Negotiating the Christian Past in China

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Published by Penn State University Press


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Around the year 2000, Christian churches in Gulangyu began to be affected by the problem of dwindling congregations. Trinity Church was particularly hard hit. Old Pastor Wen (see chapter 3), then Trinity’s head pastor, worked hard to reverse the trend by establishing gathering points on the more populous main island of Xiamen and developing new approaches to attract young converts.

At this critical point in time, an American Christian agency entered the scene and initiated missionary activities directed at young adults. The two communities inevitably encountered one another, and they decided to establish cooperative efforts. Elsewhere as well, the ambitious American church has been attempting to play a greater role in the global missionary enterprise. This chapter sheds light on the rarely studied interplay between this international Christian presence and the local sociopolitical context in China, an encounter that has profound implications for the study of Chinese Christianity and broader developments in Christianity worldwide.

The tremendous economic development that China has been experiencing since the 1980s has stimulated massive population flows. Just in the past few years, international immigration to China has swelled and diversified to a far greater extent than ever before. Many of these international migrants are devoted to the Christian mission. As discussed in chapter 1, foreign missions to China are not a new phenomenon; their history can be traced back more than a millennium, though there was a sharp break in the influx and activities
of Christian evangelists in China after the founding of the People’s Republic, when foreign missionaries were expelled and the links between the Chinese church and the international Christian church were severed.

Under the terms of the government’s current religious policy, foreigners are still prohibited from establishing any organizations or sites for missionary purposes. Furthermore, they are not allowed to solicit followers among Chinese citizens, nor are they permitted to appoint any religious staff. Foreign involvement, even if only perceived, greatly increases the likelihood that restrictions will be imposed on the organization. If any international funds or staff were discovered, this would arouse the suspicion of the Chinese government that such activities were being engineered from abroad, perhaps for political purposes such as “peaceful evolution” (heping yanzhuan, referring to Western efforts to gradually subvert and break down the system of CCP rule). And if this transgression were confirmed, Chinese Christian groups would face the serious charges of receiving foreign funding or allowing foreigners to preach.

Yet in spite of these restrictions, foreign Christian groups have long found ways to participate in the development of Chinese Christianity, as several researchers have pointed out. Daniel Bays and Ryan Dunch both note the presence of English teachers in missions, without providing any detailed descriptions. Hunter and Chan refer to financial and training support received from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and a variety of international sources. Nanlai Cao mentions Chinese American Christian entrepreneurs who visit and preach in the Wenzhou church; he notes that their “high morals,” “politeness,” and “humble manners” deeply impressed local believers. A few scholars refer to the active participation of the South Korean Protestant community in training clergy in China. In contrast to these very brief references unsupported by detailed evidence, Lyu Yunfang’s study has been very clear about the missionary connections of foreign teachers (waijiao) in Xiamen today. Miwa Hirono’s research in ethnic minority areas of western China reveals the ways in which international Christian nongovernmental organizations have adapted to the current political situation and propagate their religious values through their promotion and support of development projects.

So far there has been very limited empirical scholarly work on the presence of international Christian agencies in present-day China, particularly the unofficial channels that enable connections between the Chinese church and its foreign counterparts. As Dunch points out, it is unclear how many Christians (Protestants) are associated with missionary organizations and
movements based in the West and what kind of relationship they have with Chinese Christianity more broadly. To the Chinese state, any growth in such efforts, however limited, triggers political sensitivities, increasing its wariness toward transnational Christianity. Aware of the high risk of expulsion they face if detected, most foreign missionaries keep their activities clandestine, haphazard, informal, and consequently lacking in consistency. Under present circumstances, it is not easy for foreign evangelists to maintain any long-term relationship with prospective converts or to continue to remain in contact with and encourage any new converts they might have made. Apparently, neither the Christian church nor lay Christians are willing to make their involvement known. Therefore, given the circumstances, any thorough investigation of this sort of international Christian agency would seem unlikely to be successful. However, I had the good fortune to be granted access to an international missionary organization whose activities are much more structured, visible, and long-term than is typically the case. The organization is run by an American couple, Larry and Anna, who have developed strategies to attract potential converts through English teaching and a longing for cosmopolitan experiences rooted in the context of present-day Chinese society.

Rainbow: An American Mission in Contemporary Xiamen

Sitting in a café, Larry told me about his early life, a story of conversion and dedication. Larry’s parents were both born and raised in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. To escape from the Great Famine (1959–61) during Maoism, they fled to Hong Kong, then a British colony. Larry was born there in 1965 and migrated to France with his family a few years later. Like many overseas Chinese, Larry’s parents opened a restaurant where he often worked as a waiter.

Despite being raised in a Christian family, Larry did not really accept the faith. He moved to the United States for his studies at age seventeen, and it was there that he officially accepted the religion. Over the next few years, Larry completed his education, obtained a master’s degree in engineering, and went to work as an engineer. He met and fell in love with Anna, who had migrated to the United States from Taiwan with her Christian family and was working as a prosecutor after obtaining her law degree. The couple got married and had three daughters. They took out bank loans so they could buy a house and a car.
When speaking to his audience, Larry often compares the two lives he has led in different countries, developed and developing, to explain why he and Anna decided to give up their fortunate life in America to spread the gospel in China. Larry says they were unable to stop thinking about the meaning of life until Anna’s father, Reverend Zhang, convinced them it was the right thing to do. Zhang, a retired pastor of a Chinese church in the United States who once actively ministered in China, happened to be in Xiamen at the time. On his recommendation, Larry and Anna finally decided to settle in this coastal city and establish a ministry organization.

Speaking of why he chose to be an evangelist, Larry said, “We once lived the American dream. However, engineering was not a passion of mine but a means to make a living. It is theology that really interests me. After working as an engineer for four years, I decided to do a master’s degree in theology. . . . It usually takes three years to finish the theological training. Nevertheless, it took me seven years because I had to take care of my family and young children, and I also served in the Chinese American church. During that period, I learned Greek and Hebrew.”

In our conversation, Larry cited a memorable anecdote to illustrate the social status they left behind in America: “My wife worked as a prosecutor. Once, while driving, we were stopped by a policeman, but we were let go as soon as Anna showed her prosecutor’s credentials.” I heard this story retold several times by young people who admire the couple for sacrificing their comfortable way of life in America to devote themselves to the Christian mission. One college student commented, “Their dedication is extraordinary. Not everyone can achieve this. It really touched me.” The couple also emphasized that they were motivated by what was happening in Chinese society; as Anna said, “The youth here lack faith and spiritual pursuits. So I decided to stay and guide them to know of the Lord.”

They sold their house and car and paid off all their bank loans. In 2003, they began their big adventure as missionaries. Before long, they rented a private property in Banyan Village, a fishing village near Xiamen University. They started a discreet evangelical ministry directed toward young people and named it Rainbow. Because of its arch-like shape, a rainbow is usually associated metaphorically with a bridge, and indeed Rainbow’s stated purpose is to “bridge the young Chinese people to the Lord,” and, my observations suggest, to American society and culture.

Early on, the Saturday gathering drew only eight or so people, but this soon grew to over two hundred. Hence, Larry and Anna had to switch to renting a bigger private property. On special occasions, they had to put
some of the people attending in another hall where they could follow the service via cable television. Unsurprisingly, these large gatherings attracted the attention of the police. Anxious about their precarious situation, the couple’s first priority was to find a way to forestall trouble. Pastor Zhang, Anna’s father, had close links with Chinese church communities and sought the help of the resourceful Pastor Wen. Wen and the church committee were glad to help, as Trinity Church urgently needed to foster the development of a younger congregation on the main island of Xiamen. In his own words, Pastor Wen’s role was to “cover” (zhegai) Rainbow’s preaching activities. Nominally Rainbow became a youth fellowship of Trinity Church and hence officially operated as the church’s gathering point for young believers. To ensure that there was an official link between Rainbow and Trinity Church, Trinity sent its incumbent preacher, Mo Liwen, to take charge. After her appointment, Preacher Mo was responsible for dealing with the authorities. Trinity also supplied Rainbow with a piano, dozens of plastic chairs, and monthly rental subsidies to cover its rising expenditures.

To maintain good relations and secure a steady stream of financial support, Larry and Anna make occasional visits to American churches. Thanks to their efforts, American churches have sponsored Rainbow for the past decade. Once Rainbow was up and running smoothly, encouraged by its rapid growth, Larry and Anna established another gathering point called Kindness Family, focusing on “improving the quality of marriage and children’s education.” Members organize activities similar to those I have observed at Rainbow. Participants are mainly young and middle-aged couples with children. They bring their offspring to Kindness Family and the Rainbow members babysit for them, leaving couples free to focus on the activities. As in Rainbow, there are bilingual talks and discussions.

In 2007, the Banyan Village Christian gathering point was granted legal status as a venue for religious activity, and the following year what had been a deserted church was “(re)built” in the church compound. Three years later it was promoted to the status of a formal “church” (jiaotang) with the joint approval of the provincial Lianghui organizations and religious affairs authorities. Preacher Mo was assigned by the Xiamen Lianghui to take charge of the Banyan Village Church and ordained as a pastor in November 2012. After it was granted legitimate status as a jiaotang, the church also assumed responsibility for covering Rainbow, which was affiliated with it as an English corner (Yingyu jiao), part of the youth ministry, until the summer of 2015.14

Under existing government regulations on religion, a baptism service can be held only in officially registered churches. Some followers of Rainbow
were publicly baptized in the Banyan Village Church, which issued them with baptismal certificates. Some others received private baptism from members of Rainbow. In contrast to the standard certificate bearing the official seal of a particular church, the Rainbow equivalent is simply a card made of a thick paper bearing the words “Baptism witness card: we bear witness that you have been baptized a Christian,” with signatures by Anna and other key members. All of those involved sign their English (therefore not legally binding) names. In 2008, Rainbow baptized more than one hundred people in a single year, more than half the number achieved by the Bamboo Church (195 baptized in 2008), which is one of the three biggest registered churches on Xiamen Island.

At the time, the English corner offering the opportunity to talk to native speakers was something of a novelty, and it was a source of fascination for a considerable number of young students and professionals. Another great advantage was that the mission gave young people the chance to be directly exposed to American culture, otherwise inaccessible to them in their everyday lives. Rainbow has created a lively and relaxed atmosphere where they can practice their English, one that compares very favorably to the rigid teaching methods used in schools, and early on it had already made a name for itself as an authentic English corner.

Running the Mission and the Company

I came across the Brand-New Company completely by chance. Although I had frequently heard of it in conversations with Rainbow members whom I knew well, whenever I inquired about the company, they were reluctant to divulge any details. My curiosity was very much aroused. In August 2011, when I enrolled in the free English practice service at Rainbow, a junior member e-mailed me the details of an American contact. His e-mail address appeared to be linked to a particular organization, which I then searched for online. When I clicked through to the associated Web address, a business company Web site appeared on my computer screen. Surprisingly, I noticed several familiar faces, some of whom I had often seen at Rainbow’s Saturday gathering. In fact, the Brand-New Company’s core leadership consists of Larry (president), Anna (chairwoman of the board), Jacob (general manager), Kara (marketing director), plus a
few other people from the organization. Jacob and Kara are both Caucasian American citizens.

The Company claims to be focused on consultancy. Below is the introduction on its Web site (as translated from the original Chinese):

"The Brand-New Company is an American-owned enterprise with a team of experts from around the world. By means of its worldwide network of resources, the company aims at designing series of training courses for individuals and enterprises at different stages of development. We believe that true excellence derives from the renewal of understanding, thinking and healthy characters. With global resources, we pave the way for your integration into a new world filled with vitality, inspiration and renewal; for a new journey to explore and grow in your life. Our team would like to accompany your life journey, no matter what challenges you are facing concerning business development, interpersonal relationships, marriage and children’s education.

The company claims to assist in developing children’s character, improving parent-child relationships, and enhancing the lives of white-collar professionals. It also offers management consultancy. These first two are services that Rainbow provides free of charge. The third closely resembles Rainbow’s bilingual preaching. As for the last service listed, management consultancy, most of the expert consultants listed on the company’s Web site had served or were still serving Rainbow as “English teachers.” Later I was able to confirm that the principal aim of the company is to serve the missions rather than to make a profit. Besides training young ministry workers, its true role is to connect American churches and receive missionaries from outside mainland China. More importantly, it conceals transnational religious activities under the guise of “lawful” business. The company assists the couple and other missionaries in obtaining long-term work visas.

This covert agenda explains why the Web site has never been upgraded: it serves no real purpose except as a cover.

Given the strict regulation of religion in China today, especially the law that absolutely prohibits foreigners from preaching without the approval of authorities, the Brand-New Company’s way of operating is an effective strategy to ensure the survival and development of the Rainbow missionary organization. This is particularly the case because the current government attaches great importance to local economic development, allowing Western
missionaries to justify their presence and activities in the name of foreign investment.

Name-Tag Groups and Organizational Structure

At each Saturday gathering, people wear different-colored name badges that indicate their status in the organization. The groups are usually named after their tags:

White-tags are first-time visitors, whether Christian or not, to a Rainbow Saturday gathering.

Blue-tags are non-Christians who have come to the Saturday gathering at least twice. The organization pays close attention to these potential converts.

Green-tags are Christians who have attended the Saturday gathering at least twice.

Any blue- or white-tags who want to be baptized privately by Rainbow, or publicly by the Banyan Village Church on Rainbow’s recommendation, must complete a course entitled “Exploring the Truth” given by senior members of the group. The course, consisting of eight one-and-a-half-hour sessions every Saturday afternoon, is designed to assist non-Christians to “reflect on atheism and realize the existence of God.” After completing the eight-week course, applicants are interviewed by senior members of the group or by Larry and Anna personally to determine whether they are ready to be baptized.

Red-tags are part-time volunteers who are junior members of the ministry. Christians who actively attend Rainbow (usually green-tags) cannot qualify as red-tags until they have completed a series of courses on themes such as “Spiritual Discipline.” The courses run for over half a year and are designed as a test of perseverance. Green-tags who lack the necessary steadfastness will either give up of their own accord or be excluded by the leadership. Red-tags are not required to work for the company unless they decide to dedicate themselves entirely to the gospel enterprise. After completing the compulsory courses, they are interviewed by key members or on some occasions the founding couple to ensure that they will be able to help others. Generally speaking, there are around fifty red-tags, but their numbers usually fluctuate. Each year some leave for different reasons; they might graduate from university or move to another city. Replacements are continuously being trained and selected to succeed members who have
left. No matter how long a person has served as a red-tag, he or she would be considered a lifetime member.

Purple-tags are those who have completed Rainbow’s formal theological training program and are now supported as full-time ministry workers. There are around fifteen purple-tags in the organization. To become a purple-tag, red-tags are required to take a complete series of courses and training, including Bible study, church history, organizational skills, and the like. Those who are currently receiving training are referred to as “trainees” within the missionary group and are not eligible to be selected as purple-tags unless they have passed the final assessment. Almost all purple-tags and trainees simultaneously work for the Brand-New Company while receiving systematic training courses.

In the early years of Rainbow, Larry and Anna set up a two-year program and trained a dozen full-time ministry workers who became central members of the establishment. Later the program was extended to six years, consisting of three years’ training and another three years of mission service. Under the terms of their “contracts” with Rainbow, an agreement in the name of the Brand-New Company that studiously avoids any mention of missionary activities, purple-tag trainees must work for Rainbow (also in the name of the company) for at least three years upon completion of the training program. Their salary varies according to their status either as trainees or as qualified workers. However, in both cases their earnings are considerably below the average income in the Xiamen area.

Samuel, a key ministry worker who received his bachelor’s degree in economics from an elite university and has been a purple-tag for several years, once compared his salary with those of his classmates. In 2013, he earned no more than RMB1,600 (USD260) every month of the year. He and his wife, who also served the mission full-time, had a combined monthly income of around RMB3,000 (USD488). They are not wholly dependent on their salaries, as the mission also provides them with housing and a general cost of living allowance, as well as covering his paralyzed father’s living expenses, but Samuel’s work for the organization certainly creates challenges for the young couple. When I asked whether they were going to have a baby, he sighed and answered, “It’s hard to raise a child now.” He mentioned the example of Donald, one of the first trained purple-tag workers, who resigned full-time service and found a new job under increasing pressure shortly after he had a baby.
To ensure their young workers’ devotion to the evangelical enterprise, leaders offer single young people accommodation with full board, ensuring they can serve the mission at all times. Their commitment is reinforced by the six-year program and often by marrying within the group. Harry, a red-tag, explained the situation as follows:

Trainees who graduated from college (usually around the age of twenty-three) will be nearly thirty by the time they finish the six-year program. Their future life will be somewhat fixed. If they decide to devote themselves [to the mission] full-time, their marital relationship will not survive if their spouses do not support it. Therefore it is better to find a mate within Rainbow. Both Anna and Larry hope for internal pairings, as this sort of marriage will be stabler. Biblical teaching requires Christians to marry people of the same faith.

You might think that Rainbow is like a big family.

Indeed, Rainbow is buttressed by family relationships and contributes to the formation of new ones. For instance, one woman who was a purple-tag had a younger brother who was a trainee; her mother is a cook for members of the organization. Later, the woman married another trainee, meaning that four members of her family are now serving the mission. In recent years, over a dozen internally paired couples have formed. Their babies are called “Rainbow kids.” Extended kinship and family-like relationships, as well as their multiple years of training together, create strong bonds between full-time members of the group.

Subculture theory tells us that groups of like-minded people may establish their own distinctive ways of thinking and behaving. If most members of a group with close ties to one another hold the same views about a particular significant issue, those who initially do not agree with the majority way of thinking will soon come round to the same view. As people interact with each other, they are constantly passing on all kinds of information, thoughts, and feelings as well as rewarding similar opinions and behaviors. Disagreements within the group might arise; nevertheless, powerful forces press members into greater similarity. Full-time members of Rainbow interact with each other through strong ties. On consideration it would seem fair to say that the rather “authoritarian” couple dominate the organization and hence play an important role in shaping the members’ religious faith and practice, perhaps even their personalities.
Rather than focusing on more old-fashioned methods of preaching and conversion, the mission is dedicated to “equipping those who are capable of equipping others.” Besides accepting the tenets of faith, a person who aspires to become a red- or purple-tag is also required to become a member of the organization. Rainbow is a relatively closed group: it is quite distinct and separate from outside society. Members pay a social and material cost to belong to the group, sacrificing time spent with people outside it, higher salaries, perhaps even the opportunity to start a family. In return they receive strong emotional support, close ties with other group members, and other nonmaterial rewards that they highly value, including their spiritual gains. Finally, the tension generated by the group’s separation from the rest of society encourages members, who may feel somewhat lost, to commit themselves to the mission even more.16

Members who are accepted as red-tags are invited to an annual ceremony, a “rite of passage” where they receive uniform T-shirts as well as Bibles.17 Through a total of six years of courses and training, these young workers establish a close relationship with Larry and Anna that is very like the discipleship in traditional priestly training. However, the young workers are instructed with a degree of religious commitment that contrasts with the level of engagement usually found in official, state-approved seminars. The strictly established selection and training mechanisms ensure that Rainbow is strongly integrated both to reduce free-riding and to lead to the exclusion of those without a great commitment to the mission.18

Finally, orange-tags are non-PRC citizens, the majority from the United States, who serve Rainbow on a temporary basis and who are referred to as “English teachers.” On a typical Saturday gathering, there are several Americans present, sometimes even dozens. The orange-tag group is rather miscellaneous and can be divided into five main categories.

The first is composed of full-time missionaries sent by American churches. They hold nominal posts in foreign companies or teach in schools based in China, but their real duty is to give instruction in Christian activities and train Chinese evangelists. They are paid by the American churches that sent them rather than by Rainbow.

The second category includes missionaries sent by American churches to serve Rainbow on a short-term basis; they are often tasked with introducing or trying out new types of ministerial activities. When it is felt that Rainbow has properly adopted these new activities, the American church will send experienced missionaries to offer more comprehensive guidance.
The third group is made up of American citizens whom Larry and Anna have specifically invited to teach foreign languages or give lectures on particular themes. The guests themselves bear all their costs, including travel and accommodations. Recently, a growing number of groups of American college students have come to hold music concerts or outdoor sports events, or simply to communicate with their Chinese counterparts. These young American students have attracted a large number of young Chinese people to Rainbow.

The fourth category is drawn from a miscellaneous group of Westerners working in Xiamen who are invited to participate in the Saturday gatherings. Due to the increasing need for the service of foreign Christians in worship, in 2005 the city’s religious affairs authorities approved the establishment of the Xiamen International Christian Fellowship (XICF). This group is open to non-PRC citizens, including people from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. Anyone who wants to attend the fellowship is required to show their passport. Larry and Anna are members of the XICF, and from time to time, they invite other Western members to Rainbow, particularly when the number of language teachers present on Saturdays is too low.

I never saw Larry and Anna wearing name badges, but they do not really need them. As the founding leaders of the organization, they are well known to all but the newest attendees, and they appear to have absolute authority over Rainbow.

English Teaching and Evangelism

A Cosmopolitan Language to Transmit a Christian Message

When they think of missionary work, Christians in Xiamen are likely to think of the evangelists or medical personnel reminiscent of the pre-1950 Christian mission, or even people working in the social services, much more so than English teachers. Yet almost from the start, English teachers have had an important part to play in the mission work of churches whose roots are in the English-speaking world, and Xiamen is no exception. Since Christianity was introduced in the 1840s, missions have established dozens of educational institutions on different levels where it was a requirement to know English (see chapter 1). Today, by teaching English (and rarely, other foreign languages) to young Chinese people, foreign teachers constitute a unique group that influences young people’s faith.
As Donald Snow points out, English teaching is regarded as “a useful mission vehicle in part because Christian English teachers have the opportunity to live and work in countries which for religious, political, or cultural reasons do not accept missionaries who openly work as evangelists, pastors, or in other church-related capacities.” This is particularly true in Muslim and communist countries.

Unquestionably, English teaching is also a useful approach to everyday mission, since English proficiency is a valuable commodity, and the opportunity to learn from native speakers, particularly in a more relaxed and friendly setting than formal Chinese education, invariably attracts an audience. In modern urban Xiamen and elsewhere, those who would never choose to attend an evangelical meeting in either Mandarin or vernacular Fujian Chinese will tolerate the gospel when it is presented in English, simply because it gives them a chance to improve their English skills and meet Westerners, and many of my informants honestly admitted to these “utilitarian motivations.”

The dominant role played by English as the world’s international language of diplomacy, business, and scholarship has created an enormous demand for English teachers worldwide. English is a compulsory subject in the Chinese school education system, and the reform era has seen a mushrooming market in private schools and training agencies catering to the need to acquire English skills to improve professional, educational, or social prospects. In both state-run and private educational institutions, native speakers of English are highly valued not only for their linguistic and cultural background but also because their very presence makes studying English seem much more real and exciting to students and does a huge amount to raise their interest and motivation. This guarantees regular employment for a large number of Western English teachers throughout China.

Nevertheless, it is often made explicitly clear by China’s educational authorities or by employing institutions that English teachers are expected to behave as secular workers rather than missionaries. To ensure that this stipulation is observed, restrictions are often placed on any religious activities they might have been contemplating. Accordingly, those language teachers are often very discreet about their mission activities and tend to preach outside the classroom.

As Baugus argues, one consequence of this sort of practice for the missions to China is a “foreign Christian presence dominated by young, adventurous, short-term workers with little to no training in church development or pastoral experience and no access to the Christian church.”
It has to be said that this criticism does not apply to Rainbow, run by a Chinese American couple with Christian roots. It is a rare example of a foreign evangelical enterprise in China that is highly organized, operating through open and above-board English teaching. A typical Saturday gathering, described directly from my fieldwork notes, shows how this works.

A Typical Saturday Afternoon at Rainbow

On June 18, 2011, around 2:30 in the afternoon, I arrived at Banyan Village, half an hour before the Saturday gathering was scheduled to begin. There was no one at the entrance of the church. After I pushed open the front door and entered the church hall, I saw a group of people sitting in rows of armless chairs arranged in pew-like fashion at the front. They were speaking to one another in low voices, with their heads bent down, holding each other’s hands. I heard “I hope all the brothers and sisters who are coming today. . . . Amen.” They were praying.

Around ten minutes later, as soon as the group prayer had finished, preparatory work began. Two young ladies sang hymns and at the same time reminded their colleagues to get rid of echoes and adjust the pitch on the audio equipment. Another young woman was carrying a stainless-steel rack with a number of name badges hanging on it to the church entrance. Beside the rack, a square red cloth organizer with dozens of pockets on it was hanging on the iron church gate. An English letter was inscribed on each pocket. The name tags of people who have not shown up recently were placed in these pockets, placed according to the first initial of their personal (usually English) names. The badges of those who often attended were hung on the rack. This arrangement allows them to easily distinguish participants who are active from those who are not. Several young people were arranging indoor seats into six circles, three on the left half of the church hall and three on the right. A sign placed outside the front door said “Intermediate,” another saying “Elementary” was outside the annex, and an “Advanced” sign was placed upstairs, directing participants to the English conversation groups that suited their language proficiency.

While they were busy, more and more people arrived. Each of them was led to the reception desk and asked if they had come for the first time. If so, they were requested to register with their names (in both Chinese and English) and give contact information and the like. Once this had been recorded, they wrote their names on white badges. As far as I could observe, every newcomer was encouraged to use an English name. Anyone
who did not yet already have an English name would be advised to take one, sometimes recommended by the receptionists. Most of the participants did use English names, but a few insisted on retaining their Chinese names. Participants joined different English conversation groups according to their self-evaluated level of English proficiency and members’ advice. Each group consisted of six to eleven participants, under the guidance of one English native speaker. As is typically the case in China, the foreigners guiding the groups were respectfully called “teachers.”

I joined an intermediate group. The teacher, Alex, was a young man of Asian appearance. He is second-generation Chinese from Houston, Texas. At the time, he and his wife were working at his parents-in-law’s garment factory in the neighboring city of Putian. He held a brief outline, printed on A4-size paper. During the conversation, he glanced down at the paper from time to time and tried to guide the talk back to the topic: How to be attractive. Participants were not very proactive in speaking, leaving Alex somewhat at a loss. Moreover, though he tried to ensure the conversation was Christianity-related, most of the participants were non-Christians and easily diverted from the main theme.

Suddenly, we heard music, signaling that the English corner was coming to a close. Someone stood on the front stage with a microphone announcing the end of the conversation groups. People began to replace all the chairs in rows, as they had been before the English corner. When this was finished, two women holding microphones stepped onto the stage and greeted the audience. One, a middle-aged woman, was Anna, the host. The younger woman was an interpreter who translated what Anna said into Chinese.

I glanced quickly around the church hall and estimated an attendance of around 150, most in their twenties or thirties. Anna asked the white-tags to raise their hands and invited those who were sitting around them to greet them as a ritual welcome. I, a non-Christian green-tag, shook the hand of a woman sitting on my left. There were twenty or so people who had come for the first time. Once this was done, a short video entitled Six Stages played on a projector to acquaint the newcomers with Rainbow.

After the video, attendees proceeded to the section where English songs were practiced. Lyrics, both in English and Chinese, were projected onto two screens at the front. Anna led the audience in reading out the English lyrics. The songs were all Christian hymns, two of which were “The Lord Is My Light” and “Knowing You.” As we were singing, Anna asked the audience to stand up and wave their arms in time with the melody. She also urged people to relax both physically and emotionally.
Around twenty minutes later, English language lessons began. An incomplete English sentence related to that day’s English corner topic appeared on the front screens. Anna asked the audience to raise their hands and read out the whole sentence, filling in the blanks. Only a few people raised their hands. With Anna’s permission, red-tag volunteers handed microphones to one man and one woman in the audience. They stood up and read out the sentence with the words filled in. Anna praised them and asked the audience to applaud, then encouraged everyone to repeat the sentence to the people around them. This lasted only about a minute.

After the English language lesson, Anna introduced foreign guests and invited an American couple, Jim and Lorrie, onto the stage. The couple had been married for twenty-eight years and had a son and a daughter. Jim was a certified public accountant and had run his own business focusing on accounting and tax services for eighteen years. Lorrie was a high school health teacher. Later Anna presented another couple from Guangzhou and asked them to stand up. The wife conveyed their greetings to everybody in less-than-fluent English. Anna was at pains to emphasize that the couple had come to Xiamen on this occasion solely because of Rainbow.

It was 4:30 and time for the Life Talk segment to begin. Larry, wearing glasses and a long-sleeved striped shirt, walked onto the stage, accompanied by a young lady as his interpreter. At the beginning, someone introduced her, saying that she was formerly a Rainbow interpreter but had since moved to Guangzhou. The topic was “Relationships 101: How to Be Attractive (Kind),” and the content was related to the theme of the English conversation. In his speech, Larry referred to his life experiences in France and America, as well as to biblical teaching.

Around an hour later, the Life Talk finished at the scheduled time. Several purple-tags took the stage and reported details of forthcoming activities, including times, places, people in charge, and how to register. Specifically, these activities were: first, a range of courses on “Exploring the Truth” to be given by purple-tags to blue-tags who wanted to learn more about Christian beliefs; second, a lecture entitled “Dating in Different Cultures” to be given by American guests especially for blue-tags; third, a lecture on “How to Plan Well” to be delivered by Jim, the American accountant; fourth, a lecture on “Healthy Diet” to be delivered by Lorrie; fifth, the Globe E-Friend program for blue-tags who had come to Rainbow at least three times and wanted to communicate with Americans online. Over the next few days, people would phone candidates and check whether their oral proficiency in English met the standard requirements. Interested parties
could register with their details, including Chinese and English names, mobile phone number, English proficiency, affiliated institution, and so on. Finally, there was a call for volunteers to serve as tourist guides for the American guests, repeatedly emphasizing that all costs would be borne by these “teachers.”

Once this business had been rounded off, the Candlelight Conversation began. Tables had been already prepared in the front yard, and six to ten plastic chairs were allocated to each. On each table stood a sign reading “Student,” “Work,” “Freedom,” or “Marriage,” indicating the respective themes. Rainbow members had also prepared candlesticks and snacks. As it was not at all dark, the candles were not lit. People who wanted to continue their English practice stayed and chose their favorite theme. The people who left were asked to remove their name badges and hang them on the rack. Rainbow members said warm good-byes. When I left before the Candlelight Conversation, there were still a couple of young adults registering for the forthcoming activities.

The Saturday gathering, which has been held for years, has made Rainbow well known among college students as a place to learn English. Many young people have been particularly attracted by the presence of American faces. By providing opportunities to practice English with native speakers, the missionary organization has also gained popularity among young Christians. Although it states that it provides foreign language practice as part of the English corner, the topic for each gathering invariably has a link to the Christian faith, closely linked to biblical teaching. Rather than preaching the gospel directly, the mission employs English teaching and American culture as the vehicles for its message. While young people are becoming acquainted with the Christian elements here, they are also fulfilling some of their yearning for opportunities to come into contact with America specifically or a global capitalist market in general.

Imagining America Through Rainbow

William Bainbridge once wrote that “religion offers a way to transcend and transvalue relative deprivation. In heaven, all will be equal and all will be fulfilled. Membership in the religion can be a private badge of status, compensating the individual for lack of status in secular society.” In the same vein as what might be called the deprivation explanation, some scholars espouse the idea that the growth of Christianity in China is most likely
to occur in underdeveloped rural areas; many believers are female, elderly, and either illiterate or semi-illiterate. Recently, however, researchers have increasingly noted an upwardly mobile stratum (for example, Christian entrepreneurs and educated young people) attending urban churches in economically advanced regions, a trend that is gradually changing the composition of the modern Christian population. As I have observed in Rainbow meetings, the vast majority of attendees are young college students or well-educated professionals.

Formerly, when sociologists of religion sought the motives behind religious conversion, two approaches tended to take center stage, the individualistic and the institutional. The individualistic approach emphasized the significance of such microlevel factors as individual crisis, personal bonds, and networks that might grow or, conversely, break down. The institutional approach shifted the focus to competition between religious organizations. However, in looking for other reasons for the rise of Christianity in urban China, Fenggang Yang argues that besides these two approaches, the contextual aspects, above all the globalized market under political repression, should be examined as the primary influence. In a joint piece, Yang and Abel alert us to the fact that the importance of global contexts is now crucial to understand Christian conversion. From my observation of how matters are conducted in Rainbow, I am convinced that a yearning for the West, in particular for America, plays a major role. To young, urban Chinese people, Christianity, together with the English language and American faces, convey a modern, cosmopolitan image. The attraction of learning the English language and coming into contact with Americans is largely propelled by a sense of wanting to connect with the outside world. It reflects young people’s desire to be in touch with the modern West, as well as to participate in global integration.

One key feature of Rainbow is the English corner. Another is the gatherings it holds every Saturday afternoon, like the one described above. Rainbow also holds a full range of activities, including lectures by American guests, retreats for young men and women, outdoor sports, mini English corners, plus the Global E-Friend platform for those who want to communicate with Americans. In contrast with local churches, Rainbow’s target groups tend to be young college students, white-collar professionals, and businesspeople with a higher educational background. With this in mind, its mission activities take place in a relaxed and lively atmosphere that is attractive to young people who long to learn about American society and culture. Moreover, Rainbow emphasizes the sense of foreign experience by
inviting Americans to each gathering and advising Chinese members to adopt an English name.

Anna uses at least three names or titles on different occasions: her English name in the Saturday English corner, “Professor Zhang” in the Kindness Family counseling for marital relationships, and her Chinese name when she delivers sermons to local Christians at an officially registered church. She is very conscious of the fact that English or Chinese names and titles mean different things to different audiences. For the young people, her English name stands for her American identity and helps to create an informal atmosphere. Her self-proclaimed “professorship” at an elite university brings her respect among the young and middle-aged couples who attend Kindness counseling. The title of Professor is somewhat misleading, as her position was in fact a one-year job some time ago, and she was an ordinary foreign teacher without a professorial appointment. Whenever she has been invited to give a sermon to local Christians, she uses her Chinese name instead of her English name, apparently to cater to the tastes of Chinese-speaking audiences and also to keep a low profile in a state-sanctioned church, where preaching as an American would be an evident violation of the law.

Larry, who apart from his native Cantonese is multilingual in Mandarin Chinese, French, and English, takes a rather different tack. He always prioritizes English at public events, although he grew up in France. For both Anna and Larry, their English fluency, their years of living in the United States, and their travels across the world are all indicators of their American identity and cosmopolitan qualities. A postgraduate student recollected that Larry was once invited to give a speech at his university, and he was fascinated by Larry’s English fluency. However, his admiration for Larry’s cosmopolitan experience evaporated as soon as he was given the opportunity to study in a French institution for a semester and travel across Europe.

However, unlike this particular student, many students who attend events and activities at Rainbow are often deeply impressed with the cosmopolitanism of the experience, which is instrumental in their conversion. One of these was Andrew, a student who was then pursuing his master’s degree in engineering management. Sitting in a coffee shop, Andrew told me his story. He began to acquaint himself with Christianity at college but did not accept Christ until he was introduced to Rainbow. He attributed the gap to the fact that local churches are usually filled with elderly Christians. My younger sister once attended some churches in Zhejiang Province where
congregation] was completely [made up of] elderly ladies. The young people her age no longer wanted to go there. They had even got the impression that Christianity is a faith for the old or those who have nothing to do after filling their stomachs. These churches are very unlike Rainbow where you can find a group of really outstanding young people and white-collar professionals like Larry and Anna. . . . It offers many different interest groups that other churches do not have. Some people do come here because of these interest groups rather than the gospel, and subsequently acquire an interest in Christianity. Rainbow supplies various and abundant packages, so you can at least try some. People are very enthusiastic and hospitable. In contrast, other churches are dull, stuck-in-the-mud and lack vitality.

Jordan, another student, went to the Saturday gathering for the first time in 2006 and immediately favored the way the gospel was preached. As he said, “Most importantly, these topics are awesome. They do not dogmatically talk about beliefs; instead, they refer to those that are significantly connected to our own lives, values, and worldviews, subjects that we can’t learn about at school. These open discussions let you reflect on the sorts of things you don’t think about outside that particular atmosphere. Another plus point is that their English songs are great, especially when they are led by Anna. Third, I do like the contents of Larry’s talks, as well as his humility and good manners.”

These testimonies bear witness to how Rainbow awakened their interest in Christianity, but in many cases, the people who attend events and activities there seem to be much more motivated by their affection for America, a country virtually none of them has visited. Mary, a fashionable girl who recently graduated from college, is an example of this. Her parents are both government officials and “loyal” (in her words) to the Communist Party. Yet she is grievously disappointed in China and constantly complains about the numerous social problems there. The country’s one-party rule is what causes her the greatest discontent: “I think faith has nothing to do with political parties. I trust you, therefore I shall join your Party, but I can have my own faith. The two are not contradictory. Nevertheless, the CCP is afraid because it is well aware that it is not perfect. Hence, it adopts many tools to take control and ensure you have no other beliefs. I think this is wrong.”

When she spoke of going abroad, I sensed the intensity of her desire to visit the United States. She admitted that her affection for the United States is rooted in her sense of discontent and disillusionment with the social
realities around her. “The word ‘xenophilia’ (chongyang meiwai) seems a bit negative to me. Since I have never been to America, I have no idea if I am right or wrong. But at least, [I know that] I do not like my own country.”

Mary imagines America in extremely positive terms, as a society with a much higher degree of freedom than China. She insists that Christianity is what made American society better. “I do not believe that people will be granted God’s grace as soon as they convert. When individual Americans convert to Christ, they change gradually but will experience a substantial transformation.”

Though she might not think of herself as a feminist, Mary is also unhappy about traditional Chinese marital relationships, in particular men’s lack of appreciation for their spouses. In contrast, she has a very positive view of American marital relationships, as she has witnessed them through events and activities at Rainbow.

After coming into contact with foreigners, I have become even more xenophilic. I am not a traditional person, and I am concerned with men’s responsibilities and experiences. A good man must be the soul of his family. Certainly, his wife can back him up, but this does not mean his spouse should be just a housewife, occupied with the laundry and the cooking. A housemaid can do it. They should be mutually supportive. I think American people do it well. In Chinese families, the most frequent things I have seen are quarrels, divorce and the other woman. Although I am not knowledgeable about America, from those [Americans] I’ve met I definitely have a sense of American men’s love for and appreciation of their wives. How many Chinese men would say they appreciate their wives? They might say their ladies are good, kindhearted, honest and decent. But very few of them would say they appreciate their wives. American men do this very often.

For many attendees, Rainbow provides a pathway to understanding both the Christian faith and American society. Spurred on by their American dream, some are exploring a range of possibilities for migrating abroad. Among my respondents, Victoria shows the greatest desire to migrate to America. Born and raised in remote Xinjiang, she graduated from a local teachers’ college; later, her career took her to a coastal province. She moved to Gulangyu for the sake of her only daughter’s musical education and sent her to the noted Gulangyu Piano School, leaving her husband to look after their business in northern China.
I met Victoria for the first time in 2011, when a missionary couple had been invited to visit her home on Gulangyu Island, and a purple-tag asked me to act as a guide and interpreter for them. It was a cloudy and windy morning when the American couple and I landed on the island, where we were received by Victoria. Though she spoke barely any English, on a Rainbow member’s recommendation she used her English name. Her apartment is only ten minutes’ walk from the ferry terminal, but it took us more than an hour. She frequently stopped and asked me to take pictures of her with the two Americans. I do not have very pleasant memories of the meeting. Here’s the thing: Victoria made it clear she had no interest in me, a mere Chinese postgraduate student from a local university. I was little more than an accessory to facilitate the meeting with the foreigners, whose presence carried with it the reflected thrill of America.

While we were speaking in the living room, her daughter Wendy came home from school. On her mother’s instructions, Wendy performed on the cello and then the piano. I sensed her displeasure at her mother egging her on. Nevertheless, an obedient daughter, she played for the guests as requested without complaint. During the conversation, Victoria was mainly interested in finding out how she could send her daughter to an American school; she then wanted to know if the couple could help. She had heard that American schools were happy to accept students from Christian families recommended by an American church.

The following year, I left to pursue my doctorate in the Netherlands. This time, whenever I did field research in Xiamen, Victoria showed an interest in my European connections. She has kept in touch with me via social media and persistently inquires about the possibility of migrating to Western Europe. By going abroad, I became someone worth knowing, whereas before she showed no interest in me as a person.

Unquestionably, the revival of Confucianism and other native religions indicates that many people are still attracted to traditional religion and culture in China. However, for Chinese people who are more interested in the West, Christianity represents the antithesis of traditional, conservative, or restrictive Chinese culture, providing a vector for their yearning. In fact, Christianity is typically seen as a modern, cosmopolitan, universal faith, the diametrical opposite of more traditional beliefs. The case studies of people who choose to attend Rainbow gatherings instead of native Chinese churches indicate that the involvement of Americans and American culture strengthen their perception of Christianity as a modern religion.
and a vehicle for modernity. Their American background in itself makes the international agency’s proselytizing efforts more effective.

This success has not come easily, as Rainbow’s mission faces numerous challenges. Besides political restrictions, the Chinese American organizers have always had to find sophisticated ways of coping with the Three-Self church structure; even so, they are inevitably dragged into church politics.

New Missionaries, American Ministry, and Church Politics

The indigenization of Christianity in China has attracted widespread attention among Chinese researchers. Undeniably, this scholarly interest has been driven at least in part by the expectations of the party-state. At a recent national religious work conference in April 2016, Xi Jinping emphasized that “in adapting religion to socialist society, one of the most important tasks is to adhere to the path of Sinicization (Zhongguohua).”

Looked at historically, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Chinese Christian elite has initiated a far-reaching reform of the “foreign religion.” While this transformation has been underway, a vibrant and multi-faceted popular Christianity has also emerged. In Xiamen, as early as the second half of the nineteenth century, the Three Missions based in this area had begun to empower the local church by deliberately granting it a certain degree of autonomy, a fact that the Christian community celebrates even today (see chapter 1). Thus, in contemporary Xiamen, Christianity is seldom associated with the label of “foreign religion.”

Yet in stark contrast to the indigenous churches that have taken root and adapted to new social and cultural environments, Rainbow is at pains to retain its American characteristics, going to great lengths to distinguish itself from the Xiamen Christian community. Its history of conflict with an officially recognized church reveals some of the reasons behind this self-marginalization, and its somewhat ambiguous position in the local ecosystem of Christianity.

The Relationship Between the American Mission and the State-Sanctioned Church

For political reasons, Anna and Larry made the tactical decision to nominally affiliate Rainbow with Trinity Church. Pastor Wen describes Rainbow as one of Trinity’s gathering points, and in fact he was once invited to
teach theology at Rainbow’s worker training sessions. Rainbow leaders do not deny the role of Wen’s church in legitimizing their organization, but they tend to frame it as a reciprocal relationship rather than unidirectional support. For the first few years, their cooperation was mutually satisfactory. They were not in competition, and Rainbow in fact acted independently of Trinity. Pastor Wen did not impose any restrictions on it. Those who wanted to be baptized at Trinity Church were recommended by Rainbow.

The situation changed when approval was granted for a church compound to be “(re)built” in Banyan Village. When it was completed in 2008 the church was “(re)opened” after a lapse of half a century. Shortly afterward, on the grounds that it was a youth ministry, Rainbow was transferred from Trinity to the new minor church, which it was nominally affiliated with as an English corner. The Banyan Village Church took over the task of shielding the Rainbow missionary organization. To underline the link between them, Larry repeatedly emphasized that Rainbow had contributed enormously to “building” the church. As I have observed, both the founders and the members of Rainbow have actively taken part in the restoration and religious activities of Banyan Village Church.

Although Rainbow had to be affiliated with the church in order to obtain a legitimate status, in a pragmatic sense it was mostly independent. The relationship was mutually beneficial: the church gave Rainbow a legal status, and in return, Rainbow improved attendance and made the church more attractive, especially to young people. Moreover, Christians who converted because of Rainbow (baptized in Banyan Village) could be counted among the church’s successes, contributing to its status vis-à-vis the Xiamen church. Even more importantly, thanks to Rainbow, the Banyan Village Church became the recipient of many more donations, divided in two according to their agreement: half for the church and half for Rainbow.

Despite their ostensible cooperation, a growing competitiveness set in. When Rainbow seemed to be enjoying a much better reputation, some church members were evidently dissatisfied.

Mo Liwen, then a young preacher at Trinity Church, was sent to be in charge of the Rainbow ministry, but Larry denied her any substantial role; he treated Pastor Wen as the person in charge. Even Mo’s role as a messenger was not acknowledged. Larry told me, “Actually she seldom came [to see us]. We usually contacted the Old Pastor directly.” Preacher Mo was in an awkward position because, in her own words, she was being bypassed. The Rainbow leaders made it clear that the Old Pastor was the real umbrella they needed, and they therefore tended to communicate with him
in person rather than through Mo. When Mo was ordained and appointed head pastor at Banyan Village, her authority went unrecognized, exacerbating the conflict.

The honeymoon period seemed to be over before it had really begun. The status of each party was unclear and subject to a lengthy negotiation process. Rainbow was gradually marginalized and, to regain lost ground, Larry and Anna had no option but to give in gracefully, as they could not operate without the “umbrella” of Pastor Mo and her church. Rainbow’s bargaining position was weak, and its situation became even worse when the leaders were warned that Mo was unwilling to shield their organization. Dissatisfied with the relationship, the Rainbow leaders sought other churches they might be able to cooperate with, but their attempts failed. I was told that the founding couple’s strong personalities and the perception that they might try to dominate church affairs worried the leaders of other churches. More importantly, most were unwilling to take the risk of covering for a foreign mission led by influential pastors. Although Mo Liwen is not very influential in the church community, her husband is a resourceful figure in the official church organizations on prefectural and provincial levels, giving her valuable connections with local authorities.

The tension in the everyday relationship between Rainbow and Banyan Village Church was also reflected in their styles of worship. As an American youth ministry, Rainbow specializes in attracting young people. Mo, on the other hand, takes a traditionalist approach and even went as far as to strongly advise Rainbow to adopt the *Amoy Hymnal* widely used in the Southern Fujian region. Under Mo, the newly (re)formed church adopted a more traditional style of worship, prompting some young people in the Banyan Village congregation to stop attending the church. The distribution of financial resources was a further point of friction: at first, Banyan Village Church had been responsible for some of Rainbow’s expenses incurred for printing and hospitality; as time went on, it was no longer willing to bear these costs.

“Building” or “Rebuilding”: Controversy over the Birth of the Banyan Village Church

Rainbow members describe Rainbow as being established before its host organization. The narrative is “first Rainbow, then the Banyan Village Church.” As Larry commented, “The request to build a church was initially objected to by the RAB on the grounds that there were not many Christians in the village and that Buddhism was actually the prevailing religion.
Only when the number of Christians exceeds two hundred can the application for a church be approved [by religious affair authorities]. In response to the criticism, the Old Pastor told the officials that there was in fact a gathering point, with two to three hundred in regular attendance. After his intervention, the Xiamen RAB finally authorized the building of the Banyan Village Church.”

Mo Liwen disputes Rainbow’s statement. From her point of view, the village church was established as early as 1926. Although the church building was heavily damaged in the Japanese bombing and finally destroyed in the 1950s during battles between Communist and Nationalist forces across the Taiwan Strait, the remains of the belfry still bore witness to its past existence. There is no question that before the construction of the new church building, part of the old belfry still existed. I saw the pictures during my field research. Members of Rainbow must have known about the old church, since the ruins were still there during their first five years in the village. As far as RAB officials were concerned, the construction of the new church building was a “reconstruction” of the old church. Pastor Mo emphasizes that the RAB approved the plan on two main grounds: first, the fact that the old church had once stood on the same site; second, on the basis of the post-1979 national religious policy on the restoration of religious sites.

Rainbow members dismiss Mo’s account. They argue that the new church has nothing to do with the historical one; specifically, they say there was no continuity in worship, nor in the makeup of the church congregation. Furthermore, they added that the original site of the old church had become a rubbish dump. They say it was even the property of a local villager, rather than a church organization, until the new church was built.

Rainbow and the Banyan Village Church did not reach a consensus on the “building” versus “rebuilding” dispute until December 2012, when Mo was raising donations to erect a stele with an inscription created by the first preacher of the historical church in Banyan Village, Cai Zhenxun (1874–1968). Cai composed the text entitled “The Stele Epigraph for the Xiamen Banyan Village Church” in imitation of a widely read essay—“The Epigraph on My Humble House” (Loushi ming)—authored by Liu Yuxi (772–842), a prestigious scholar-official in the Tang Dynasty. The short text, made up of eighty-one characters, was originally published on April 2, 1931, in Daonan, an important Christian publication based in Xiamen that also covers the Three Missions and other churches throughout Southern Fujian. Cai’s epigraph reads as follows:
A church need not be high;  
It is holy as God is with us.  
The teaching does not have to be abstruse;  
So long as it is practiced and widespread.  
The saints are those  
Whose great virtue gives out the true fragrance.  
Our sanctuary is where the light of God graciously shines;  
Our hymns are written in elegant, ethereal rhyme.  
Christ converts stones;  
God calls good soldiers.  
In this sanctuary we can play the organ and read the Bible.  
No heresies intrude;  
No obsession with fame and wealth.  
The two stone tablets transmit the Ten Commandments;  
The Cross celebrates redemption.  
The Savior warned us to watch and pray.\textsuperscript{34}

In the 1930s, the historical Banyan Village Church, situated in what was once a remote fishing village far from the urban periphery of Xiamen, had a fairly small congregation and stood on the outskirts of the city’s Christian community. In his concise text, Preacher Cai Zhenxun draws an analogy between this church and Liu Yuxi’s house—although it is a humble building, the host maintains a civilized demeanor.

Pastor Mo’s husband found the text and informed the church. Subsequently, it initiated a series of historical writings and planned to install the stele. When the stele was erected, Mo invited Cai’s grandsons to come see the “rebuilt” church compound and the stele that acknowledges their grandfather’s contribution. Under the circumstances, Cai’s descendants were effectively mobilized and one of them finished a biography of Cai, where he described his grandfather’s life as revolving around the establishment and development of the historical Banyan Village Church.\textsuperscript{35} Nowadays church flyers handed out to visitors and people attending Sunday service give a historical introduction to the church, and although it is very concise, it traces a continuity between the historical church and the present one.

When I asked Rainbow members about the stele and what they thought of it, they tended to make comments like “We just focus on preaching the gospel.” Apparently, the erection of the stele was enough to supply convincing evidence of the historical continuity of the Banyan Village Church. Since
then, Rainbow members have not spontaneously brought up the disputed narrative.

Local Tradition and Power Structure

Pastor Zhang, Anna’s father, has played a vital role in Rainbow ever since it was established. Whereas Larry and Anna are US citizens, Zhang is from Taiwan, which is extremely convenient from many points of view—linguistically, culturally, and historically—to help them communicate with the people of Southern Fujian. Both Larry and Anna are familiar with the conditions in China and aware of how important it is to avoid conflict with local churches. Samuel, a key purple-tag of the missionary organization, once explained:

There are many American people in Xiamen, but nobody else could carry it [the organizational missionary enterprise] off. Larry and Anna do not want to be dragged into church affairs. Most of the time they just plead ignorance. Of course, they are well aware of the rules. If they were not, how could they deal with them? They have an American network but use it only if and when the need arises.
Some foreigners might speak out against the inappropriate conduct of the local clergy, but that is not our way. We know the rules of the game. If we speak out, everything will be exposed. Other foreigners are not in the same situation. They are not in the same circle and have no conflicts of interest. You [foreigners] might speak your mind about [something], but we [local church members] will pay no attention to you. However, if anybody within the Xiamen church were to behave like this, they would find they had enemies to contend with. In this sort of environment, you can decide whether or not you want to get involved.

Referring to the Lianghui organizations, Samuel continued, “We need a subtle strategy. Specifically, we just [go ahead and] do it rather than say anything. It is better for us to stay in the gray area. Never try to clarify. Do not pay attention to the religious regulations. We are obedient to God. So far, there has been no intervention [by the government or the Lianghui]. Perhaps there is always someone in the audience [sent by authorities] who observes everything.”

When a fellow researcher based in Xiamen asked a Xiamen RAB official about religious groups formed by non-PRC citizens, he swiftly responded, “Do you mean Rainbow?” Religious affairs officials are quite aware of Rainbow’s activities, but they have never interfered. As a representative of the XICF, Larry has been invited to dinner several times by RAB officials, but the hosts never mentioned Rainbow to him. Larry, of course, is wise to the fact that the authorities know about his organization. As he said, “Everyone knows what we are doing here. We have no secrets.” However, as long as Rainbow keeps a low profile, authorities can pretend it does not exist, even when they undoubtedly know what it does.

When I asked Larry if they had a long-term plan, he became melancholic. He shook his head and said:

Since we came, we have realized we couldn’t make many plans. The situation has changed rapidly. When we arrived, we expected to cultivate the youth and we succeeded. In the next decade, we shall continue to dedicate ourselves to the missions, God willing. In China, we cannot make plans because of our identities. These are very subtle things. The fact that we have been here for ten years is a miracle. Over the past two or three decades, a number of missionaries have come to this country under the cover of some other identity.
However, none of them has achieved anything like Rainbow. It is a miracle. As soon as they began their missions, they were taken away [by the authorities]. . . . So far, we have not had to deal with the RAB. We shall [certainly] be in trouble if we are caught. It is hard to say [what the prospects for the next ten years will be]. . . . As far as the government is concerned, it would be ridiculous for officials to make trouble for us because we convey positive information [about China today] abroad. Bad news will follow if we find ourselves in trouble. Rainbow makes a favorable impression on foreigners.

As the ongoing tension between Rainbow and the Banyan Village Church led their relationship to deteriorate, the former found the situation increasingly unfriendly and felt the risk of being reported to the authorities. Eventually, Rainbow leaders decided to part from the Banyan Village Church and the two organizations went their separate ways.

In search of a new umbrella, Rainbow sought a collaboration with the Bamboo Church. This new relationship is severely asymmetrical. Rainbow needs the cover of the Bamboo Church, but Bamboo does not need Rainbow to attract more members to the congregation. As one of the main churches under the leadership of the influential chairwoman of the Xiamen TSPM, Bamboo has over five thousand registered members and provides various ministries for different age groups. The most obvious manifestation of the inequality is that Rainbow is not allowed to use its name and logo; instead, it has to conduct its activities overtly in the name of the Bamboo English Corner. As a purple-tag explained:

The Bamboo Church is a major institution. There is no shortage of either money or workers. The English corner will have to content itself with enriching its youth ministry. We now duplicate our activities in the Banyan Village Church in the Bamboo Church and pool all our resources. Nowadays, all of the registered churches are doing this [English corners with foreigners involved]. The TSPM [leaders] are aware of it and acquiesce in it. The churches led by courageous pastors have all espoused this. However, none of the Bamboo pastors appears [at these gatherings]; only a lay church member who has been assigned to coordinate our work attends. . . . Once there were dissenting voices. The main issue is how to identify the converts who have been influenced by Rainbow. Are they with the Bamboo Church or with Rainbow? This has a direct bearing on financial donations.
Money! This is a sensitive issue. . . . The pastors all have families to raise and cannot survive without their followers’ donations. . . . We are unwilling to discuss the matter with the Bamboo Church.

Conclusion

Contemporary Chinese Americans have now assumed the mission of building a bridge between young Chinese and the Lord. The English language, American faces, and Christianity are a potent cocktail to produce a cosmopolitan and global image. As the Communist government strictly prohibits traditional foreign missions, English teaching plays an important role in helping missionaries obtain long-term visas and attracting Western-oriented youth.

Rainbow is not the only foreign agency involved in the Xiamen church. Other Southeast Asian churches of Southern Fujian origin and seminaries have also established a close cooperation with churches to train clergy. One of the reasons they have been welcomed is their forefathers’ connections with the Xiamen church. The new-era American missionaries are reluctant to fully join the church community, since they are aware that maintaining a distance will keep them safer. Thus, although the American missionary organization in Xiamen has been successful in converting the youth, it is not in a position to be either localized in or assimilated with the indigenous Christian tradition. The prosperity and success of the mission enterprise in late nineteenth-century Xiamen is a sharp contrast to today’s international Christian agencies and the dilemma they are caught in.

Religious affairs officials, who are well acquainted with Rainbow but pretend not to know it as long as it does not stir up any trouble, probably feel confident that the organization will not be able to develop into a big movement. Mired in church politics, the most immediate difficulty Rainbow has to deal with is the official churches. The controversy aroused by disagreement over the “building” versus “rebuilding” of Banyan Village Church reflects a tension between the contemporary missionary agency and the state-recognized church. It is worth noting that the dispute between them involved the reconstruction and contestation of historical narratives within the Christian community. The Banyan Village Church, which enjoys official recognition, easily prevailed. As a Lianghui leader told me, “They should obey the regulations, otherwise. . . .” He did not continue, but I could guess what he left unspoken from his tone. He even reminded me not to get involved.
On the opposite side of the fence from the young Christians who wish for fuller involvement in the global world, church workers in Xiamen do not show much interest in the present American mission. This situation is in sharp contrast with the historical tradition of Christianity in Xiamen, the result of American and European missions and the passion for reestablishing religious networks with Southeast Asia. The Xiamen Christian community is now proud of its global connections, mainly in historical terms. Through their yearning for the Christian past, Xiamen Christians have found a sense of belonging to global Christianity.

As it had to face up to the independence of the Banyan Village Church and the transfer of Rainbow to another leading church, Trinity Church’s strategy of international cooperation was declared a failure. For the declining Trinity Church, the future seems even darker than it did before.