workers to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children and nation was manipulated so as to refashion women migrants’ subjectivities in congruence with the state/capitalist project. Similarly, Pun (1999; 2005) provides an intriguing narrative of how the gendered quality of being submissive was linked to the making of qualified migrant workers, where being obedient, industrious, and tender is internalised as an indication of modern and civilised women workers as well as the constitution of new selves, in contrast to rural and “backward” femininities. Therefore, this process of self-subjectivisation actually legitimates and extends new forms of domination and patriarchal hierarchy. Overall, women migrants’ subjectivities are increasingly circulated in gendered forms of governmentality and biopolitics (Silvey 2004).

Yet, despite the acknowledgement of gender subjectivities in the literature described above, and as I have suggested in chapter 2, women migrant workers may not share common and coherent gendered experiences, and are subject to different systems of oppression and inequality that cannot be simply captured in terms of singular hierarchal power. Therefore, in this chapter I focus on how intersectional lived experiences and multiple power relations among women migrant workers affect and are affected by each other. Although intersectional approaches have been introduced in migration studies (Anthias 2012; Sinatti 2012) , relatively little research has focused on the way religion and religious ethics are intertwined with migrants' performative practices of femininity. Migrants' religious lives not only allow them to imagine alternative subjectivities beyond those normalised by material and discursive power relations, but also provide support and a sense of community that enables them to materially and emotionally settle in new socioeconomic environments (Silvey 2013; Gao et. al 2018). Therefore, attention to religious practices can enable a more nuanced understanding of women migrants' gender subjectivities as malleable, becoming, and culturally conditioned. So, on the one hand, religion might possibly open up new spaces for the restoration of spiritual and religious sources of agency for women migrants, and thus reconstruct their subaltern subjectivities.

In particular, the emerging scholarship of postsecular feminism has prioritised religious ethics as an important impetus that brings forth an alternative notion of the feminine self and feminist consciousness beyond the femininity defined by the ethos of secularism (Mahmood 2005; Braidotti 2008; Vasilaki 2016). Nilsson and Tesfahuney (2019: 2) note that religion has not been seriously taken into account in the analysis of women's subjectivities and agency, since "the traditional and the religious have been equated with female oppression, patriarchy and hierarchy". Therefore, the postsecular turn in feminism

calls for a critical rethinking of religion, gender and the secular, beyond secularist accounts of religion as a space that thwarts women's agency, as well as the assumption of women's agency in terms of emancipatory and resisting subjects (Mahmood 2005; Braidotti 2008; Vasilaki 2016). In this regard, the feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti (2016) proposes a 'non-oppositional' understanding of woman's agency which contests the normative liberal-feminist assumption that agency primarily manifests in practices of resisting or subverting social norms. In other words, women's agency can also be achieved through strategically reconstituting their subjectivities by drawing on existing cultural resources rather than socially, ethically, or political opposing hegemonic norms. Nevertheless, research on gender and religion should abandon a zero-sum stance with a simple dichotomy between domination and resistance which omits the complex and ambiguous relationship between gender and religion.

However, the 'postsecular turn' that moves towards an affective and ethical engagement with religion might also risk adopting an apolitical account of religion *per se*, overlooking religion as ideologies that sustain women's natural status (Vasilaki 2015). For instance, in Ammerman's (1987: 146) study of a North American conservative Christian community, "most women learn to influence family decision making while still deferring to their husbands' authority, and that both they and their husbands find ways to live with the tension between Fundamentalist norms for family structure and modern norms of individuality and equality". Yet, as I argue in chapter 2, instead of discerning the 'progressive' and 'dark' sides of religion, women's religious subjectivity and agency need to be examined in relation to their intersectional experiences. This chapter therefore presents such an attempt by examining how lived and intersectional experiences



influence woman migrants' construction of gender subjectivity and what forms of religious agency are engendered in this process.

### **8.3 From peasant women to migrant workers: Christian femininity in the intersectional “matrix of domination”**

#### **8.3.1 The multiple marginalisation of Christian women in rural society**

In this section, I argue that Chinese rural women's subjectivities cannot be separated from the intersectional “matrix of domination”, including the state's hegemonic discourses, the legacies of both traditional familial and patriarchal culture and Mao's ideologies, and the emerging mechanisms of market forces in the post-Mao era. In imperial Chinese society, the cultural legitimacy of the state and the political system were based on ideal Confucianism moral codes that emphasised the proper order and hierarchy of the family and “the moral training of obedient, filial subjects” (Johnson 2009: 2). Women's submission to men was normalised as one of the “three cardinal guides” (*sangang*, 三纲) including “ruler guides subject”, “father guides son”, and “husband guides wife”. This moral order was further entrenched in the ideal production model characterised as “men tilling the land while women weave at home” (*nangeng nvzhi*, 男耕女织) in Chinese rural society. During the Republican period in China (1912-1949 on the Mainland) and in particular the Chinese Enlightenment Movement from 1919 onwards, the imperatives of altering and even subverting the traditional family system to transform China into a modern nation-state had become a consensual aim among both liberal democrats and communist reformers. When the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949, they claimed that the socialist revolution had released rural women from ‘feudal’ oppression

within both the Confucian familial hierarchy and society as a whole. During the communist era from the 1950s to 1970s, peasant women were actually endowed with a relatively high social status in the ideologies of the party-state, as peasants were viewed to stand in alignment with the urban working class at the vanguard of the socialist revolution. In particular, peasant women were even hailed as “holding up half the sky”, which epitomised a Marxist representation of feminism and the efforts to mobilise women into socialist construction (Fan 2003; Jacka 2013). Yet, the Maoist state scarcely challenged patriarchy because, as Honing (2000) notes, Maoist gender ideologies focused on the sameness between men and women rather than women’s social expectations and circumstances *per se*.

Since the launch of reform and opening-up in the late 1970s, China’s rural areas have undergone drastic social and economic changes as the state adopted a set of pragmatic policies such as marketisation and decollectivisation to release individuals’ productive agency. Chief among these policies that profoundly impacted on rural societies was in the introduction of the household responsibility system (HRS), which indicated the collapse of communal production. However, despite the fact that the post-Mao reform policies substantially improved agricultural productivity and peasants’ quality of life, they have indeed reinforced rather than diminished patriarchy and gender inequality (Xu 2000; Fan 2003). Firstly, gender ideology in the post-Mao state appeared to retreat from a symbolic gender-equality agenda to instead focus on economic growth. Now, peasants, and particularly peasant women, were depicted as “backward” and low *suzhi* (quality), and were viewed as a barrier to China’s project of modernisation (Jacka 2013). Secondly, the release of households from communes facilitated by the HRS also signified the restoration of deep-rooted patriarchal power dynamics in the peasant household. As Fan

(2003: 289) suggests, “rather than being part of a commune, the wife is now likely to be subordinate to the husband as he takes on the role of the household head when negotiating with village authorities”. Overall, the post-Mao reform did not undermine any of the forms of domination of women in history, but rather reformulated them in a new mixture.

Fang, for example, was a 34-year-old Christian rural migrant woman whom I met at a house church in Shenzhen. Fang told me the story of her lived experiences and family in the countryside. She grew up in a village in one of the provinces in North China where, as she complained, the value of “privileging men over women” (*zhongnan qingnv*, 重男轻女) was prevalent. As she recalled, her family had not allowed her to go to primary school until she was 9 years old, because she had to take care of her younger brothers until they were able to walk. In spite of her good academic performance at school, Fang was forced to drop out of education at the age of 13 because her family had to find money for the education of her two younger brothers:

My father said: “You have two younger brothers who need to attend school. Just come back, it is useless for a girl to have too much education”. But I really want to go to school. After I came back home, I worked hard at farm work. I worked hard to cut the wheat in order to please my father, make him change his mind.

This phenomenon is common among the woman migrant workers I interviewed, who stopped pursuing an education during the ages from 13 to 18. Regardless of whether they willingly quit school or were forced to by their family, this responded to the traditional patriarchal ideology that discourages investment in girls and thwarts women’s achievement of personal goals. Like many other young women who became “surplus

labour” in the countryside, Fang left the village to pursue work as a migrant at the age of 16. Although Fang became a worker in the city, she dutifully sent her earnings to her rural family until she married, in order to support her two younger brothers’ education. Fang was apparently subject to a gendered expectation of being a “filial daughter” who is more tolerant and thus should make sacrifices for the family (Bauer, Wang, Riley and Zhao 1992). In the patrilineal marriage tradition, daughters are expected to eventually become the daughter-in-law of another family. Thus, it is normally a filial duty for young migrant women to offer financial support to their family to repay their parents’ expenses in raising them. Aged 23, Fang married a man in her town who was introduced to her by her parents (to an extent, in an arranged marriage). Fang told me: “Usually, I have to listen to my parents, including the arrangement of marriage. I was young at that time. I’d considered resisting but they wouldn’t allow it, I guessed.” Most of our married participants had returned to their villages for marriage or married other rural migrants, while only a few (2 out of 20) had married urban residents. Nevertheless, marriage only legitimates the transfer of a rural woman’s labour to her husband’s household.

Since the mid-1980s, social and economic reform has been accompanied by the nationwide religious revival, and particularly the “Christian fever” in rural society. One noticeable aspect of the rural Christian revival is the fact that the majority of rural Christians are women (Fiedler, 2010). Women’s conversion to Christianity can largely be attributed to the insecurities and hardships of rural life and especially women’s subordinate status, which compel them to seek refuge in God (Fiedler 2010). The prevalence and active role of women in rural Christian congregations are particularly manifest in the notion of “sisterhood” prevailing in many rural churches, which helps women maintain social networks. Some scholars therefore view the embrace of

Christianity as an emancipatory force that empowers rural women believers (Li *et al.* 2004; Hunter and Chan 2007).

Yet, notwithstanding that Christian communities in the countryside might somewhat empower women Christians, I suggest that rural Christian women's religious experiences often interact with and are mutually constituted by other forms of oppression in rural society, which combine to subordinate Christian women as inferior subjects. On the one hand, rural Christian women struggled to be "filial daughters" or "good wives" under the expectations of traditional patriarchal culture and to be devout Christian women following god's will. Despite the noticeable revival of Christianity, Christians still constitute less than 8% of the overall rural population. In other words, Christian believers are still a religious minority group in the face of an overwhelming patriarchal lineage and culture and Confucianism-based ancestor worship in rural society. The Christian faith is always incompatible with and unaccepted by ancestor worship or other folk religions in terms of religious doctrines and rituals. For example, many devout Christian women might refuse to offer sacrifices and burn incense for the ancestors of a family or lineage community, as they think of this kind of "idolatry" as going against Christian doctrine. In turn, many non-Christian villagers view Christian rituals as representing a great offence to their lineage culture. Moreover, Church activities and particularly Sunday worship distract women's focus from the household and agricultural work, which other non-Christian family members would often be unhappy about.

For example, Xiaoli, a 25-year-old woman migrant worker, told me how the Christian faith was suppressed by the patriarchs in her family. In Xiaoli's family, her mother and

grandmother were both devout Christians, but her grandfather strongly objected to their Christian faith. As she recalled:

Xueyi: My grandfather didn't believe in Christianity. He really disliked Christians. At that time, he even burned my grandmothers' Bibles, quite a few. He had strong lineage values. Every time he found my grandmothers went to congregations, he would get angry and scold my grandmother.

Quan: Why was he angry?

Xueyi: Because there were men and women in the church. He thought this was quite improper. He couldn't understand why they sing and pray, why the men and women sit together. Many people of older generations despised this.

Likewise, another young migrant worker, Liting, from the countryside in the Chaoshan area of Guangdong province, told me how her Christian faith was treated by her family:

My family worships *laoye* (various folk beliefs of gods in the Chaoshan area) so they disliked my Christian faith. My parents didn't even want to talk with me. My relatives also scolded me, because they thought what I believe was a foreigners' religion.

On the other hand, the oppression of rural Christian women might sometimes take place within Christian institutions themselves. For example, Christian women and especially young Christian girls were more likely to be sent by rural churches to the front of the "evangelising battle". Many rural house churches or underground churches were

particularly dedicated to sending church members to cities or villages elsewhere for evangelical activities, some of which even claimed to “occupy the city”, an organisational strategy in a manner similar to the spread of early Chinese Communist Party ideas in a hostile political environment (Koesel 2013). Four participants in my research mentioned their early experiences of evangelisation when they were young.

For example, after Fang (mentioned above) quit school, the local church sponsored her to learn theology and Korean in preparation for missionary work that would be undertaken in Korean ethnic areas in North-east China. However, undertaking evangelisation in a hostile environment in which the state imposes strict controls on religion often put them in dangerous and vulnerable situations. Another Christian migrant worker, Lijun, also shared her horrible experiences of evangelisation when she had to escape pursuit by the police. As Fang and Lijun recalled:

Fang: The elder (a male church leader) of the church said he wanted me to be devoted to god (*fengxian chuqu*, 奉献出去). So, they raised money for me and sent me to study theology. It was tough at that time, you had to go to remote mountains to study [beyond the reach of state surveillance] ... To evangelise the villagers, we often climbed several mountains and slept there overnight.

Lijun: The policy on religion was quite strict at that time. If the police were about to catch you [when we were evangelising], we had to escape into the mountains. I remember there was one time I escaped into the mountains with another girl: we two girls were extremely scared and didn't dare to leave the mountains until midnight.

Fang and Lijun's accounts reveal that the hierarchal and patriarchal culture in rural society indeed influences the way religious institutions operate, expecting women to be more tolerant and self-sacrificing. In this sense, religion institutions can both empower and repress rural Christian women's subjectivities.

### **8.3.2 Christian femininity under the migrant labour regime**

As the existing literature has documented, when Chinese rural women migrants migrate to cities in search of "*dagong*" (employed work, 打工), they may attain a liberating sense of autonomy from familial patriarchy and a urban modern identity (Pun 1999; 2005; Zhang 2014). However, this does not mean that migration necessarily empowers rural migrant women, as they are actually absorbed into a larger "matrix of domination" woven by the state and global capitalism.

In chapter 4, I have elaborated on how the neoliberal governance of migrants' bodies is materialised through the factory labour regime in Shenzhen. The state and manufacturing factories (particularly the Foxconn company) adopted a set of governing techniques to produce both durable and governable labouring subjects but simultaneously to minimise labour and welfare costs. In chapter 7, I have further illustrated that the hierarchical management and coercive control of workers relies on a hegemonic "culture" of masculinity. This hegemonic masculinity legitimates the unquestioning obedience to hierarchical power relations and simultaneously degrades the masculinity and dignity of lower working-class men. Against this background, this section further expands on how the process of discipline controlling workers in the workplace is linked to the production of the sexed body and feminine identity. Simultaneously, I discuss how Christian femininity comes to terms with the factory labour regime and patriarchal power relations.



Firstly, becoming *dagongmei* (working sisters) or women workers is a process of self-subjectivisation in which migrant women refashion themselves as modern, disciplined working subjects (Pun 1999; 2005). Chief among this politics of identity is to discard a peasant identity and embrace urban modernity, including “proper” behaviour as defined by the factory management. This is particularly evident in Foxconn, where they deployed a set of disciplinary techniques such as intensive pre-work training, strict surveillance, monetary punishment, and the avowed blame on those who make mistakes, so as to refashion rural migrant women’s rural lifestyles as “modern” docile labouring subjects. In this sense, the factory labour regime actually worked in hand with the state’s hegemonic discourses that degrade rural women as “low suzhi” (low quality), backward, and uncivilised bodies. For example, as my participants reported, the managers or line leaders would often give lectures to them regarding the imperatives to discard “bad habits” from the countryside, such as acting casually and lacking discipline, when they were newly recruited into Foxconn. When I asked Xueyi, a 32-year-old Christian worker, about how she thought of the managers’ lecture, she recognised it as reasonable because she thought migrant women should adapt to the city. Xueyi unwittingly accepted the state’s representation of rural women as low-quality and backward and that being obedient to factory regulations was a necessary adaptive strategy:

It depends on where you are. If you come back to the countryside, you need to adapt to the rural lifestyle. If you go to the city, you can’t only take a shower every few days like you do in the village. You need to adapt to the lifestyle here, take a shower every day, make yourself tidy, queue up in the canteen ... You need to be especially cautious, behave well, and be professional (*jingye*, 敬业) in your work.

Secondly, under the factory labour regime, and particularly in the collective factory dormitory system tightly interwoven with the just-in-time production model, women migrant workers were intentionally largely atomised as isolated subjects and were deprived of emotional support from family and friends. Many of the participants in this study complained that the intensive workloads and work schedules constantly shuffled them from day to night shifts, with little daily interaction with friends and workmates possible. Even roommates in the same dormitory could hardly ever meet each other if they worked different shifts. Married couples were separated in different dormitories strictly segregated between men and women. It was not until the suicide events of 2010 that Foxconn started to allow friends or those in the same working unit to become dormitory mates. For example, a 28-year-old Christian woman worker, Lili, described the feelings of loneliness and isolation she faced at Foxconn:

There was one time I got cold because of the intensive workload. So, do you know what? I just realised that no dorm mates cared about me. There were four people in our dormitory. I had moved in two weeks before but nobody really knew me, and neither did I know them. Because I worked on day shifts, I only saw them sleeping when I came back at night. So, we scarcely had any communication ... I have several friends, all my colleagues, but we are tied up by the work and seldom meet one another.

According to Lili's narrative, woman migrant workers' social ties seem to be cruelly severed so that their socialisation activities were minimised. This exploitative logic was essentially an effort to structure workers' lives in the holistic sense of service to the goal of profit maximisation.

Thirdly, under the hierarchical management at Foxconn, woman migrant workers were victims of double repression inflicted by both hierarchical and patriarchal power (see figure 1). As I have illustrated in Chapter 4, the biopower of the factory machine attempted to increase workers' capacity to endure exploitation. In essence, this biopower was not simply targeted at a general body but also a specifically sexed and feminine body. At Foxconn, as my participants mentioned, a popular phrase amongst the workers is that "women are treated as men, and men as animals". Moreover women, and especially rural women workers, were imagined to be easier to regulate and control in comparison with rebellious and aggressive male workers in Foxconn's masculine culture.

As a result, while men's production workers' masculinities were deprived by the organisational hierarchy, they, in turn, constructed their masculinity both through confrontational practices against managers and in claiming superiority over woman workers. As the participants remarked, it was common for male managers or production workers to overtly 'talk dirty' and make sexual jokes and flirt with women workers in the workshops. In some cases, offensive language turned into sexual harassment, such as touching women's bodies. However, this verbal violence and sexual harassment were viewed as natural by men. If the women tried to complain and resist, they would be viewed by male workers or managers as "too serious" and as someone who "can't take a joke".

Moreover, women workers sometimes endured more intensive exploitation than men in terms of unjust workloads and assignments, as they were expected to be more obedient, tolerant in conforming to the factory machine. This is particularly the case for Christian migrant women, whose religious morality and doctrine already taught them to be obedient.

Like male Christian workers, who defined their manhood in terms of hard work and self-control over the body, female Christian workers also actively constructed their Christian femininity by performing an image of being kind, hardworking, helpful, and reliable. For example, when I asked Yangyi, a 34-year-old Christian worker, regarding what she liked or disliked about her non-Christian colleagues at Foxconn, she replied that she could not tolerate those who did not take their work seriously:

I dislike those who don't take responsibility for their work and disregard the job you do. If you ask me to loaf on the job, I can't, and neither will I do that. You know, what we Christians do is for God ultimately. At least, I ensure that my work should be done in the right way and weigh the salaries I received.

For Yangyi, being diligent in her work in tandem with Christian morality appeared to offer her moral superiority over non-Christian workers. It is therefore no wonder that Christian workers, and especially woman Christian workers, were conceived of as “good people” in the eyes of their colleagues. However, this kind of religiosity made Christian women workers more susceptible to unjust treatment in the workplace, as they would be viewed as more tolerant of exploitation by their managers. This can be illustrated by the story of a 23-year-old Christian girl, Xiaoli, who had been assigned by the line head to perform the same repetitive operation for two months because no one else was willing or able to take on this work:

Right after I was assigned to this assembly line, they asked me to assemble the phone screen, by just pressing the flexible printed circuit (FPC) into the phone model. I said: “OK, I have no objection”. But they asked me to do this every day, repeating the same action again and again with my two fingers. Other colleagues could switch to other

operations but I wasn't allowed to. So, I had pressed the FPCs for ten hours a day for one month and my fingers were injured already. After the first month, I talked to the line heads and asked them to let me shift to other positions, but they refused. The line head and assistant line head both asked me to continue. They said: "You do a good job on this. If I change to another one who is unfamiliar with this, he is more likely to destroy the FPCs, so more products will become scrap." I guess this may be God's test. God must realise I am going to study traditional Chinese medicine, so he trained my hands in advance [laughing here].

It is apparent that those who behave obediently were subject to more intensive exploitation at Foxconn. Despite being conscious of her unjust treatment, Xueyi nevertheless did not question and challenge her supervisors. Instead, for Xiaoli, labour discipline is re-interpreted through religious values and discourses, and the problem was deflected from labour discipline *per se* and to God's arrangements and tests. This is further demonstrated by her attitude towards labour protest. When I asked what she thought of recent workers' collective struggle for better welfare and fair treatment, Xiaoli responded that she would not participate in it because Christians should accept the situation arranged by god. Xiaoli said a Christian should learn to adapt to rather than overthrow the job he was doing.

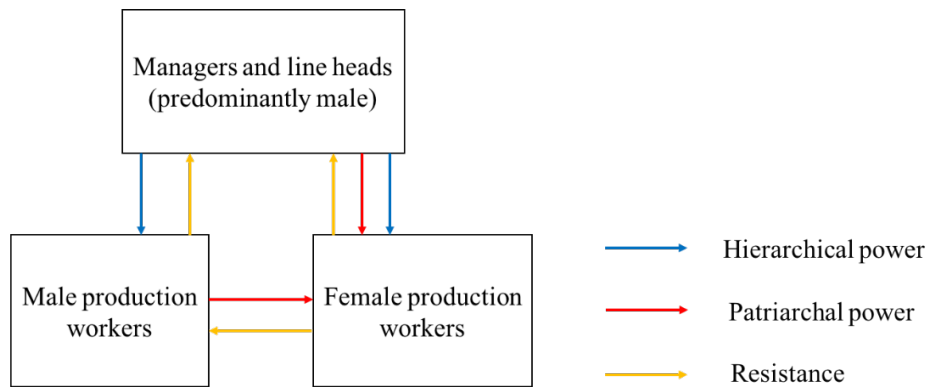


Figure 8-1. The hierarchical and patriarchal management at Foxconn

## 8.4 Women’s religious agency: constructing Christian femininity in church and family

Although Christian woman migrants were highly constrained by the double exploitation of patriarchy and labour discipline, they were not entirely negative recipients of the dominant arrangements, as they were capable of constituting their Christian femininity and ethical selves, and sometimes tactically redefining the existing power structure by drawing on Christian discourses and ethics. This is particularly manifest in the churches where woman workers constructed a “comfort zone” in response to the subaltern subjectivity inflicted by labour discipline, and in the family relations in which they negotiated patriarchal dominance through evangelisation. In particular, I elaborate below on how religious agency can be conveyed by performing docile, hardworking, tolerant Christian femininities, and particularly in pious ways of living.

### 8.4.1 Church: the making of women’s “comfort zone”

In Chapter 5, I have elucidated how churches, be they TSPM or house churches, provided migrant workers with faith-based communities based on the theo-ethics of love,

brotherhood/sisterhood, and equality, in terms of social, emotional, and psychological support. In this section, I explore this line of inquiry further by specifically focusing on women's interactions with the churches.

In contrast to oppressive factory life in which women were atomised as isolated subjects and were deprived of emotional support, the churches offer a sense of relative freedom. Many Christian woman workers conceive of their churches as places in which they can unleash their feelings, talk freely to fellow believers and express private emotions that they do not share elsewhere. For example, Xiaoyue, a 36-year-old woman at Guanlan Church, mentioned the women's fellowship which offered her a "comfort zone" to confide about her distress inflicted by family conflicts and work, while she was ashamed to share such feelings elsewhere. However, attending the church could help her temporarily fence off the distress and enter a state of being "free" and "belonging to God":

When stepping into the church, I can put aside all my distress and joyfully participate in it. When I was working, I always felt unhappy. I would think I was at such an old age already but had achieved nothing. But in the church, I feel quite relaxed. The brothers and sisters often encourage me, and I constantly remind myself I'm joyful, I'm free, I'm healthy, and I'm belonging to god.

However, women's perception of churches as a "comfort zone" is often constituted through particular religious rituals such as prayer and testimony, which create possibilities for the liberation and transformation that many woman workers claim to experience. For example, the 27-year-old woman worker Lijuan conceived of prayer as a

crucial way to attain inner peace, because through praying she could submit herself to God who, as she believed, would bear the distress for her:

There was one time the line head scolded me harshly. I felt really upset. I didn't even want to eat anything, because all I ate was tasteless. But my mind suddenly turned to God — I should go to the church and pray before God. Lord, it's not my fault (the mistakes in the work), please testify for me, please bring justice for me. After I prayed for a while in the church, I gradually felt peaceful ... If I solely rely on myself, it's useless regardless of how great the efforts I've made. You can't solve any problem by relying on your own mind.

Moreover, woman migrant workers also actively construct a feminised space characterised by embodied practices and emotional narratives through day-to-day participation in the churches. This is particularly the case for some house churches I investigated which, according to my observations, were more capable of accommodating women workers' requests for lived, affective and embodied religiosity compared with the TSPM churches. The latter normally identified themselves as urban evangelists and therefore followed a highly institutionalised structure that emphasised religious hierarchy, theological knowledge and formal training. The TSPM churches are often based on a gender division of religious participation in which males have greater responsibility for leading worship and preaching while females tend to undertake more responsibilities for evangelisation (Kao 2009). For example, the chief pastors of Shenzhen's 27 TSPM churches were all male, with only a few women entering the core of power in these churches. However, the situation is quite different in some house churches, most of which bear the legacy of a Pentecostal-style charismatic Protestantism. For example, the



Pentecostalism-dominant churches like Foxconn House Churches A and C often prioritise feelings and emotional experience, such as healing and the experience of the holy spirit, over religious hierarchy and orthodox theological vocabulary. It is noteworthy that emotionally laden narratives are dominantly shaped by women and in particular rural migrant women. According to my observations at these house churches, rural migrant women primarily make sense of their religious activities and commitment to God through embodied practices such as sharing experiences of the miraculous healing of their bodies or God empowering them to survive life's difficulties. For example, in the prayer meeting of Foxconn House Church A that takes place every Wednesday evening, participants would kneel around in a circle to say their prayers, and women are intuitively the leading actors in this ritual, who can bring a joyful atmosphere to an emotional climax. The joy arising from these occasions is usually expressed via women's passionate prayers with shouting and tears. Liyun was a 36-year-old rural migrant woman at Foxconn who was overwhelmed by the distress caused by her husband's addiction to gambling and irresponsibility toward his family. However, for Liyun, prayer with tears offered her an emotional channel to release her distress:

Liyun: When I first came to Shenzhen, it was a tough time. I felt touched every time I went to the congregation. I even cried every time when I prayed with other Christian fellows during that time. Especially when I accepted the Holy Communion, I was almost crying my eyes out.

Researcher: What made you so touched?

Liyun: I was thinking there was nothing in the “world” worth my addiction. Only God and Christian fellows were reliable. I said, Lord, I submit anything of myself to you, life or death, blessing or curse. I said, even I and my husband will divorce or anything, I don’t care anymore.

This is consistent with Woodhead’s (2001:71) observation that the “emphasis on the authority of feeling, intuition, and experience in religious matters empowers women to attain a spiritual and institutional power denied them elsewhere”.

Another strongly feminine symbolic act was the introduction of the “square dance” (*Guangchang Wu* 广场舞) into Foxconn House Church C for entertainment, particularly for women workers. However, in China, *Guangchang Wu* is often viewed as a grassroots form of dancing conducted in a public square, and is popular among middle-aged and elderly women. Therefore, the pastor recruited a professional dancer to modify *Guangchang Wu* and attributed it a new meaning; namely, “gospel dance”. At 8 p.m. every Saturday evening, approximately 20 women workers (with a few male workers) would gather to dance for one hour (see figure 2). In this sense, rural migrant women’s quest for a subjectivity of everyday life has somehow reformulated the lived religiosity of Foxconn House Church C.



Figure 8-2. “Gospel dance” at Foxconn House Church C

In these house churches of the Pentecostal style, women’s religiosity actually reframes the institutional spheres where men have traditionally been dominant, therefore creating spaces for women workers to reclaim their agency in femininity that is suppressed elsewhere.

#### **8.4.2 Family: empowerment and the Christianisation of family relations**

For feminist scholars, the family is not only a structure of inequality in which various powers contest but also epitomises the institutionalised ways in which broader ideologies and socially constructed meanings are enacted and reproduced (Lloyd *et al.* 2009). As I have noted, the Christian migrant women were suffering from a double marginalisation inflicted by patriarchy and the exclusion from the dominance of familial or lineage culture. As a cultural minority group, Christian migrant women need to reconcile the tensions of not only gender relations but also cultural conflicts with non-Christian family members. However, Christian migrant women are capable of negotiating with this double marginalisation by endeavouring to create Christianised family relations and therefore

attaining a certain kind of empowerment within the family. Chief among these strategies of Christianisation are establishing Christian marriage and evangelising non-Christian family members.

Firstly, like male Christian migrants, women migrant workers also pursue a “blessed” Christian marriage. In my interviews, no matter whether they were single Christian girls (6 of 20), women with Christian husbands or boyfriends (9 of 20), or married women with non-Christian husbands (5 of 20), all insisted that an ideal marital relationship was based on common Christian faith. When I asked Xiaohong, a 26-year-old woman, about what kind of ideal marital relationship she aspired to, she explained with reference to Matthew (19: 4-6) in the Bible:

At the beginning, the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united with his wife, and the two will become one flesh’. So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.

Xiaohong emphasised that an ideal marital relationship should be to be “joined together” by God so that the couple could achieve “a spirit of unity” (同心合一, *tongxin heyi*) and therefore less likely to separate in comparison with non-Christian couples. However, what I want to emphasise here is that Christian women’s imagination of ideal spouses morally justified their struggle for autonomy in marriage from their parents. Xiaohong’s parents had match-made a potential spouse for her but she refused to return to the village to attend the *xiangqin* (blind date, 相亲). She told me that her parents cared more about how much benefit and particularly betrothal gifts (*caili*, 彩礼) they could get than her own happiness

if she married the man they arranged for. Most importantly, as she said, she was not willing to find a *waibangren* (foreigner, referring to a non-Christian) as his husband in spite of her resistance that irritated her parents. Xiaohong eventually found a Christian husband whom she knew in the fellowship at Foxconn House Church A. Xiaoli's story was not unique, as finding a spouse at church was quite a common phenomenon according to my observations. As I have discussed in chapter 7, these churches not only encourage marriage between believers but serve as "marriage agents" for young Christian workers. In this sense, by drawing on Christian relationships, the migrant women attained a certain sense of agency to establish a type of marriage they aspired to.

Secondly, for Christian migrant women, evangelising among their non-Christian family members is another strategy that might improve their status in the family. For Christian women, evangelising is not only the duty of a Christian that brings glory to God but also a way to make their situation in the family more "habitable" in a practical sense. My interviews show that it was usually women who first converted to Christianity before converting their husbands and other family members. All 20 women participants in my research have experiences of evangelising their family members. Among 9 women with Christian husbands or boyfriends, 4 of them had successfully converted their spouses while the others were themselves already Christians. All 5 married women with non-Christian husbands had been trying to convert their husbands.

The most common trajectory of evangelisation often started from husbands and mothers-in-law, then targeting other female relatives and then male relatives, although Christian women would readjust their strategies in accordance with relatives' susceptibility to the "gospel". However, evangelisation is also a process accompanied by various cultural

conflicts and misunderstandings. For example, the 42-year-old women worker Lijun told me that her husband could not understand her Christian faith at the beginning: “When he heard me saying prayers, ‘Jesus, you’re the love of my life’, he was jealous of Jesus and thought I was crazy”. But Lijun gradually resolved her husband’s misunderstandings and eventually converted him by enacting an image of a good Christian wife. As Lijun said, her husband felt that she became softer and more passionate and tolerant after converting to Christianity and therefore he believed that having Christian faith was a good thing. Lijun sincerely admitted that their intimate relations had substantially improved, as she explained: “When you submit yourself to God, He will re-lighten your life, let your life shine again”.

Apart from the husband, a mother-in-law is an equally important target for evangelisation. In Chinese family life, the daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationship, which scholars often depict as inherently conflictual (Stacey 1983; Gallin 1994), is crucial in determining the harmony of family life. As Shih and Pyke (2010: 334) argue, the contentiousness of this in-law dyad is associated with “Confucian values of filial piety and respect and gender hierarchies that obligate the daughter-in-law to serve and defer to the mother-in-law and that place both women in a subordinated position, pitting them against one another as they vie for more individual power”. Against this backdrop, I suggest that evangelisation could enable migrant women to establish a Christian alliance of daughter- and mother-in-law that might extend to other women family members, who may thus collectively reformulate gendered power relations. This can be illustrated by the story of Xiaochen, a 46-year-old rural migrant women who married into an urban family. In the first few years of her marriage, she had been harshly treated by her mother-in-law because of her identification as both a rural woman and Christian. However, her status

substantially improved after she successfully converted her mother-in-law, husband, and sisters-in-law:

I converted to Christianity at 19 and got married at 25. When I first married into my husband's family, my mother-in-law very much disliked my Christian identification and discriminated against me because I was a rural woman and she thought I was ugly. But thanks to God, when they discriminated against me, I didn't give up. I had always prayed and followed God's will. During the toughest times, my tears wet three pillows altogether, but God has always loved me ... With God's blessing, I started a small business in 2001. I worked hard and brought a "peasant house"<sup>[12]</sup> in 2003. God always blesses me and He gave me a pretty daughter and a pretty son subsequently. My friends all said that both my daughter and son were pretty ... Now, I have led my mother-in-law and husband to the church, bringing them to God. I am delighted I didn't give up before. Now, they all treat me well, like a noblewoman. My mother-in-law even cooked for me.

It is noteworthy that evangelisation is never achieved through the "hard sell" of Christian theology but rather through migrant women's performance as docile, tolerant, hardworking Christian wives that gradually transforms family members' understanding of Christianity.

Additionally, Christian migrant women also draw on churches and "supernatural forces" (such as healing and exorcism) to help them evangelise, especially in cases of disease and

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12 A "peasant house" is a kind of state-owned low-rent housing that the Shenzhen government sells to rural migrants at a relatively low price.

difficulties occurring with their family members. When their relatives became ill, the migrant women would usually organise Christian fellows to visit and pray for the patients at home or in hospital. One of the most common rituals during these visits was the Christian women's performance of faith healing with patients as a complement to medical treatment. Christian women's relatives were normally willing to accept this healing or exorcism, and many Chinese people request divine assistance to resolve dilemmas despite not necessarily having any formal religious faith. However, in comparison with Buddhism, Taoism and folk religions, in Christian healing there is no need to pay for rituals or to donate to temples as is widespread in the increasingly commercialised traditional belief systems (Gao and Qian 2018). In some cases, the church fellows would make donations for those with serious illnesses. Therefore, Christian women's evangelisation was often conceived of by their ill relatives as not only an expression of care and emotional support but also a spiritual act that might possibly cure the disease based on confidence in the efficacy of prayer. But the visit did not aim to successfully convert ill relatives in a short time but rather, as they claimed, to plant "Christian seeds" in the patients' minds. For example, the 27-year-old Christian migrant woman Liufang converted her father-in-law, sister, and sister-in-law by providing regular care, material help, and spiritual healing:

My father-in-law converted after his leg injury caused by an accident. Although I didn't have many savings, I paid for my father's medical expenses. I prayed in front of my father. I prayed for 20 days. His surgical operation was very successful. He said he didn't experience any suffering. So, he finally accepted my gospel.



Overall, Christian migrant women's efforts to Christianise the family did not subvert patriarchal power and traditional familial values, as their performance as good Christian wives and daughters-in-law during evangelisation sometimes overlapped with the ethics of filial piety and submission based on the family hierarchy. However, women's religious agency cannot be solely defined in terms of a resisting subjectivity. In this study, submission and being docile is not only a process of self-cultivation into a pious way of life that may spiritually empower them, but is also an integral part of the tactic that redefines familial power and relationships; in this sense, as Christian women's agency.

## **8.5 Conclusion**

According to Mahmood (2005, p.15):

Agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.

The aim of this chapter has been to examine the formation of Christian migrant women's religious subjectivity and agency under the intersectional power relations produced by the state, global capitalism, patriarchy within the family, the workplace, and religious institutions. These intersectional forms of domination have established a structural oppression that defines rural migrant women's subaltern subjectivity. In this sense, this chapter echoes Silvey's (2013) argument that the regulatory power of the state and global capitalism work in tandem with patriarchy and the feminisation of labouring subjects. Intuitively, religious piety and norms that emphasise docile, tolerant, and self-sacrificial femininity legitimate the exploitation inflicted by the state, patriarchy and global capitalism. On the other hand, Christian migrant women are also capable of utilising

Christian discourses and social capital to construct their religious agency in churches and the family and therefore achieve a certain sense of empowerment. Yet, Christian migrant women's religious practices nevertheless do not directly challenge dominant powers. Therefore, the most crucial problematic of this chapter concerns how to understand migrant women's religious agency.

This chapter engages in a non-confrontational account of women's religious agency in terms of post-secular feminism, which moves beyond normative and secular definitions that reduce agency solely to resisting actions and counter-subjectivity. Christian migrant women's performance of religious piety can be understood as a reconstitution of their subaltern femininity that hardly challenges oppressive power at all in many cases. However, this does not mean that it cannot have counter-hegemonic effects. I argue that, if we differentiate between the ethical meanings of religious practices and their consequences, we can achieve a more nuanced understanding of religious agency. On the one hand, migrant women's religious practices somehow emotionally and socially empower them, although this empowerment is never achieved through a zero-sum game of domination-resistance but rather through compliance and docility. On the other hand, women's religious agency can also be understood "in terms of ethical formation, particularly in its Foucauldian formulation" (Mahmood 2005: 32). In this sense, Christians' technologies of self that transform themselves into meaningful ethical subjects (as discussed in Chapter 6) actually open up a kind of agency for migrant women.

## **Chapter 9**

# **Youth transition to work, spiritual capital, and the remaking of working-class adulthood**

### **9.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines young Christian migrant workers' transition to working-class adulthood and the possibility of postsecular subjectivity and agency that emerge within this process of transition. By adopting an intersectional approach, I have analysed how secularity and postsecularity interact with gender relations in Chapters 7 and 8. In this chapter, I further explore how neoliberalism, secularity and postsecularity are inhabited within particular life courses in young people's transition to adulthood. It is noteworthy that the 18 Foxconn workers who attempted suicide in 2010 were all rural migrant youths aged from 17 to 25, which implies not only that these youths have been one of the most marginalised and psychologically vulnerable groups in contemporary China but that youth transition is essentially a conflictual and contested process which may be imbued with hope, aspiration, and psychological growth as well as despair, struggle, and chaotic selves (Bynner 2005). This is particularly the case in the era of reform and opening-up in China in which contradictory ideologies and values, including the propagation of communism and the entrenchment of neoliberal ideologies of self-responsibility, have jointly shaped Chinese youths' personhood (Liu 2011). Against this background, this chapter therefore delves into young migrant worker's lived experiences of the transition from school to labour market and the ways they struggle to navigate their marginalised and precarious working-class adulthood. In particular, I focus on how Christianity can be

manoeuvred by young migrant workers as a form of resource or capital and a way of being, enabling an alternative approach to working-class adulthood beyond the personhood normalised by the neoliberal labour regime.

Recent research in geographies of religion and youth has highlighted the fact that religion can enable new forms of agency and may represent an alternative pathway to adulthood for young people ( King and Roeser 2009; Hopkins *et al.* 2015; Olson and Reddy 2016). Instead of reducing youth agency to practice *per se*, these studies emphasise the importance of social, cultural, and material resources and capital associated with religion through which youth agency is made possible. In the light of these arguments, I propose that the geography of postsecularity needs to be attentive to how youth agency and subjectivity are mediated through, and materialised in, resourcefulness and social/cultural capital. This chapter addresses these concerns by re-examining the analytical value of the concept of “spiritual capital” (Verter 2003; Guest 2007), in the sense of religion embodied as a specific kind of knowledge, ideology, habitus, disposition and interpersonal relations. The reason for the use of the concept of spiritual capital rather than religious capital is that spiritual capital highlights the religious capital, habitus, disposition and everyday practices that diffuse in-and-beyond institutional religious fields. I argue that the concept of spiritual capital provides a tool to examine how postsecularity can be understood as a particular form of social/cultural capital. I do not reduce postsecularity into moral and cultural resources in an instrumental sense, however, but emphasise that postsecular subjectivity is contextualised in and mediated by everyday sociability. Moreover, to explore the socio-spatially specific (re)production of spiritual capital and how it influences the youth transition to adulthood, I situate my study in the sino-knowledge of *jiazhiguan* (value), *suzhi* (quality) and *guanxi* (interpersonal relations).

In the first empirical section, I explore the structural forces, and in particular the neoliberal coalition of vocational education and factory regime, that influence young migrant workers' transition to working-class adulthood. In particular, I show how this neoliberal educational-economic regime produces particular forms of precarity, depriving young migrant workers of aspiration, hope, and upward mobility. In the second empirical section, I elaborate on how spiritual capital can produce hopeful geographies of adulthood for rural migrant youth. Firstly, young migrant workers acquire "spiritual capital" by forming religious networks and establishing a system of *jiazhiguan* (values), which enables them to attain a more coherent model of adulthood. Secondly, young migrant workers manoeuvre spiritual capital (in the form of what they called "Christian wisdom") to establish *guanxi* or interpersonal networks of influence beyond the social spaces normalised by the neoliberal labour regime. This chapter aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the ways religion and spirituality impact on young people's transition to adulthood by engaging with the concept of spiritual capital. Overall, I suggest that geographies of postsecularity require critical reflection on how religious ethics and discourses are mediated by and embodied in contextualised everyday sociability.

## **9.2 Youth transition, spiritual capital, and working-class adulthood**

In late modernity, young people's transition to adulthood is increasingly regarded to be complicated, fractured, unpredictable, self-focused, and a process of 'becoming' in which young people tactically negotiate their life course and validate their adult identities by mobilising cultural resources and social networks (Ansell 2008; Hopkins *et al.* 2015). Youth transition does not simply involve uniform rites of passage (such as leaving home, finding a stable job, and forming a new family) from which young people are expected to inevitably move into adulthood (Ansell 2008). Instead, young people increasingly

abandon these normalised markers of adulthood in favour of self-exploration and multiple, reflexive and individualistic identities so as to attain an inwardly directed selfhood (Arnett 2006; Silva 2012).

Much of the research on youth transition draws on the social imaginary of cultural transformation in late-capitalism, as the collapse of external sources of authority (Giddens 1991) and the ubiquity of risk (Beck 1992) make the external and traditional markers of adulthood more uncontrollable and unattainable for young people. However, the emphasis on individualistic markers of adulthood is by no means simply a by-product of the cultural project of modernity, but also an ideologically charged process engineered by neoliberal governmentality. As Jeffrey (2010) notes, the equation of successful adulthood with autonomy and independent choice is the outcome of a socio-political project of neoliberalism rather than universal social datum. For instance, the “blame the victim” type of neoliberal discourse produces a hegemonic moral judgement that ascribes the precarious lives of working-class youth and the causes of worklessness to their rebellious nature and masculine egos and overall their inability to become ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ in line with structural transformations such as the decline of manufacturing and the withdrawal of state welfare (Hardgrove, McDowell, and Rootham 2015). This self-blame is further internalised into young people’s subjectivities, particularly in the age of the “mood economy,” in which young people increasingly redefine happiness and competent adulthood in terms of the ability to control their negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviour on their own (Silva 2012). Overall, the individualistic and therapeutic narratives of youth transition, stressing for example self-care, the management of emotions, taking responsibility for oneself, and independent decision-making, represent

an accessible cultural schema that young people can adopt to attain a sense of control over the uncertainty associated with neoliberal conditions of being.

In this line of scholarship, the structural processes and in particular the global neoliberal transformations that afflict and marginalise young people's experiences of growing up are particularly emphasised (Jeffrey 2010). As an alternative to transitions models, meanwhile, other scholars have highlighted the importance of "vital conjunctures" (Johnson-Hanks 2002), meaning a socially structured zone of possibility emerging around particular spans of the life course in which new visions of the future and socio-spatial marginalisation might occur simultaneously in young people's negotiation of adulthood (Jeffrey 2010). For example, a substantial body of research has examined education and employment as two concretely structured elements where "vital conjunctures" take place (McDowell 2003; Pimlott-Wilson 2017), including the switch from schooling to the marketplace, which endow young people with individual autonomy in constructing their independent adulthood while also drawing them more tightly into the prevailing regime of governance.

Nevertheless, young people's adulthood never simply involves the normalised subjectivities that institutionalised discourses and associated affective regimes tell them to act and feel, they are capable of creating their own cultural models and narratives that ascribe meaning and coherence to their transition to adulthood (Holt 2010; Holloway, Jeffrey 2012; Holt and Mills 2018). Although religiosity and spirituality have only recently been brought into the discussion of youth transition in human geography and beyond (Hopkins *et al.* 2015; King and Roeser 2009), they are argued to provide alternative markers of and different paths to adulthood (Bailey, Harvey, and Brace 2007;

Hopkins *et al.* 2015; Olson and Reddy 2016). Religion frequently appears as a coping mechanism or a source of resilience that young people use to alleviate stress and uncertainty or reposition themselves in relation to parents, peers and other adults ( Pearce, Little, and Ferez 2003; Bailey, Harvey, and Brace 2007; Hopkins *et al.* 2011). It can also represent a consciousness, of external authority and/or personal faith, utilised to create meanings, self-definitions and self-management (Bailey, Harvey, and Bruce 2007; Olson *et al.* 2016), and an institutional sphere in which youths cultivate social networks and civic engagement through faith-based activities (Hopkins 2015; Williams 2015). One of the central concerns of this literature is how young people's agency in their negotiation of adulthood can be conveyed through and supported by religion and spirituality. On the one hand, religion may serve as institutional accommodation and a moral framework that structure or direct youth into what Hopkins (2015) calls "religious adulthood" by offering a restricted and institutionalised agency; and particularly the technologies of the youthful self in the logic of religious doctrines (Bailey *et al.* 2007; Olson *et al.* 2016). On the other hand, young people may also question institutional beliefs and construct their own narrative of religious adulthood that is neither theologically pure nor orthodox transcendence, for example by emphasising embodied practices and lived authenticity (Olson *et al.* 2013) or by drawing on alternative and individualistic spiritualities (Bartolini *et al.* 2017). Although this type of research illustrates that young people can tactically deploy religious or spiritual discourses in their transition to adulthood, however, it is still unclear to what extent religion can be used to forge a more politically progressive agency through which young people actively navigate and redefine the dominant power structure.

Moreover, despite the essential influence of religion on youth transition, there is relatively scant geographical research examining how young people's religious agency is mediated



through, and materialised in, resourcefulness and social/cultural capital. This is perhaps because human geographers “have tended to underplay the analytic value of social capital, by equating the concept with dominant policy interpretations” (Holt 2008: 227). A re-emphasis on social/cultural capital is valuable in trying to overcome the theoretical difficulties that equate youth agency as practices *per se* in a reductive sense while omitting to analyse the social, cultural and material resources on which it is based. Manifested as either embodied habitus and a distinctive way of being (Bourdieu 1984), social networks of civic engagement (Putman 2000), or invested resources with expected returns (Lin 2001), social/cultural capital does condition the ways in which young people navigate their transition to adulthood. This is particularly the case for working-class youth, and Silva (2012) suggests that constructing a therapeutic narrative of adulthood may “require a particular set of class-based linguistic skills, knowledge, and resources” that are more accessible to professional middle-class than to working-class people. Instead, working-class youth may forge distinctive forms of youth transition by drawing on their class languages; for example, constructing blue-collar adulthood by mobilising the ‘ethos of bravery, strength, and distrust of words’ shared among those on the shop floor (Illouz 2008: 234). Likewise, Nayak’s (2006) ethnography of working-class young men in North-east England suggests that the performance of ‘spectacular masculinities’ of while male excess cultivates a bodily capital (with particular codes of respect, dress, bodily adornment and comportment) that forms “respectable” working-class networks. In this sense, close attentiveness to resourcefulness and social capital can provide a more nuanced understanding of how working-class youth exercise their agency to create alternative adulthood.

In this chapter, I therefore examine how religiosity and spirituality can be mobilised as a form of resource or capital that enables an alternative model of youth transition. To achieve this goal, I incorporate the notion of spiritual capital (Burger and Hefner 2003; Verter 2003; Guest 2008) that has rarely been deployed in human geography. Theorising religion as a form of social and cultural capital might start from Bourdieu's (1991) conceptualisation of "religious capital" and the "religious field". Bourdieu (1991) insists that religious knowledge, competencies, and dispositions can be defined as a form of symbolic capital to be acquired and exchanged within particular fields and utilised to maintain and modify one's social position. Bourdieu (1991a) suggests that religious capital manifests in two forms: religious symbolic systems (with ideologies and myths) and religious competences (mastery of specific knowledge and associated embodied practices) (Verter 2003). For Bourdieu (1991b), religious capital persists, circulates and is consumed and recognised within a circumscribed field of religion with its legitimacy and species of capital; therefore, the accumulation of religious capital is subject to the ideological apparatuses which produce it, within which laypeople can wield but hardly redefine religious capital. Yet, Bourdieu may omit the evolving significance of religion in late-modernity, as religion is increasingly conceived of as variously an extra-institutional cultural resource, individualistic spirituality, and 'highly eclectic personal theology,' with emphasis placed on the interior and subjective dimensions of religiosity (Beckford 2003; Guest 2008). Therefore, Verter (2003) provides a more subtle account of religious capital, which he calls 'spiritual capital':

Thus, if religious capital is conceived *à la* Bourdieu as something that is produced and accumulated within a hierocratic institutional framework, spiritual capital may be

regarded as a more widely diffused commodity, governed by more complex patterns of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption (Verter 2003: 158).

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) theorisation of capital, Verter classified three forms of spiritual capital: an embodied state, an objectified state, and an institutionalised state. The embodied state refers to spiritual dispositions (such as knowledge and taste) that accumulate in the unconscious processes of socialisation and are embodied in "habitus", "the socially structured mode of apprehending and acting in the world" (Verter 2003: 159). In the objectified state, spiritual capital is viewed as material and symbolic commodities; that is, religious goods to be consumed, including ideologies and theological knowledge. As Verter (2003: 159) argues, objectified spiritual capital relies on the embodied capital that directs individuals to appropriate and practise these objects and texts: "Proper consumption in the religious field implies knowing the operations through which sacred objects release their power." Finally, spiritual capital exists in an institutionalised state, as religious institutions exercise their power to legitimate and determine the meanings of and access to religious goods.

While admitting that spiritual capital is mostly an institutional product that can diffuse and circulate beyond the religious field, Vector (2003) also notes the existence of extra-institutional forms of spiritual capital, such as in New Age religions, for instance. Vector's theorisation of spiritual capital appears to imply that there is a visible demarcation between different spheres/fields and particularly between the religious and the profane. Yet, instead of seeing spiritual capital as something solely enacted and structured by religious/spiritual spheres which then may "spill over" into the spheres of everyday life, I argue that spiritual capital is better understood as a co-production of a

more sophisticated interactive network woven by different institutions and the practices of everyday life. Put differently, spiritual capital is not simply about how it is acquired and exchanged but how it is made possible in the everyday “doing” of religion.

In light of this, a useful way forward would be to explore the socio-spatially specific, relational, and performative (re)production of spiritual capital (Massey 2005; Holt 2008). Geographers could tease out how spiritual capital can be embodied in forms of postsecular agency that “emerge through social practice within time/space-specific regimes of power” and at particular ‘moments’ in young people’s lives (Ottosson *et al.*, 2017; Holloway, Holt and Mills, 2018). Firstly, spiritual capital is often made possible through embodied practices, performance, and even a process of subjectivation. Yet, as opposed to secular social/cultural capital that might be acquired through manipulable, rationalised and staged behaviours, spiritual capital is also performatively constituted, but achieved through the unconscious ‘doing’ of religion (Bulter 1993; Nash 2000; Holt 2008). Secondly, it is through sociospatial relationalities (such as a contextuality of reciprocity and trust) that normative frames of personhood are transmitted through conscious/beyond-conscious bodily acts (Holt 2008). Thus, spiritual capital is always becoming, and is materialised in the sociospatial context and everyday practices in which people render the representational resources in their social networks and relationships. The analytical frame of spiritual capital may open up possibilities beyond the dualist idea of religious agency where the analyst must choose between comprehending religion as an instrumental resource that people use to solve problems or as preconscious morality, habits, and dispositions that form a meaningful way of being.

### 9.3 Contextualising youth in China: *jiazhiguan*, *guanxi* and *suzhi*

Since the economic and political reform in the late 1970s, Chinese youth have been living under a series of contradictions, including between the emergence of individualistic values and self-reliant neoliberal subjectivities and the state prorogation of collective and socialist values (Liu 2011). This is particularly the case since the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, in that Chinese youth have been involved in a “spiritual or ideological crisis” caused by the collapse of both Maoism and traditional values along with a growing sense of uncertainty about market-oriented reform. The Chinese state has been overwhelmed by anxiety that socialist values have increasingly lost their hold on the younger generations in the face of the pluralisation of Chinese society after forty years of reform. Therefore, how to reconstruct values (*jiazhiguan*, 价值观) among young people has become one of the crucial ideological agendas of the Chinese state in maintaining its legitimacy, thwarting the youth’s revolutionary motivations and preventing peaceful *evolution from the West*. In 2007, the Marxist “three outlooks” (*sanguan*, 三观), consisting of a world outlook, an outlook on life and values, were advocated as an essential task in China's project of spiritual civilisation. In this sense, the state has made efforts to establish normative values for youth, which are defined by a set of criteria such as patriotism, loving the Chinese Communist Party, self-sacrifice, collectivism, striving and atheism. As Liu (2011) suggests, these values represent a: “call on people to be the loyal subjects to the authoritarian Party state, which enjoins the subject to ‘deny’ one’s self and embrace communist-collectivist values such as selflessness, collectivism, a hard and plain life and devotion to the Party, the people and the motherland”. For many Chinese youth, acting in conformity with state-propagated values can be considered as a form of social capital that can be embodied in higher assessment at school and better chances of promotion in the workplace.

However, the state's guidance for young people subjectivity formation is often contradictory, as the state has adopted "a creative blending of neoliberal rationalities and revitalized forms of socialist rationalities" (Sigley 2006: 504). On the other hand, young people are encouraged to be autonomous, free to choose, self-enterprising, and self-reliant in congruence with China's market-oriented reform and the dismantling of the socialist welfare system (Rosen 2009). In this vein, the state-propagated discourse of *suzhi* (quality) addresses the effort to cultivate both productive and governable subjects (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006). While deriving from the state's problematisation of human conduct as indicative of the 'low quality' of the population, which impedes the project of modernisation (Liu 2011), the discourse of *suzhi* is bound up in every aspect of young people's lives in the form of the 'one child' policy, healthcare, education, and the labour market. In most circumstances, *suzhi* equates to one's economic utility as defined by market valuation and human capital (Kipnis 2006; 2007). In essence, the *suzhi* discourse serves in the social engineering of differentiation, fostering the knowledge and skills of a specific population necessary for national economic development while devaluing another (for example, rural migrant workers) as low-quality cheap labourers needed to maintain the relatively competitive labour regime (Kipnis 2007). One of the examples is the state's reform of "*suzhi* education" which primarily targets urban middle-class children in order to improve the competence of the "high-quality" urban population while rural children are still subject to the regime of exam-oriented education that disadvantages them in access to the labour market. Therefore, *suzhi* can be understood as a form of discursive power that disciplines young people through normative selfhood.

Apart from *suzhi*, another crucial social knowledge that influences Chinese young people's youth transition might be *guanxi* (关系), which literally means interpersonal

relationships between individuals. *Guanxi* is better conceived of a sinicised form of social capital, which indicates “carefully constructed and maintained relations between persons which carry mutual obligations and benefits” in Chinese sociality (Qi 2013: 309). Likewise, Bian (2016: 312) defines *guanxi* as “a dyadic, particular, and sentimental tie that has the potential of facilitating favour exchange between the parties connected by the tie.” In the traditional social fabric, the capacity to navigate *guanxi* is the most important marker of adulthood, meaning that one’s ability to get access to resources through personal relations and informal structures (Yeung and Tung 1996). According to Hwang (1987), *guanxi* can be classified as expressive or instrumental ties, with the former characterised by moral obligations and emotional relations that reinforce stable and long-term mutuality between people within networks, while the latter emphasises a rent-seeking strategy in forming beneficial relationships. Therefore, *guanxi* works closely with other social norms in China, including *renqing* (interpersonal behaviour, 人情), *mianzi* (‘face’, 面子), and *xinyong* (trustworthiness, 信用), which jointly impose constraints by exerting social and emotional pressure on individuals (Qi 2013; Bian 2018). If *jiazhiguan* and *suzhi* entail the state’s effort to shape the desired subjectivity of young people in spiritual and embodied terms respectively, *guanxi* may in turn open up a form of agency which individuals utilise to form informal social ties and networks beyond institutional spheres. In this literature, *guanxi* tend to be interpreted in terms of embedded resources within specific networks, operating under the relational logic of asymmetrical exchange in which both the receiver and granter seek favours or anticipate the future return of favours (Lin 2001; Bian 2018). In sum, *jiazhiguan*, *suzhi*, and *guanxi* offer a specific texture of the social fabric to understand youth transition in the context of China’s social and economic transformation.

## **9.4 Youth transition under China's neoliberal transformation: hope and despair**

### **9.4.1 The story of Tian Yu: a young Foxconn suicide survivor**

At 8 a.m., March 17, 2010, overwhelmed by the feeling that she described as “helpless and gruelling” at Foxconn, Tian Yu jumped from her fourth-floor dormitory at the company's Longhua plant in Shenzhen. At the age of 17, she was the youngest Foxconn worker who attempted suicide, along with the other 17 young Foxconn workers aged from 18-25 to have attempted suicide in 2010. Fortunately, Yu eventually survived after various operations and three months of treatment, despite being left paralysed from the waist down and suffering from psychological damage caused by the suicide attempt<sup>13</sup>.

Yu was born in February 1993 into a peasant family in a village in Hubei Province. Like many adults in her village, Yu's parents were rural-to-urban migrants who made their livelihoods far away from home. Yu was therefore one of the “left-behind children” of her generation, who were typically brought up by grandparents, and experienced a lonely childhood. However, rural life did not limit her aspirations, as she intended to leave the village to pursue a more wealthy and modern urban lifestyle one day. Like many rural youths, Yu did not go to high school but instead opted to complete a skills training course at a vocational school in order to help her secure a job at the city in the future. In early February 2010, Yu decided to leave the village to seek a job in Shenzhen, Guangdong Province, one of China's most economically developed areas which was the first to open up to global capitalism. She recalled that:

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<sup>13</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 15. December 2010. <https://www.scmp.com/article/733389/struggle-foxconn-girl-who-wanted-die>



My cousin brought me to the long-distance coach station. I was joining many rural youths leaving the land to find jobs in the city. It was the first time in my life that I was far away from home, my familiar place, food and people ... Getting off the coach, my first impression of the industrial town was that Shenzhen was nothing like what I had seen on TV<sup>14</sup>.

Yu's curiosity and enthusiasm quickly disappeared, because the reality of the industrial town did not match her imagination of Shenzhen as a modern and lively city. The prosperity of Shenzhen had nothing to do with Yu, as she said: "I had never been to Shenzhen's city centre and just stayed inside the plant. Foxconn is a very large factory with many people, but people are cold there. Friendly chit-chat is not common."<sup>15</sup>

After the pre-work training about the rules and regulations at Foxconn, Yu was formally employed as an assembly-line worker with the staff number F9347140. Yu's job was far from technical, and involved checking computer screens for surface defects. However, she had to complete every action in seconds before the next item rushed along the production line. For Yu, this monotonous process lasted for 10 hours a day. The switch from being a student to an assembly-line worker appeared to happen so dramatically that she had no anticipation of the harsh production regime she was going to face. As a 17-year-old girl, Yu had never experienced severe humiliation before, but this happened every day due to Foxconn's punishment-oriented management. As she recalled,

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<sup>14</sup> This quotation comes from Chan's (2013) interview with Tian Yu.

<sup>15</sup> *South China Morning Post*. 15. December 2010. <https://www.scmp.com/article/733389/struggle-foxconn-girl-who-wanted-die>; *South China Morning Post*. 24. April 2013. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1222225/foxconn-suicide-survivor-says-no-job-worth-ending-your-life-over>

I didn't make any mistakes on the products, but the line leader blamed me anyway ...

I saw a girl who was forced to stand at attention for hours for supposedly making an error. Public humiliations occurred several times during the working month<sup>16</sup>.

Apart from the militarised management, what troubled Yu most was that she had made no friends even after having worked at Foxconn for one month. She was randomly assigned to a dormitory with workers who often worked different shifts and it was hard to meet one another. For Yu, it was difficult to make friends at Foxconn because the round-the-clock, military-style training and discipline broke up socialised space and isolated everyone from one another.



Figure 9-1. The survivor Tian Yu

Source: photograph from Chan (2013)

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<sup>16</sup> This quotation comes from Chan's (2013) interview with Tian Yu.

An accumulation of despair eventually reached a physiological limit in the middle of March 2010 when Yu encountered frustration in claiming her wages. Her supervisor told her that her personnel file and documents were kept in another Foxconn plant, in the Guanlan district, and she needed to go there to receive her pay. With only five yuan left in her pocket, Tian took a bus to Guanlan plant, but she could not find any information about her wages as the managers and administrators all denied responsibility and told her to ask someone else. After a fruitless day of searching and with no money left, she walked for around 10 km back to her dormitory and cried herself to sleep without dinner. Even worse, unfortunately, Yuan's mobile phone was broken at that time, and she could not call her parents to ask for help. She was overwhelmed by anger and desperation at that time, and her dormitory mates were on night shift so that there was no one she could rely on. The next morning, Yu jumped from the dormitory in utter helplessness<sup>17</sup>.

Yu's story epitomises the tragedy of the 18 young Foxconn workers who committed suicide in 2010. It is possibly not a coincidence that they were all young rural-to-urban migrant workers aged from 17-25, as this age group may face the toughest and most precarious period in which they are experiencing the transition to adulthood, leaving the village for the city, learning to be independent, and struggling through their early careers. In this section, I elaborate on how China's neoliberal transformation has created new "vital conjunctures" (Johnson-Hanks 2002) in which young migrant struggle to navigate their marginal working-class adulthood.

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<sup>17</sup> *South China Morning Post*. 15. December 2010. <https://www.scmp.com/article/733389/struggle-foxconn-girl-who-wanted-die>

#### **9.4.2 Learning to be labour: education, capital and suzhi**

China's political and economic reform has unleashed millions of rural young people from their homeland, enabling them to be free-floating labourers that have facilitated the rise of China as "the factory of the world". This young labour force provide the "demographic dividend" that has fuelled China's rapid economic growth over the past three decades. However, improving the quality of these young labourers to meet the urgent demands of industrial development has been a crucial task for the party-state governance (Kipnis 2007). It is against this backdrop that the Chinese state started to re-emphasise the imperative of education in the country's transition to a market economy. This is evident in the state-reinforced expansion of vocational education over the past two decades in order to increase the quality and labour skills of young people in congruence with China's labour-intensive manufacturing economy (Koo 2015; Pun and Koo 2018). As Koo (2015) argues, the Chinese state's promotion of vocational education is in the service of the country's neoliberal transition, and is therefore subject to a neoliberal ideology of human resources which believes that "the economic success of individuals, and also of whole economies, depend on how extensively and effectively people invest in themselves" (Beck 2002: 3). This ideology is widely accepted among rural youth, who attempt to increase their employability and achieve upward mobility by attending vocational schools. Until 2012, enrolment in vocational education at high-school level (including at technical secondary schools, vocational high schools and skilled workers' schools) had reached 21.13 million, with 7.54 million new enrolments in 2012<sup>18</sup>. Given the minimal opportunities for rural youth to gain access to higher education, attending vocational schools is seen to be the most feasible way for them to accumulate human capital and

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<sup>18</sup> Central Government of the People's Republic of China. 2013. "Education at High School Level." Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China Website, October 29. Accessed April 15, 2019. [http://big5.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/test/2013-10/29/content\\_2517467.htm](http://big5.gov.cn/gate/big5/www.gov.cn/test/2013-10/29/content_2517467.htm)

increase their competitiveness in the labour market. Among the 20 youth informants in this study, 14 had attended vocational schools for varying periods from 6 months to 3 years, while the others continued at high school or left education entirely<sup>19</sup>.

In vocational schools, students are generally required to cultivate an active individualised strategy that encourages personal responsibility for their employability. For example, the young migrant worker Hui told me that, “Be master of your own future” is the famous slogan of the vocational school he attended. The school required him to join a one-year internship in a manufacturing factory as a compulsory element in attaining a vocational degree. On the other hand, to meet the need for young and productive labourers, many factories actively engage in business partnerships with vocational schools that “dispatch” students to work as trainees in their factories or directly recommend graduates for formal jobs. As Hui remarked, the vocational school guaranteed him a job as a technician at Foxconn after graduation, yet the job he received did not meet his expectations because Foxconn allowed only limited opportunities for him to practise the technical skills he had learned and instead he just repeated the same operation to test mobile phone models. Hui, therefore, faced emotional stress due to the discrepancy between his dream of searching for a technical job and the programmatic factory life.

Likewise, other young migrant workers who attended vocational schools also complained that the school trapped them and the knowledge and skills they learned neither matched the work they were doing nor increased their competitiveness in labour market.

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<sup>19</sup> According to China’s laws, students are obliged to complete 9 years of compulsory education with the government’s support of free tuition fees, but students need to pay for textbooks and accommodation. In this study, all youth informants had completed middle school education.

I learned software development in vocational school. They only taught me very basic things, so it is difficult to find a job. But they (employers) usually demanded workers highly skilled in computer programming. I was finally recommended to a printing company where I was responsible for graphic design. However, I was only accepted as a trainee with a very low salary, because they thought I lacked the capacity for imagination. I was educated in an examination-oriented system, and no one taught me this before. (Xiaolong, male, 25-year-old worker)

Xiaojie appeared to accept the neoliberal ideology of self-responsibility and thereby attributed his marginalised situation more to his own capability than to the unjust partnership between vocational schools and factories. In essence, the outcome of the investment in human capital is associated with class differences, as “working-class families are systematically disadvantaged by the strategic processes of ‘self-investment’ in neoliberal times” (Koo 2015: 48). Vocational education is embedded in China’s mixed neoliberal values that integrate authoritarian state control and collective morality with the mechanisms of the market (Pun and Koo 2018). In particular, the *hukou* household registration system and the discursive power of *suzhi* have jointly created an institution-based opportunity structure that manipulates rural migrants into becoming cheap labourers to feed China’s industrialisation (Fan 2002; Kipnis 2007).

Xiaojie, a 28-year-old male migrant, shared stories of how the dominant labour regime devalues his professional training and blocks his path to upward mobility.

I majored in financial management in a vocational school in Huizhou, but no company was willing to employ me, because they didn't trust a rural migrant. They didn't think that I could handle the position. Afterward, I worked in several jobs in different cities.

As Sun (2009: 637) argues, *suzhi* is inscribed into the geographical imagination of individuals, and in particular urban residents, as it “supposedly inheres in the bodies from that particular place, which legitimates the definition, branding, and classification of people according to their place of origin”. It is thus no wonder that one's place of origin even overrides professional training in finding a job.

For many rural youths, “investment for a better future” as propagated by state and vocational education institutions has been shown to be an illusion after they switched from school to the labour market. Their self-investment has not increased their chances of upward mobility but only matches both the expansion of vocational education and the state's demands for cheap labourers. In such circumstances, manufacturing factories like Foxconn have become the most feasible places accommodating the “urban dreams” of millions of rural youths.

#### **9.4.3 *Guanxi*: surviving the workplace**

For many young rural migrant workers, establishing *guanxi* or personalised networks of influence at the workplace is a most challenging prospect during their early careers. This is particularly the case under the militarised management at Foxconn in which workers are largely deprived of spontaneous interpersonal relations and turned into hierarchically organised and atomised subjects. Young workers usually need to cope with two sets of *guanxi*, including personal relations with supervisors and other assembly line workers. In

Chapter 5, I have elaborated on how Foxconn's militarised management has created tension and distrust both between managers and production workers and among workers themselves. However, this is not a uniform scenario, given that workers may cultivate their own personalised networks beyond institutionalised and hierarchical relations in order to make their working spaces more habitable. For example, establishing *guanxi* is such an effort to create informal spaces that enable some migrant workers to survive the workplace yet disadvantage others.

Jiale was a 22-year-old who had worked at Foxconn for two years. When he was humiliated by his line leader, Jiale started to realise how *guanxi* mattered at the workplace in terms of chances of promotion, mitigating humiliation and reducing workloads. In the third month after he had joined Foxconn, Jiale made a minor mistake because of the mislabelling of one product, but his line leader blamed him at the morning meeting, which made him lose face in front of all his colleagues. He believed that the line leader overreacted to his mistake because he had not dealt with the *guanxi* with his line leader properly and had argued with him. According to Jiale's observation, apart from the common methods such as giving gifts and social eating, the most crucial way to establish *guanxi* with supervisors was to being docile and loyal to them. Jiale told me that a few workers who had good *guanxi* with supervisors were rarely blamed even if they made obvious mistakes. Instead, more coercive punishments were more likely to be targeted at more rebellious workers. However, establishing personalised relations with supervisors is often devalued as *liuxu paima* (shameless flattering, 溜须拍马) by most production workers. Some young workers instead tried to establish *guanxi* with workmates and sought to create small networks among workers to protect themselves. For example, a new worker, Lilong, remarked that:



The line heads tend to humiliate those new workers, scolding them seriously even when they made small mistakes. But it depends on whether or not you have close workmates to support you. You know, they always bully the weak and fear the strong. Because I have five close friends or fellow-townsmen at the same workshop and we support each other, the line leaders don't dare to bully us deliberately.

However, these interpersonal networks of influence only operate in segmented and largely restricted spaces, and Foxconn's militarised management along with the state's regulation of labour have successfully stifled the possibility of large-scale labour protests.

#### **9.4.4 Master production, upward mobility and hopelessness**

The new generation of rural migrant workers often have higher expectations of life and upward mobility than their elders; however, working at manufacturing factories like Foxconn does not coincide with their aspirations. Many young workers complained that they could not attain any sense of achievement and hope under the standardised production and hierarchical management. Foxconn's master production adopted what Kemp (2013) defines as standardisation, a system by which production workers can master standardised operational procedures, and use standardised machinery, materials, and tools. Additionally, every employee is only responsible for a particular process, or even only responsible for a specific action and operations. The young worker Wu entered Foxconn in 2015 after he had completed vocational education. However, he quit his job one year later because, as he claimed, he could not find any motivation to continue his work:

I feel I have no future at Foxconn. I learned mechatronics at vocational school, but what I am doing has nothing to do with this. Foxconn will gradually wear away your willpower and impetus. I think any ambitious young people shouldn't stay there for long ... Although I was responsible for repairing machines, unlike what other assembly line workers do, it is indeed a quite unskilful job. You only need to repair a certain kind of machine so the technologies are very limited. Unlike some small factories that require comprehensive technicians, Foxconn only required you to have expertise at certain operations. So, I learned nothing at Foxconn. (Wu, male, 22-year-old)

Apart from the standardised production and sophisticated division of labour, Foxconn's highly hierarchical management allows only limited opportunities for upward mobility among young workers. Normally, a young worker is only eligible for promotion to group leader (of a subunit of an assembly line) after having worked for 3 years with good performance. For example, the 26-year-old worker Liujun explained to me:

Why did I finally quit the job? Because there was nearly no space for promotion. If the line leaders didn't leave their positions, the group leaders couldn't be promoted. I was promoted to be a group leader before because our previous group leader was promoted to be deputy line leader. If you have worked in Foxconn for several years, perhaps you could only become a group leader. So, I think my life shouldn't be like that. (Liujun, male)

The loss of hope was overwhelming among young workers at Foxconn, and this feeling was further reinforced after the Foxconn suicide events when the company started to use

robots to substantially replace some of the labour force. Since 2015, the Foxconn factory has laid off approximately 110,000 production workers thanks to the introduction of robots.<sup>20</sup> By replacing workers with robots, Foxconn has substantially reduced its labour costs and relieved itself of any issues stemming from the exploitation of workers. However, in doing so, it has ultimately ended up not only putting hundreds of thousands of people and particularly young rural migrants out of work but also reinforced its Taylorist mode of production. Zhenjie, a 28-year-old technician who had worked at Foxconn for 7 years, told me that the introduction of robots and other autonomous technology had deprived him of any sense of achievement, hope and upward mobility that he had ever had:

I held a technical position at Foxconn before, but the job became less and less challenging as digital control techniques were widely introduced in recent years. What you needed to do was a simple operation, and you didn't need to programme it because the programming was already done for you. Previously, I needed to programme the machine but in recent years I just operated the robots. This is quite unskilful. I feel I have no future.

## **9.5 Spiritual capital and the remaking of working-class adulthood**

As I have shown above, China's neoliberal transformation has largely structured the trajectory of the transition to adulthood of migrant working-class youth. Due to the structural inequalities inflicted by the neoliberal regime of education and labour and the lack of the social, cultural and human capital that would enable them to achieve upward

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<sup>20</sup> *South China Morning Post*, 21 May 2016. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/economy/article/1949918/rise-robots-60000-workers-culled-just-one-factory-chinas>

mobility, it is challenging for young rural migrant workers to acquire a sense of order and self-navigation in their transition to adulthood. This can partially explain why 18 young people attempted suicide at Foxconn. In this section, however, I elaborate on how Christianity can generate a form of spiritual capital that enables young migrant workers to attain an alternative and spiritually coherent model of adulthood.

### **9.5.1 Cultivating spiritual capital: religious networks and *jiazhiguan***

As I have suggested, spiritual capital is produced, accumulated and exchanged in and beyond institutional spheres. For many young migrant workers, spiritual capital is primarily cultivated in two forms. On the one hand, Christian churches and their associated communal life provide interpersonal networks in contrast to the highly atomised factory life under neoliberal management. On the other hand, Christian knowledge and ethics offer young migrant workers alternative *jiazhiguan* (values) through which they can re-interpret themselves and cultivate certain kinds of spiritual and psychological coherence such that they can attain order and self-navigation to mediate the chaos, despair, and precariousness that may otherwise be overwhelming.

Firstly, access to local communal participation in churches opens up a social network and the possibility of empowerment for young workers. Echoing Cao's (2010) research on migrant workers in Wenzhou's churches, the migrant workers in this study acquired symbolic power through religious participation. In Cao's (2010) ethnographic work, migrant workers obtained a certain level of upward social mobility through interactions with boss Christians, but their position was nevertheless conditioned by the local-migrant dichotomy, so that migrant workers cannot enter the power core of Wenzhou's churches. In contrast, many churches in Shenzhen are more inclusive in the sense that young

migrant workers play a crucial role in church organisation and operations. In the churches that I investigated, somewhat differently from Cao's descriptions, migrant workers had largely taken over responsibility for the day-to-day church operations. In Sanzhuli church, young migrant workers have been the most active group in church management concerning the organisation of religious and evangelical activities. This communal participation has also created a network of support for young migrant workers and particularly those who are psychologically vulnerable. For example, the 19-year-old Christian worker Lihua told me that participating in the youth fellowship in the church had made her more mature and outgoing:

I used to feel very inferior and rarely talked with others when I first arrived at Foxconn. On the occasions with strangers, I would walk away to the corner and avoid talking with them. It was only when I participated in the youth fellowship that I gradually learned to communicate with strangers. I felt very comfortable to talk with brothers and sisters in the church. It's a place where I can lay down my guard and relax. So, I've become more outgoing than before. I gradually came to know that Christian faith is not only written in the Bible but you can see it in the Christian fellows around you.

A few young migrant workers even established their own religious networks by organising Christian congregations. For example, Hui is one of the leaders of Foxconn Church B, which was established by Foxconn workers themselves. Hui suggested that taking charge of the operations of a house church not only allowed her to cultivate organisational, preaching and musical skills but also offered an outlet for the development of spiritual life. In 2016, he quit his job as an assembly worker at Foxconn for a full-time commitment to the church; he also noted that co-supervising a church with more than 100

adherents propelled him to improve himself in terms of Biblical knowledge and public speaking ability.

Secondly, and most importantly, Christian discourses and knowledge have offered young migrant workers a form of spiritual capital that reshapes their *jiazhiguan* (values) and enables them to attain a more psychologically coherent adulthood. In this sense, spiritual capital was produced through the mastery of specific types of spiritual knowledge such as dispositions, conduct, ways of thinking, and the ability to enact religious morality.

***Idolatry and Christian freedom.*** In a youth fellowship at Foxconn House Church A, the 28-year-old worker Gao shared his experience about how Christian *jiazhiguan* (values) offered him freedom and order, which substantially reformulated his chaotic life after he first graduated from vocational school. Despite being a rural migrant, Gao considered himself as an ambitious youth who strove to escape from the blue-collar jobs that most rural migrants held. After he quit his first job as a factory worker, Gao turned to a marketing company and became a salesman. As Gao said, he was addicted to stories about the histories of striving by successful men and therefore considered Chairman Mao and Jack Ma (Chinese businessman and founder of the Alibaba group) as his idols and life directors. In order to achieve his dream of becoming a successful man, Gao attended a few training classes that he described as “devil training camps” to increase his selling techniques and confidence. However, his new job did not offer him a stable income even for daily expenditure because of the limited numbers of products he sold. Gao had changed jobs four times in the subsequent 3 years and was overwhelmed by feelings of anxiety and depression. He said: “I was crazy and really thirsty to succeed during that time”. Afterwards, Gao converted to Christianity in 2015 when he worked at a company

operated by a Christian entrepreneur. Gao told me that Christianity has fundamentally reshaped his system of *jiazhiguan*:

We Chinese always like to set up icons for you to follow. For example, when we're children, we're encouraged to follow Lei Feng<sup>[21]</sup>. Our education encouraged me to learn the spirit of Chairman Mao. I used to admire Chairman Mao very much, but after I converted to Christianity I started to realise we shouldn't idolise any icon. I started to think that what Chairman Mao said was not necessarily true ... The human is powerless. I have realised I should confront my weaknesses rather than conceal them, and submit myself to God. What I need are confidence and patience.

When I asked Gao why Christians should not encourage idolatry, he replied that it would blind him. He added that the Christian *jiazhiguan* (values) made him realise that what he desperately pursued before was more likely what the idols tell him to pursue, regardless of whether or not it is suitable for him. In this sense, I did not consider Gao's switched focus from idols to God as *jiazhiguan* that transferred his this-worldly pursuit to transcendence (for example, the "human is powerless" and "submit yourself to God" in the quotation above); instead, I argue that Christian *jiazhiguan* provided him with a certain degree of freedom and autonomy through which he could critically and reflectively re-examine secular values and ideologies and therefore re-adjust his aspirations and way of life.

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<sup>21</sup> Lei Feng was a soldier and a Communist Party member in China. After his death, he was portrayed as a selfless and modest person devoted to the CCP and Mao Zedong under the state's propaganda campaign. Lei's image as a role model and serviceman has endured for several decades in China.

*Tolerance, patience and life attitude.* For many young rural migrants, the yearning for upward mobility made them frequently change jobs to seek better opportunities. According to Yang's (2013) research, approximately 44% of rural migrant workers switched jobs within one year while only 26.9% stayed in the same work unit for more than 3 years. Some young rural migrants quit their factory jobs because they could not tolerate the exploitative and unfree factory life. For example, a distinctive group of semi-employed migrant youth who were jokingly described in the Chinese media as "Sanhe Gods" has emerged around the Sanhe Human Resources Market in Shenzhen. This group of young migrants is depicted as pessimistic and week-willed youths who cannot tolerate the hardship of factory work and only accept low-wage jobs that merely sufficient to sustain their low living costs. Young rural migrant workers are therefore characterised by frequent job mobility and precarious lives in China's neoliberal transition. However, this general scene is somehow at odds with the young Christian migrant workers who exhibit more patience and tolerance in their jobs. When I asked Yang how Christianity has changed the way he looked at the world, he replied:

Before I converted to Christianity, I always looked at things with worldly views and tended to go with the flow. If I saw my friend had a job with a higher salary than mine, I would be jealous of him and considered changing my job. But I gradually became mature and learned to be patient. (Yang, male, 22-year-old)

The teaching to be tolerant and patient is widely celebrated by the churches, especially among the pastors and senior Christians. For example, prior to being appointed the sexton of Sanzhuli Church, the senior migrant worker Wang worked in Shenzhen's factories for 15 years. He has often taught young migrant workers that Christians should love their



jobs: whether your wage was calculated by the length of work or the number of products, and whether or not the managers engaged in surveillance, Christian workers ought to work with a full spirit because “you need to make a confession before God one day”.

In my interviews, the word “*tashi*” (steadfast) frequently appeared. For example, the 27-year-old Foxconn worker Huang told me that being *tashi* was one of the most valuable assets she learned from the senior Christians in the church. She considered being patient and *tashi* as important markers of Christian adulthood:

Brother Chen and sister Liao (the church leaders of Foxconn House Church A) always taught me to be *tashi*: an adult Christian should have a stable personality and avoid rashness and impatience.

Huang has continually worked in Foxconn for nearly four years. Echoing the church’s teachings, she believed that young Christian workers should have the proper attitude to their work:

For an ordinary worker, you should try to do well in what you ought to do. As the Bible teaches us: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men” (Colossians 3:23). No matter whether managers or workers, they are only placed in different positions. They are all the children of God. They are equal. So, just do what you ought to do, and in God’s eye, you are glorified.

From this quotation, Christian discourse appears to generate different *jiazhiguan* (values) about labour and work that emphasise devotion to one’s current position. Huang’s

interpretation of work seems to be rooted in the Protestant ethic that “it was not what the believer did but the commitment with which she or he did it that determined the spiritual quality of an action” (Abbey, 2014: 90). By attributing transcendent meaning to work, young migrant workers became more tolerated and patient about their work and therefore acquired a particular source of spiritual coherence in comparison with the psychologically vulnerable youths at Foxconn. In this sense, Christian *jiazhiguan* actually served as a form of spiritual capital or emotional resource that migrant youths utilised to navigate their precarious adulthood. This is also illustrated by the narrative of Minggang, a 28-year-old Foxconn worker who successfully prevented himself from committing suicide because of the therapeutic effects of Christianity. When he entered Foxconn initially, he was very depressed and always complained about his life: “I often used to blame my parents who weren’t able to support me to get a better education, which resulted in my bad situation now”. However, fortunately, he said that:

When the suicide event happened in 2010, it didn’t affect me seriously because I already believed in Jesus at that time. If not, I guess I would be one of their successors. If only they had believed in God! They could know God was always with them.

### **9.5.2 Performing spiritual capital: *guanxi* and Christian wisdom**

As I have discussed above, spiritual capital (including that from religious networks and Christian *jiazhiguan*) not only operate within the field of religion but also shape young migrants’ working practices and interpretation of adulthood. In this sense, spiritual capital can create inter-institutional spaces that cross the boundaries between religion and everyday life. In what follows, I further show that spiritual capital is not merely manifest in the ways in which religious discourses and knowledge are utilised in everyday life, but

rather about how it is ‘done’ and performatively constituted, and implicated in contextualised interpersonal relations (as *guanxi*, in this chapter).

In the context of Chinese culture, to be a Christian cannot be separated from the social fabric of *guanxi*. In the interviews, many young Christian insisted that to be a spiritually mature Christian was primarily about “living out the image of God Jesus” (活出耶稣基督的样子) and the capacity to cope with interpersonal *guanxi* in accordance with God’s will. They frequently reported that Christian knowledge or theology made them wiser in terms of navigating interpersonal *guanxi*.

Xiaolong was a 22-year-old rural migrant who had worked as an assistant chef after graduating from vocational school. He told me that Christian knowledge and dispositions offered him different sources of wisdom in coping with the *guanxi* at the workplace:

Quan: You mentioned that Christianity has influenced the way you deal with interpersonal *guanxi*?

Xiaolong: Yeah.

Quan: How does this happen?

Xiaolong: Sometimes I’m like a kid, a naughty kid. It’s as if the holy spirit left my body. But if I listen to God’s words, I’ll be very polite to my colleagues. Fellowship, praying, and reading the Bible all benefitted me a lot and made me wiser in dealing with interpersonal *guanxi*. The Bible says: be as shrewd as snakes and as soft (温柔) as doves<sup>22</sup>. If you want to run towards your goal, you do not necessarily walk straight to it. You can also take a tortuous path to it, as in the movement of snakes. Although

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<sup>22</sup> The original verse is “Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent doves” (Matthew 10:16).

it covers a longer distance, you can arrive at the destination as well. In terms of speaking, you should be as soft as doves. I used to have a bad temper, but now I gradually changed the way I get along with my colleague and boss ... So, I get along well with my colleagues and boss, quite harmoniously. I have a co-worker one year younger than me, and he said the boss thought very highly of me.

In the interviews, holding back the tongue and in particular speaking in a proper manner are accepted by many young Christians as a pearl of Christian wisdom to maintain their interpersonal relationships. Unlike many rebellious non-Christian workers, young Christian workers rarely argue with or offend their supervisors.

Likewise, the 19-year-old worker Duo shared his story about how Christian wisdom refined his *guanxi* at the workplace when he was working at a small factory. Despite being one of the youngest workers, Duo was conceived by his co-workers as the most helpful and reliable workmate on the factory floor. When some workers worked an extra shift in the evening, Duo often came back to the factory and cooked *tong shui* (糖水) dessert for them which, as he said, could slightly relieve the hardship of his workmates. Duo insisted that the best way to make his factory life better was just to behave in the way that a Christian should, focusing on your own work and treating your workmates and superiors kindly. Additionally, Christian wisdom provided him the means to cope with the *guanxi* with his supervisors:

Duo: The profits of the factory were very low. So, I came up with an idea that could improve the productivity of the assembly line: we should position the efficient workers at the front of the assembly line and the less effective ones at the end. This is human

nature; we like to compete and therefore the less efficient workers would try to follow the effective ones.

Quan: So, you relayed this idea to your shop manager?

Duo: I let him know about this idea, but I didn't tell him directly. Because "do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen". I recalled this verse of the Bible, so I spoke good words to my supervisor and indirectly addressed my idea to him. My supervisor was very willing to follow my idea. As I spiritually grew, I realised that managing your tongue was very important for a Christian ... The idea finally became my supervisor's because I didn't give him any suggestions.

Apart from manner and speech, many young Christian workers also considered sacrifice, unconditional love and suffering loss as wisdom that might sometime improve their situation unexpectedly. For example, the 25-year-old woman worker Xueyi shared with me her story about how she got along with classmates at vocational school. Xueyi's performance was among the best in the class when she was studying graphic design at vocational school. She always shared learning materials and skills with other students, even though other they were unwilling to do so because of the competitiveness. Xueyi believes that sharing and sacrifice are something that God encourages. However, as she notes, she had not anticipated the rewards from God: she became the most trustworthy person in her class and was recommended to be monitor by her classmates. Xueyi told me emotionally with tears of joy: "If I solely relied on my own, I couldn't make it. This is God's love."

Similarly, the 25-year-old worker Shenyi considered suffering loss as another form of wisdom and blessing in exchange for good *guanxi* with workmates or supervisors:

Sometimes God can give you comfortable interpersonal *guanxi*. You know, *guanxi* is the most essential relationship between people. After I converted to Christianity, God gave me peace. I have no longer complained, even if I suffered loss or was taken advantage of [at the workplace]. Because God gives you the job. If you cannot change your circumstances, you just change yourself. These [sufferings or being taken advantage of] are God's blessing. It can gradually improve your interpersonal *guanxi*. When I initially entered the factory, they were all indifferent to me ... But now, if I can't say they wholly open their hearts to me, they at least treat me very sincerely and speak freely to me.

In this section, I have described a specific form of spiritual capital which is Christian wisdom, and how it was manoeuvred by young migrant workers to establish *guanxi* or interpersonal networks of influence in their transitions to adulthood. However, young Christian migrant workers' establishment of *guanxi* in the workplace is not simply an instrumental enactment of existing Christian knowledge or cultural resources in strategies of everyday life. Instead, spiritual capital may emerge within the processes of performance and the "doing" of Christianity (Mahmood 2005) in line with "God's will"; for example, in "living out the image of God Jesus". Many young Christian workers emphasised the proper ways they performed God's will more than the Christian teachings *per se*. From a secular-liberal perspective, the young Christian workers' performance of Christian wisdom scarcely challenges or subverts existing power relations and even sometimes reproduces the neoliberal labour regime. Yet, if we think of postsecular

subjectivity or agency not as a synonym for resistance to structures of power but rather as a modality of action, young Christian workers' acquisition and performance of spiritual capital indeed articulate a positive and spiritually coherent way of being beyond the chaotic, atomised, psychologically vulnerable personhood normalised by the neoliberal regime.

## **9.6 Conclusion**

In an age of the neoliberal transformation of the economy in Shenzhen, the coalition of the state and free market regime appears to create more opportunities and hope for rural migrant youth in comparison to Mao's era where the state strictly controlled the mobility of the rural population. Therefore, young migrant workers have high expectations for their careers, incomes, and social status and are willing to accept the neoliberal ideologies of self-responsibility and self-investment. The massive expansion of vocational education exactly meets young working-class labourers, and in particular rural youths' aspirations for upward mobility. Echoing the findings of Koo's (2016) and Pun's (2018) research, this chapter suggests that the neoliberal regime of vocational education can scarcely secure their job security and proper employment but rather leads them to low-skilled cheap labour in tandem with the development of labour-intensive manufacturing industry in Shenzhen. Apart from the broader economic forces, I also suggest that the discursive power of *suzhi* and social relations of *guanxi* jointly shape the way rural youths survive the marketplace. Under the hierarchical and atomised labour regime, as I have repeatedly outlined in previous chapters, young migrant workers find it difficult to form their social capital and interpersonal relations, and thereby their aspirations and hope are detrimentally affected.

Following the intersectional approach outlined in Chapter 7 and 8, this chapter further examines the possibility of postsecular subjectivity and agency by focusing on young migrant workers' transition to working-class adulthood. The concept of spiritual capital can contribute to this enterprise by providing a tool to analyse how religion can be utilised as a form of social and cultural capital that enables an alternative pathway to adulthood. I argue that postsecular subjectivity and agency emerge within and are embedded in the fabric of social capital and interpersonal relations (for example, in *guanxi*) that condition the way young migrant workers produce, consume and perform the spiritual resources of Christianity. I argue that we cannot equate religious agency with religious practice *per se* while failing to analyse spiritual and social resources and the everyday sociability that condition the way individuals make sense of and manoeuvre religious meanings. In this chapter, spiritual capital is shown to enable young rural migrant workers to reformulate their *jiazhiguan* (values), form a religious community, and establish *guanxi* (interpersonal relations of influence). In this sense, young Christian workers are capable of cultivating spiritual capital to constitute a more emotionally coherent adulthood as an alternative to the personhood normalised by the neoliberal regime.



## **Chapter 10. Conclusion**

### **10.1 Introduction**

Now, at the end of this thesis, I would like to conclude with a summary of the key research findings, central arguments, and contributions presented so far by responding to the theoretical registers outlined in chapter 2. My essential efforts in this thesis are to provide a dialectical re-evaluation of secularity and postsecularity. Therefore, I begin by revisiting the chapters in this thesis. I then outline four central inquiries and contributions, which can be of benefit to an agenda for the geography of secularity and postsecularity. Finally, I consider the implications of this research for potential future directions in the geography of religion.

### **10.2 Revisiting the chapters in the thesis**

I now revisit briefly the seven substantive chapters (Chapters 2, 3 and 5-9) in this thesis. In chapter 2, I theorised secularity and postsecularity as mutually constituted epistemologies and conditions of being for the subsequent analysis and argued that human geography needs to consider how postsecular ethics and subjectivities articulate, and co-evolve with, secular conditions of being in the world (Research Question 1). Moreover, by systematically reviewing the literature on postsecularity, I highlighted postsecularity as involving new religious subjectivities, ethics and agency that emerge from and are engendered by the secular conditions of being and in particular the neoliberal transition in Shenzhen (in association with Research Question 3). I also argued that secularity and postsecularity are both context-contingent and research therefore needs to examine their

variegated forms and spatial configurations in non-Western contexts (Research Question 2). Finally, I developed a new approach that emphasises intersectionality among migrants to ground the understanding of secularity and postsecularity in specific social and power relations (Research Question 4).

In chapter 3, I have provided a geo-historical account of secularity and secularism in China. As opposed to Western societies, in which secularism serves as a mediated effect between the state and religion, China's secularity is a top-down political-ideological process that produces secular and governable subjects. In imperial, Republican and socialist China, individuals were required to be "emancipated" from religious or traditional orientations and communities such that they could be directly absorbed into the sphere of state power. In the post-reform era, as I have shown in the empirical chapters, neoliberal ideologies that emphasise atomised, self-responsible and productive subjects are actually in line with China's historical legacies of secularity. Therefore, I argue that the spatial configuration of secularity in China is characterised by a combination of neoliberal governance, state developmentalism, and autocratic rule working in concert to produce productive, docile and governable subjects. On the other hand, I also situate the possibility of postsecularity in the nationwide religious revival in China, where religion plays an increasingly important role in "moral reconstruction" and in the making of civil society. In section 10.4, I provide more discussion of Research Question 2.

In chapter 5, in response to Research Question 1, I have shown that Christian theo-ethics not only negotiate neoliberal secularity but also co-constitute the latter. On the one hand, neoliberalism has brought about a more flexible form of secularity that targets the subjectivities, affects and psychological states of individuals. However, it is through these

neoliberal conditions of being that theo-ethics and hybrid expressions of faith-through-praxis are made possible. In chapter 5, I argue that postsecular ethics do not necessarily resist neoliberal governance but also sometimes point to a more humanistic and coherent neoliberal order. This argument is further illustrated in Chapters 6-9 in that migrant workers reframe rather than simply challenge neoliberal lived experiences by drawing on religious ethics.

Chapter 7 contributes to the postsecular critique that emphasises theology, affects and bodily technologies, which cannot be simply captured by “social explanation” and secular epistemologies. It also answers how new religious ethics – for example, the theologically mediated discourses of *benfen* and *suzhi* – are engendered through theology-by-praxis. While moving beyond “social explanation”, although migrant workers’ projects of self-transformation do not critically challenge existing power relations, they nevertheless set conditions for processes of neoliberal subjectivation (Mahmood 2005) by reconstituting devalued and allegedly inferior labouring subjects as morally superior and faithful-virtuous subjects. This argument is crucial for an understanding of the intersectional subjectivity and agency of migrant workers that I have discussed in Chapters 7-9.

Chapters 7-9 collectively respond to Research Question 3 and 4 by looking at the intersections of religion, gender, class and particular life courses among migrant workers. As shown in chapter 7, Christian migrant workers’ masculinities are formed in such a way that gender, class and religion mutually constitute one another. I consider the moral manhood performed by migrant workers as a sign of postsecular subjectivities which enable them to claim a meaningful way of being men that might psychologically empower them and may set limits on secularist-neoliberal normalisation. In chapter 8, I have

offered a rethinking of women migrants' religious agency beyond the limitations of Eurocentric and secular humanist theorising. I argue that research needs to be attentive to the intersectionality within which multiple oppressions operate but also from which new religious agency may emerge. Chapters 7 and 8 respond to Mahmood's (2005) ethical reflections on religious piety, where agency and empowerment may not rely solely on the production of counter-subjectivity. Rather, subject formation is a process of autopoiesis or self-styling, involving multiple negotiations with dominant values or norms. In section 10.6, I provide further analysis of how this thesis advances Mahmood's argument. In Chapter 9, I have examined the intersections of religion, youth and class among migrant workers. In particular, I argue that postsecularity is mediated by and embodied in contextualised everyday sociability and spiritual capital (for example, in *guanxi* and *jiazhiguan* in China) in ways that help young migrant workers constitute an emotionally-coherent working-class adulthood in the context of neoliberal precariousness. In what follows, I further discuss the contributions of this thesis in sections 10.3-10.6 and consider how future research might move forward in section 10.7.

### **10.3 Re-visioning secularity and postsecularity**

This thesis responds to the "overly facile understanding" of the complexities and geohistorical contingencies of secularity in human geography (Kong 2010; Wilford 2010; Tse 2014:202; Gao, Qian & Yuan 2018). "Secularity" is often considered as a taken-for-granted notion describing a regime devoid of religion and thus retains a very marginal place in the production of geographical knowledge. I have therefore attempted to reinvigorate the notion of secularity in interpreting religious landscapes and modern conditions of being. In this thesis, secularity is examined as not only a political-ideological agenda with an associated epistemic knowledge regime that is held

unreflexively as a normative structure of modern reality (Casanova 2011), but also as a condition of being phenomenologically inhabited by modern individuals (Taylor 2007; 2010). In other words, I have focused on the spheres of governance and institutionality and, simultaneously, the lived conditions of secularity shaped by a diversity of social/power relations. Yet, these two aspects of secularity always-already imply geographical contingencies, as I have argued in Chapter 2. If we oscillate between seeing secularity as macro-social process or as individual consciousness, it becomes apparent that, at the same time as secularity operates as a macro-social force and imagery, it is also pervasively felt and performed at the level of the local and the everyday.

On the one hand, instead of viewing secularity as a transcendent power or an absolute political doctrine that governs society, I argue that the political-ideological project of secularity is better understood as a space of thought and practice that is assembled through flexible modes of governance (Ong 2007; Anderson 2016), infra-secular geographies (Dora 2018) and embodied responses in human lives (Holloway 2013). In this thesis, I have examined how secularity is articulated through the combination of and reconciliation between neoliberal and autocratic governance that work hand-in-hand to produce secular, docile, and governable modern subjects. In chapter 5, I situate the secularity within China's neoliberal reform and context-specific autocratic and authoritarian governance in Shenzhen. Neoliberal ideologies are incorporated into China's state developmentalism and autocratic rule to advance the secular project of modernisation and capital accumulation. This secular agenda operates through particular spatial politics or infra-secular geographies (for example, from the Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen to Foxconn's labour camps) in order to govern migrant workers' everyday lives and subjectivities. The alliance of the state and capitalism forces economy-

and profit-centred governance on migrant workers. For example, as I have shown in this thesis, local government has encouraged the expansion of the “factory dormitory regime” which accommodates large numbers of migrant workers yet simultaneously minimises their consumption of urban welfare. This spatial patterning of secularity is also evident in Dubai, a city that uses a variety of labour camps as a spatial-fix for more flexible capital accumulation (Buckley 2013). However, I do not equate secularity with neoliberalism *per se* nor assume that neoliberalism embodies a new form of secularity that is based on a pure economic rationality; neoliberalism is not inherently secular but a mode of governance through which secularity is articulated. As Asad (2003: 183) notes, secularity does not exist *per se* but rather “emerged historically in a particular way and was assigned specific practical tasks”. In this sense, neoliberalism, autocracy and local disciplinary practices are all specific and flexible techniques that assemble secularity.

In response to Casanova’s (2011) Foucauldian understanding of secularity as an epistemic knowledge regime that is held unreflexively as a normative structure of modern reality, I argue that an engagement with neoliberalism can help us to identify the multiple and intersectional subjectivities shaped by the ‘unthoughts’ of secularity. For example, in chapter 5, the discourse of psychological *suzhi* (quality) serves as a criterion to define “good workers”; in chapter 7, a hegemonic masculinity that emphasises hierarchical power and absolute submission becomes a normative behaviour and disposition that justifies the militarised management of the migrant labour regime; in chapter 8, the femininity which involves being submissive and tolerant was linked to the making of qualified workers; in Chapter 9, the massive expansion of neoliberal vocational education was accepted as a state-encouraged channel for young rural migrants’ struggle for upward social mobility. All of these ‘unthoughts’ address the ethical-ideological aspects of

secularity, which create a secularist and hegemonic narrative about what is good and desirable (Taylor 2007). Overall, a neoliberal form of secularity demands not only the coding, differentiation and cultivation of human life in line with the logics of rational optimisation, but also the refashioning of people's subjectivities, affects, and hopes (Anderson 2016; Cloke *et al.* 2019). Neoliberalism has brought about a more flexible form of governance that binds together a diverse range of practices and powers, including the autocratic, discursive and affective, in durable alliances that collectively produce modern, secular, and governable subjects.

On the other hand, this study also provides a grounded examination of Taylor's (2007) theorisation of secularity as a lived condition. That is, I have intensively explored how migrant workers inhabit, sense, or experience the secular. Returning to Taylor's (2007; 2011) argument, secularity is not simply a political project located in or controlled by the state; it is a lived condition in which modern individuals always face "cross-pressures" that may constantly bring into question one's lifeways and meanings. In this thesis, the introduction of global capitalism and neoliberal governance to Shenzhen has fuelled the Chinese state's efforts to create a secularised and modern society. As I noted in Chapter 3, the Maoist state's iconoclastic power succeeded only to a limited extent in eradicating religion, especially in the light of the noticeable religious revival in the post-reform era. But this does not imply a decline of secularity and secularism, as I have shown in this thesis. The coalition of the state and neoliberal capitalism has more effectively elevated secularist values of efficiency, progress and market rationality to a hegemonic consensus, internalised not only by entrepreneurs and managers but also ordinary factory workers involved in the tides of the market economy. The coalition of the state and neoliberal capitalism has also precipitated class inequality, precarious and disciplined labour

regimes, and vulnerability to exploitation for rural migrant workers in China. In this sense, secularity is not simply a political-ideological project but an actually existing condition in which migrant workers make sense of their lives. For example, in Chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9, disciplinary techniques such as intensive pre-work training, compulsory overtime, strict surveillance with monetary penalties, verbal violence, and collective dormitories are shown to work jointly to produce a sense of alienation and among migrant workers. Moreover, these workers are largely atomised as isolated subjects and deprived of emotional support from family and friends, therefore they suffer from a sense of uncertainty, uprootedness, and disembeddedness from social networks. These “structures of feeling” (Anderson 2016) of secularity also vary intersectionally, impacting on how migrant workers constitute their masculine, feminine, and youthful subjectivities. Above all, theorising secularity as a lived condition and in terms of embodied practices enables us to capture the intensities of secular power (Anderson 2017: 504); that is, how “power operate[s] by becoming part of an organizing experience”. In this sense, “actually existing” secularity surfaces in and is dispersed through multiple lived experiences.

It is under such structural experiences of secularity that migrant workers are faced with a “cross-pressure” situation (Taylor 2007). The Foxconn suicide event indicates that some migrant workers are fully enclosed in a self-sufficient secularity within which they cannot find alternative modes of being. The Christian migrant workers, however, attempt to live out of the immanent frame by drawing upon a religious way of life. Paradoxically, however, the state’s political-ideological project of secularity, in tandem with the capitalist disciplining of labouring bodies, creates a fertile ground for Christian religiosity to be revived. In a situation of “cross-pressures”, secular modernity generates rather than undermines new demands for spirituality. From this point of view, I argue that the



postsecular approach in human geography can be enriched by considering how the secular and the postsecular are co-constituted and co-evolving.

Departing from this standpoint, I now offer some further reflections on the geography of postsecularity. In this thesis, a contradictory dual process in Shenzhen, with the ascendancy of secular capitalism and simultaneously a noticeable religiosity flourishing among the new working class, has demonstrated that secularity is contested and hybrid, always-already implying postsecular reflexivity. Despite this religious resurgence, the immanent frame of secularity remains a real, tangible condition under which Christianity evolves and thrives in Shenzhen. In this study, migrant workers' religiosity is anchored in other-worldly redemption (such as in working for God and not capital) but concurrently in temporal and immanent concerns such as material support, emotional responses to alienation, subjective consolation and, ultimately, an alternative frame of migrant subjectivity in contrast to that framed by neoliberal governance. In this sense, the postsecular is an ethical and self-reflective project of secularity which, however, does not signify the decline or demise of the immanent frame. Following Cloke *et al.* (2019), I suggest that postsecularity is neither an epochal shift where society becomes more religious nor a reversal of secularisation but a possible condition of being in which the religious and the secular cohabit in such a way that new subjectivities and ethics may emerge. In this thesis, I have therefore mapped out a variety of postsecular subjectivities that are engendered by and co-constituted with secular conditions of being. In Chapter 5, the lived enactment of Christian theo-ethics in the everyday praxis of care and justice for marginalised migrant workers opens an ethical space that reconstitutes the subjectivities shaped by autocratic and neoliberal agendas. In Chapter 7, migrant workers' performance of "moral manhood" serves as a tactical alternative for them to reframe their marginal

experiences and to claim a meaningful way of being men in negotiation with the hegemonic masculinity normalised by secular and neoliberal agendas. In Chapter 8, Christian spaces and pious ways of life allow women migrant workers to attain certain kinds of agency that reframe their experiences under the matrix of domination. In Chapter 9, Christianity can also be understood as a form of spiritual capital that helps young migrant workers navigate working-class adulthood.

In general, I agree with Cloke *et al.*'s (2019) and Williams's (2015) arguments that postsecular ethics can create a political and hopeful space that may serve as active resistance to secularist ethics and the neoliberal logics of subject-formation. However, what these authors are less concerned with is the question of in what sense do postsecular subjectivities themselves relate to, and thereby reproduce, secularities and neoliberal sensibilities? Although Cloke *et al.* (2019) confine postsecularity to the positive and "good" side of religion, the formation of postsecular subjects nonetheless cannot be separated from the process of subjectivation, in which one wants to affirm him or herself in a certain way or in certain normative modes of the self (Foucault 2009). As I have shown in this thesis, and particularly in Chapter 6, the constitution of the religious selves of Christian migrant workers resists and simultaneously reproduces secular and neoliberal sensibilities. For example, while Christianity is a source of comfort and communal solidarity for migrant workers, and even offers them a postsecular ethical imaginary that re-works the state discourses that define them as inferior subjects, the theological interpretations of *benfen* and *suzhi* presented in Chapter 6 only elude, or even re-legitimise rather than contest, the realities of secular modernity and the local political economy. Therefore, migrants' efforts at self-transformation through Christian ethics and discourse, and their theologically mediated interpretation of alienation, labour

exploitation and social inequality, overlap with, and reinforce, the secularist agenda of producing the docile, productive bodies of migrants, an agenda itself endorsed by the state–capital coalition. In Chapter 7, I have also argued that migrant workers’ performance of moral manhood is itself hegemonic as it is conditioned by a set of normative religious moralities and codes of conduct, such as connecting Christian masculinities to being hardworking and “good workers”. However, I do not argue that Christianity always inescapably co-opted into the project of neoliberal secularity but that the postsecular must be rethought in light of the question of how situated religiosities and new theological thoughts and practices constitute, entrench, or reproduce the orientations and sensibilities of secularity. More critical reflection on religious subjects must delve into and analyse the complexities of power and the ways in which individuals exercise agency (as I consider later).

In addition, this thesis also offers a critique of the Habermasian approach to postsecularity that considers religion in terms of strategic moral resources contributing to the cultivation of more healthy public relationships. Instead, I respond to Holloway’s (2013) call for an engagement with the theological and faithful sensibilities of individuals as postsecular critique that avoids reducing inquiries into religion simply to social dynamics. In Chapter 6, I emphasise the embodied knowledge of theologies, the affective presence of transcendence and the technologies of the self through which faithful subjectivity is formed. However, faithful subjectivity is not simply determined by discursive or affective knowledge but is constituted through what Sunderland (2016) calls “theologies-by-praxis”. The Christian theology of valued bodies, work ethics and holy spirit (in Chapter 6) and Christian wisdom (in Chapter 9) does not represent an enactment of Biblical knowledge but rather the reframing of theology in responses of subjects to secular conditions of being.

## **10.4 Spatial conditions: rethinking secularity and postsecularity in**

### **China**

In this part of the conclusions, in response to Casanova's (2013) and Taylor's (2011) call for a global comparative study of religion beyond the normative trajectory of Western modernity, I provide some reflections on the spatial conditions, particularly in the context of China, in which secularity and postsecularity are reconfigured. Overall, I argue that an engagement with the scholarship concerning secularity and postsecularity can lead to a new paradigm for studies of religion in China and, likewise, an understanding of secularity and postsecularity can also be enriched by engaging Sonological knowledge.

In this study, a contradictory dual process has been witnessed in Shenzhen of the ascendancy of secular capitalism and, simultaneously, a noticeable religiosity flourishing among the new working class. On the one hand, the nationwide religious resurgence and its localisation in Shenzhen has challenged the "hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization" (Taylor, 2007: 534). Yet, if we revisit Casanova's (1993; 2011) three dimensions of secularisation, which are differentiation, privatisation, and decline of religion, in the context of China, we can hardly say that China is becoming more religious. In terms of the differentiation thesis, as I have noted in Chapter 3, the category of "religion" emerged in China's encounter with Western imperialism and therefore relied heavily on European ideas. It was not until 1949 that Christianity became a distinctive sphere under the state's governance. In China, restricting religion to a specific domain is not a latent function of modernisation but rather a deliberate state-led project that created a secular society as part of the transition to modernity. In the post-reform era, despite the easing of religious policy, secularity evolved from an anti-religious sentiment to a less coercive secularism that upholds secular values of reason, progress

and efficiency along with state-sanctioned capitalist ideologies as the moral basis for state-developmentalism. In this sense, state-led modernisation and China's integration into neoliberal capitalism have, at the macro-level, set in motion secularism and secularity as an ideological and cultural movement. This has created, at the local scale, a condition akin to what Taylor (2007) theorises as a stadial consciousness. The neoliberal migrant labour regime is precisely the localisation of this political-ideological project of secularity. In terms of the privatisation thesis, it is quite questionable whether or not a public sphere of religion has ever existed in China. Instead, the religious revival among the working classes and the theo-ethics that involves into the social service reflect a certain degree of de-privatisation. Christianity has played an increasingly important role in shaping labour relations and working-class culture in Shenzhen, in ways similar to E.P. Thompson's (1963) description of the wide spread of Methodism among working-class communities in early nineteenth-century England. Nevertheless, the revival of religion described in this study has indeed becomes the animus of orders of existence inside, and not outside, neoliberal-capitalist secularity.

Overall, unlike in liberal and pluralist societies in the West, Chinese secularity is characterised by a combination of neoliberal governance, state developmentalism, and autocratic rule, which work hand-in-hand to produce secular, productive, docile, and governable subjects. It is noteworthy that neoliberal and disciplinary practices in Shenzhen are subject to a larger moral discourse of Chinese secularity that legitimises the social and political hierarchy and the differentiation of human bodies through secular values of reason, progress and efficiency. For example, in this study, the pervasive *suzhi* discourse (Kipnis 2007) that champions the distinction between superior and inferior migrant bodies serves as a part of this larger moral discourses of secularity.

However, in what sense can we understand China's religious revival as a form of postsecularity, given the entrenched secularity in contemporary China? Or, on the other hand, how does a postsecular approach enrich our understanding of China's religious revival? As I have argued, postsecularity is better understood as a possible space in which religion and secularity cohabit in such a way that new and hybrid subjectivities and ethics may emerge. In this sense, my point is that questions about the postsecular religious revival in China are not simply about people becoming more or less religious, but rather concern how religion is implicated in the project of cultivating moral subjects suited to development aspirations and new zeitgeists.

By deploying a postsecular approach, this thesis challenges the mainstream perspective in China's religion studies which unwittingly or deliberately emphasises an anti-secular and antihegemonic sensibility, and in which China's modernisation is sometimes uncritically associated with the domination of secular and capitalist ethics. Instead, this thesis has argued that religiosity is not merely a strategic cultural resource for people to cope with perplexing social changes and state power, if only in vain. Rather, religiosity is integral to, and even constitutive of, local political and economic conditions. As in Cao Nanlai's (2010) argument, the postsecular religious revival in China is rather contested and hybrid, and cannot simply be reduced to a symbolic universe that is inherently anti-secular and anti-hegemonic. Instead of assuming that Christian values and ethics enable a space in which Chinese people negotiate and reclaim their autonomy from an authoritarian state, I argue that Christian values actually overlap with the state's project of maintaining power and moral legitimacy. In this study, the theo-ethics of love and unconditional care and the Christian work ethic in relation to discipline are compatible with the state's efforts to construct a "harmonious society" by filling the gap in social

welfare and service provision and fostering self-disciplined, law-abiding and productive citizens. This is consonant with Cao's (2010) argument that "Christianity certainly has gained recognition from the state as a useful source in local governance." However, I am not going to argue that religion is being co-opted into the state's regulation and neoliberal governance; rather, I suggest that the postsecular religious revival in China always reproduces the moral discourse of secularity. The flourishing of religion in this form, as Wang Gungwu (2004) suggests, does not indicate that China's social transformation is shifting from a secular state to a religious one, but rather from militant secularism to a more hybrid form of secularism that integrates secular ideologies with new formations of identities and subjectivities, with people seemingly acting as free subjects applying self-governance and self-cultivation under a situation of cross-pressure (Taylor 2007). This is not to argue that China's emerging secularity produces "inauthentic" forms of religiosity. Rather, I contend that there are hybrid cultural formations in current Chinese society, whereby people make sense of the religious by making reference to the secular, and *vice versa*. It is cultural formations of this nature that give rise to new aspirations for, and discursive formulations of, Protestant faith among migrant workers and the possibility of postsecular reflexivity.

## **10.5 The religiosity of migrants**

This thesis also brings migrants' religiosity into dialogue with existing discussions on secularity and postsecularity. This thesis argues that migrants' bodies become an important site through which secular and neoliberal governance circulates and reproduces. Regulating migrants' bodies, in particular through neoliberal techniques that maximise the economic utility of migrants but simultaneously minimise their labour costs and consumption of urban welfare, is an crucial approach in understanding China's agenda of

secular modernisation. This demands not only the coding and differentiation of migrants' bodies but also the refashioning of migrant workers' subjectivity, hope, and affect so that they become governable and durable labouring subjects. For example, in Chapter 9, it young rural migrants' hopes and aspirations for upward social mobility were shown to be manipulated to enhance the neoliberal "vocational school to factory" system that in turn reduces young migrants to cheap labour. Overall, migrants' bodies and affective life become an "object-target" for the state's efforts to reconcile its neoliberal and autocratic agendas. It is in this context that this thesis theorises new religiosities of migrant workers as responses to perplexing neoliberal social changes, or a coping mechanism under oppressive conditions. Christianity provides migrant workers with material, cultural and symbolic resources which not only enable them to negotiate the existential conditions of uprootedness, labour alienation and incarceration, but which also empower community participation by this marginal group. In this study, migrant workers' religiosity is constituted by embodied practices, emotionalised narratives, a subaltern subjectivity aspiring to empowerment, and theological interpretation of social inequality and labour alienation.

Moreover, this thesis also provides an empirical study in response to Kong (2010) and Ley's (2010) call for research to examine how migrants reshape the changing landscape of religion. It is suggested in this thesis that migration has brought new insights to the rethinking of secularity and postsecularity. Secularity and postsecularity are not homogeneous social processes, but are subject to the increasing mobility of migrants. As I have discussed in Chapter 7, rural churches in some areas of China have undergone a drastic loss of young members because the majority of rural "surplus labourers" have become seasoned rural-urban migrants, leaving only the children and the elderly in the



churches. On the other hand, rural-to-urban migration has re-mapped urban religious scenes (such as in the churches in Shenzhen in this study) through the translocal mobility of religiosity and situated religious conversion, where migrant workers constituted more than 80 per cent of attendance in the churches I have investigated. These churches serve as ‘homes away from home’ (Ley 2008) that maintain religiosity, provide networks of social support and employment opportunities, and help migrants integrate through friendship with local Christians. Meanwhile, through the church, migrants gain access to communal participation, which empowers this marginal group.

This thesis has shown that rural-to-urban migration in China has substantially remade geographies of faith and spirituality. The massive inflows of migrant workers to cities have altered the geographic location of the Christian population, giving rise to what Huang Jianbo (2014) has called the “rural church in the city.” However, despite rural migrants constituting the great majority of attendance in the churches I researched, I do not simply label them as “rural churches”. Huang (2014) emphasises rural Christians’ conflicted experiences of religiosity in urban churches in terms of “moral torment,” identity tension and different epistemological styles that are caused by difference between the rural Pentecostal and urban evangelical. Similarly, Huang Ke-Hsien (2015) suggests that there is a distinctive religious hierarchy in urban churches between migrant workers and those high-*suzhi* (quality) urban Christians and educated migrants. However, it is not clear that rural and urban religiosities are truly distinctive and mutually exclusive, as has been claimed, since this thesis has shown that migrants’ religiosity is hybrid and constituted in specific contexts. For example, the Christian theologies of the work ethic, masculinity and femininity (in Chapters 6, 7 and 8) as well as Christian wisdom (Chapter 9) are less likely to be structured by the rural Pentecostal or urban evangelical styles but

emerged in response to their lived circumstances and new socio-economic conditions in the secular realm. This is consistent with Casanova's (2007) argument that migrant religiosity is not a residue of traditions brought from a place of origin, but rather an adaptive response to a new world. In other words, migrants' religiosity rarely relies on a stable, pre-given religious identity but instead represents an ongoing, hybrid construction as migrants live out and negotiate their religious selves to achieve self-awareness and self-governance in new socio-economic environments. In this sense, migrant workers' religiosity in this study is neither rural Pentecostal nor urban evangelical in a strict sense, but instead a situated, lived response to secular modernity and neoliberal capitalism in the new social-economic environments of the city.

However, religion is just one dimension of migrants' subjectivity. As Kong (2018: 5) has recently noted, "Religion is just one aspect of the assemblage that makes up an individual's identity". Existing scholarship has, however, tended to privilege (or, worse, inflate) the role of religion relative to others. The fact remains that a range of identifiers, such as ethnicity, race, gender, language, tastes, preferences and religion, amongst others, all coalesce into one ever-shifting assemblage, with migrants having to negotiate "multiple pathways to incorporation simultaneously in different configurations at different times" (Levitt, 2012: 495). This thesis has also contributed to the inquiry into the intersectionality of migration. In this thesis, migrant workers religiosity is not homogeneous and coherent but varies in accord with different lived experiences and different system of oppression and social inequality. I provide more reflections on this issue in the next section.

## **10.6 An intersectional approach to secularity and postsecularity:**

### **power and religious agency**

One of the most important contributions of this thesis has been to develop an intersectional approach to secularity and postsecularity. In Chapter 2, I proposed three forms of intersectional thinking that shed light on issues of secularity, neoliberalism and postsecularity: (1) the intersectional nature of secular power; (2) intersectionally mediated lived experiences; and (3) intersectional subjectivity and agency. I now re-examine this analytical frame by revisiting the research findings in this thesis.

Firstly, the use of the concept of intersectionality produces new knowledge about how power relations are intertwined and mutually constructed through multiple categorisations of human subjectivity. In this study, secular neoliberalism is not only embedded in the class-based, gendered and age-specific structures that classify human bodies for different logics of optimising rationality, but also relies on the “techniques of intervention” (Anderson 2016) that produce particular intersectional affects. For example, in Chapter 9, the alliance of state power and neoliberalism is shown to not only target specific youth bodies to feed the factory labour regime but also creates a “structure of feeling” that propagates what is desired and hopeful trajectories to adulthood for young rural migrants. This is also illustrated in the hegemonic masculinity in Chapter 7 in which, for low-status managers, being aggressive and coercive was even viewed as a valuable asset that signalled a male supervisor’s capacity to discipline recalcitrant and rebellious workers and contributed to a better chance of being promoted. In turn, for production workers, being submissive, autonomous, self-responsible, and durable in the face of exploitation is associated with being qualified a worker. In Chapter 8, I showed that Christian migrant women are subject to an intersectional network of power weaving

together the state's hegemonic discourses and ideologies, urban-rural dualism, the legacies of traditional familial and patriarchal culture, the gendered disciplinary labour regime, and the patriarchal institution of Christianity, which work collectively to create the subaltern femininity of migrant women. Overall, the political-ideological project of secularity is always materialised through intersectional subjectivation. This argument resonates with Asad's (2003: 5) critique of Charles Taylor's understanding of secularism as a political process that produces a unified identity:

When Taylor says that the modern state has to make citizenship the primary principle of identity, he refers to the way [the state] must transcend the different identities built on class, gender, and religion, replacing conflicting perspectives by unifying experience. In an important sense, this transcendent mediation is secularism. Secularism is [...] an enactment by which a political medium redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion.

In this sense, state secularism is not only a transcendent power that produces normative subjectivities but is also articulated and embodied through intersectional subjectivities. I therefore insist that secular power is also characterised by the production of multiple discursive and affectual regimes that justify social hierarchy and differentiation of individuals' utility. Overall, I argue that the political-ideological project of secularity relies on what Collins (2000) calls a "matrix of domination" that grounds the basis for differentiating, engineering and stratifying human beings, which constitutes an overarching structure of inequalities and power that cannot be challenged by singular anti-oppression force.

Secondly, I have theorised both secularity and postsecularity as intersectional lived experiences. By this I mean that secularity operates by becoming part of and organising multiple lived experiences (Anderson 2017) and, correspondingly, religion reframes the embodied experience of secularity by mediating and conditioning the ways power operates. In this thesis, Christianity is conceived by migrant workers as not simply institutional beliefs and ethics but also communal life and leisure, an embodied spirituality that reframes suffering, disease and labour exploitation, and a life strategy to smoothe interpersonal relationship in the workplace. In this sense, Christianity is ‘lived’ and practised in the realms of everyday life and intersectional embodied experience. It is through this intersectional lived experience that the transition from faith-by-dogma to faith-by-praxis (Cloke and Beaumont 2012; Williams 2015) is made possible.

Thirdly, the intersectional approach helps to produce new knowledge about what counts as postsecular subjectivity or agency. In Chapters 2 and 8, by engaging with the literature on postsecular feminism inspired by Mahmood (2005) and Braidotti (2009), I have argued for research into multiple understandings of religious agency beyond the secularist and normative-liberal epistemologies that locate agency primarily in resisting and subversive subjectivities. In this thesis, multiple forms of religious agency are mapped out. In Chapter 5, the lived enactment of theo-ethics has produced various somewhat counter-hegemonic effects, since the ethics of love, transformation and Christian entrepreneurship resist and may even rework the domination of secular neoliberalism. Also, migrant workers’ religiosity can be associated with an empowerment and instrumental agency that they accrue, utilising religious discourse and practice in response to their lived circumstances. For example, migrant workers manoeuvre religion as a cultural, symbolic and discursive resource that help them to mediate labour exploitation, establish a

“comfort zone” and improve interpersonal *guanxi* in the workplace. However, it is the third kind of religiosity, which involves migrant workers’ inhabiting of religious norms and their project of self-transformation, that deserves more careful analysis in terms of the extent to which it can be read as a form of (postsecular) agency. As I have noted above, migrant workers’ project of self-transformation and their theologically mediated interpretation of alienation, labour exploitation and social inequality overlap with, and may even reinforce, the state’s agenda of the production of docile, productive bodies of migrants. This argument is true insofar as we consider it as a factual judgement in the logic of “social analysis”, but it does not mean that migrant workers’ religiosity in this form is simply a co-option into the political ethos of state-led governmentality, one that thwarts migrant workers’ struggling impulses with moral discipline (Thompson 1963). I contend that more nuanced analysis should be applied to migrant workers’ moral/ethical formations embedded in intersectional subjectivities. I therefore agree with Mahmood’s (2005: 15) argument that “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms”. In this thesis, migrant workers’ performance of religious way of life, which is especially evident in the norm to “live out the image of Jesus”, contributes to the formation of an ethical disposition and valued and superior moral subjectivities. This mode of self-transformation works by disciplining the body and by bodies’ reframe of theologies (see chapter 6), which becomes the necessary means through which faithful-hopeful subjectivities, godly manhood, Christian femininity, and psychologically-coherent adulthood are both created and expressed.

However, in what ways can these intersectional-ethical subjectivities be considered to be political? Here, instead of presupposing an ontological form of agency that is counter-

hegemonic, I focus instead on intersectionality, a nexus of social relations and articulated power structure from which different forms of postsecular agency may arise. In essence, migrant workers are subject to an intersectional and overarching structure of inequality and power that cannot be challenged by a singular anti-oppression force. This is an existential condition in which Christianity persists. Therefore, migrant workers' religious assiduity, such as in their advocacy of submission, hard work and docility, does not mean that they voluntarily uphold the exploitative structure; instead, it is a necessary part of their "techniques of the self" to attain faithful-virtue subject. However, it is noteworthy that, although migrant workers' project of self-transformation does not overtly challenge the existing power structure, it nevertheless produces a religious "structure of feeling" that exerts pressure and sets conditions on the ways that and extent to which secular powers and normalised subjects actualise as a part of migrant workers' everyday life. For example, migrant workers' emphasis on self-controlled bodies and a respectful disposition help them fend off the state's label of "low *suzhi*" at a safe distance by cultivating a morally superior and self-valued masculinity, womanhood or adulthood. In Chapter 7, migrant workers' performance of moral manhood helps them repel the homogenising and aggressive masculinity and the neoliberal "jungle law" in the workplace. In other words, migrant workers' ethical formation conditions how secular and institutionalised subjectivities are translated, embodied, and affectively felt in the domain of everyday life, and thereby reframe the ways power operates. It is in this sense that this form of postsecular subjectivity is political. Overall, this thesis has developed an intersectional approach that demonstrates how new understandings of postsecular agency can be attained by a concern with interlocking power structures and socio-historical specificities.

## 10.7 Future research

Finally, three avenues of inquiry in secularity and postsecularity can be put forward for future geographical research. Firstly, I call for critical research to explore how the political-economic project of secularity and in particular neoliberalism operate through the realms of affect and spirituality. As Cloke *et al.* (2019: 202) suggest, “understanding neoliberalism as an affective politics that shapes ethical relations is not new *per se*; yet the contestation of neoliberalism through spiritual activism is rarely understood”. Recent research in Foucauldian studies has noted that neoliberalism, like the exercise of pastoral power, often relies on a particular spirituality that reconciles contested processes of truth-telling and enchantment (Gamez 2019). The ways in which neoliberal logics shape individual subjectivities are not only about truth-telling in the game of knowledge/power, but are also about the mystery and sacralisation that re-enchant desires and aspirations entrenched by late-capitalist society. In this sense, the geography of religion needs to be attentive to the re-intervention of theologies and religious ethics that may resist or overlap with re-enchantment in the neoliberal economy, in which the souls of individuals are increasingly enlisted in the regime of social governance (Rose 2017; Cloke *et al.* 2019).

Secondly, one of the important contributions of this thesis has been to examine how postsecularity emerges through intersectionality; however, how postsecularity and intersectionality can be reconciled in a new form of critical inquiry and praxis that brings the possibility for social change deserves further theorisation. In essence, Collins’ recent book *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (2019) represents such an attempt. Collins contends that developing intersectionality as a critical social theory involves not only intersectionality’s internal dynamics but also its connection to established critical social theories such that it can open up new ways for social action. In this sense, bringing



postsecular theories into faith-based praxis and activism in countering oppression and social inequality requires a sensitivity to knowledge of intersectionality.

Thirdly, geographical research can significantly contribute to the spatialities of secularity and postsecularity beyond the normative trajectory of Western modernisation. As I have argued, existing research on secularity and postsecularity has predominantly been placed in the contexts of Europe and North America, and therefore is insufficient to capture the variegated and contested geographies of religion across the world. Therefore, future research needs to adopt a global comparative perspective in exploring how multiple patterns and configurations of secularity and postsecularity come into interaction in an age of global shift (Kong 2010).

## Appendix 1: Consent form

### Dear interviewee:

My name is Quan Gao and I am currently a PhD student in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, UK. My PhD research focuses on the everyday life of Christian migrant workers and how they make sense of Christianity. With this form I am cordially asking for your consent to be an interviewee in this research. I am also hoping that you would kindly lend me permission to use the materials from the interviews in writing up my PhD thesis.

This research is for academic purposes and serves no business interests. All the materials and data collected from the research will only be accessed by me (and my supervisors if necessary). I promise to do my utmost to respect the confidentiality of the interview data and your personal information as well. Please also note that this consent form is **NOT** a legal document subject to any legal prescriptions of the People's Republic of China. It is concerned only with an inter-personal agreement between you and me.

All participants are guaranteed anonymity. This will be done by using a pseudonym for the name of each participant and a code for the place in which the research took place. You should know in advance that:

- (1) All interviews will be tape-recorded**
- (2) All information will be treated in absolute confidence**
- (3) You are guaranteed confidentiality.** That means no information in the report will be linked to any individual participant. Any private data will not be reported without the permission of the participant (**all names will be given anonymous replacements**)
- (4) You are free to refuse to answer any questions.**
- (5) The interviewer will stop the interview at any point if you ask me to.**

### Confirmation of consent (please give your signature)

#### Date:

Contact details

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Peter Hopkins (supervisor)  
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