When scholars write about Christianity in China, they are often writing about Christian communities, churches, and individuals. Yet the different facets of Christianity I describe in the previous chapters reveal how Christianity is intimately embedded in the social, political, and cultural milieu of Xiamen. There, Christianity is not just a system of religious thought and practice; instead, it is woven into the social fabric and it matters to the whole of society.

As a source of local pride, Christianity lies at the center of reinterpretations and reconstructions of Xiamen’s glorious past. Local government, churches, grassroots groups, and individuals attempt to construct or reconstruct narratives revolving around Christian history in dynamic and ongoing interactions. I hope to push studies of Christianity in the Chinese context beyond a Eurocentric approach to reflect on acculturation and the place of Chinese Christianity on the global stage.

Revisiting Church and State in Contemporary China

The Zhejiang demolition campaign and subsequent political movements directed at various religions were a watershed for religion-state relations in contemporary China. Having been predominantly perceived by the public and overseas observers as a campaign specifically against Christianity, they
have had a profound effect on scholarly perspectives, leading back to the
dichotomous paradigm of state domination and church resistance.\textsuperscript{1} Yet the
extensive ideological education movement launched by Xi Jinping and his
administration, which is currently underway, suggests that these campaigns
have more to do with center-periphery dynamics within the government.
They appear to be intended to restructure the bureaucratic system as a whole
and mobilize millions of government officials at various levels to ensure
their political loyalty to the central leadership and the Communist Party.\textsuperscript{2}

The Zhejiang campaign has challenged previous research on Wenzhou
Christianity, in particular the overemphasis on the negotiating ability of
elite Christians who, as Nanlai Cao says, have entered mainstream local
society in the wake of their economic success.\textsuperscript{3} The current situation indi-
cates that the role of the state in interacting with Christianity is not going
to be downplayed any time soon. Although the state has not significantly
changed existing religious policy, any minor adjustments can still consid-
erably reshape the landscape of Christianity. As long as the current political
system remains in place, churches will struggle to obtain a more favorable
position in their dealings with the state.

To advance our understanding of Chinese Christianity, we need new
visions. Looking at various manifestations and forms of Christianity in
different contexts can enrich our knowledge of how Christianity, a religion
imported in the nineteenth century, has become integrated into Chinese
society, impacting many aspects of society and public life.

Looking at Old Pastor Wen and his interactions with local officials,
it becomes clear that much of the scholarly research on church-state rela-
tions in contemporary China fails to acknowledge the local and personal
dimensions that often influence exchanges between church leaders and state
bureaucrats. When religious policy implementation is not discussed at the
local level, the tendency is to reify the state as an all-encompassing entity. In
fact, actual policy implementations are much more flexible than what may
appear from a distance. As Koesel’s interest-based theory of religion-state
interactions suggests, it is not uncommon for religious groups and authori-
tarian government to form a mutual alliance.\textsuperscript{4} In the Chinese context, Adam
Chau reminds us that “because of its nested interest in the locale, the local
state necessarily behaves differently than the central state.”\textsuperscript{5} When we look
at the complex linkages more closely, we may recognize greater flexibility
and an array of options in church-state interactions.

Even so, in the era of governmentality, the shift in the governing tactics
of the Chinese state does not necessarily mean its influence over society
is waning. Instead, the authorities commit themselves to building a less direct but more resourceful social management system. The state still has a powerful but mostly imperceptible grip on the church. Although there have been no conflicts of any magnitude and church-state relations have been running smoothly since the 1980s (as Old Pastor Wen commented), the state’s authority affects and constrains the Christian community in a variety of ways.

The Christian community in Xiamen and Gulangyu must now confront a number of challenges from within and outside the church. Its historical legacy has been recognized and appropriated by the government, and it is faced with new methods of governing, one of the chief ones being heritage management. Moreover, the policy of intensive tourism development on Gulangyu led to a trend of decreasing and aging congregations that is now irreversible. Under pressure to revive the local economy, the Xiamen government will certainly not cut back on its economic exploitation of Gulangyu in the interests of the church. Urban development planning will not take the future of Christianity into consideration. In the relentless onward march of government projects, the local church has no option but to concede and adapt.

When I discussed the Zhejiang campaign with the Old Pastor, he said it would never happen in Xiamen given the city’s relatively relaxed political atmosphere and friendly religious affairs officials. Over three decades of experience in dealing with local government, he has gained great confidence. Local officials who are deeply embedded in local society tend to behave as social actors rather than agents of the state in their interactions with Christianity. As long as their political future is not in jeopardy, they will not refuse to cooperate with the church and will even help it to benefit from local politics.

When referring to good church-state relations, the Old Pastor apparently did not take into account the unregistered churches that have been disturbed by public security authorities from time to time. He also overlooked the fact that each time higher-level state agencies have intervened, local-level “friendly” officials immediately terminated their cooperation.

Some resourceful religious elites are adept in dealing with the local government and church politics. However, the advantage enjoyed by Christianity in dealing with the authorities or those of a particular church within the Christian community will disappear as soon as influential religious elites retire. The decline of Trinity Church is not just attributable to a shrinking elderly congregation; undeniably the Old Pastor’s successors have been
lacking in strong, charismatic personalities. This situation demonstrates that the capacity of negotiation with the state heavily relies on strong figures, revealing the fragility of Christianity in shifting political conditions.

Dynamics of Negotiating the Christian Past

The case studies in this book shed light on the continuities between the past and the present. As a direct consequence of China’s defeat in the Opium War, hundreds of Western missionaries settled in the Xiamen region and launched widespread activities in education, medicine, newspapers, and other social enterprises, and in these endeavors they greatly contributed to shaping the landscape of the locale. These activities cast an aura of Westernization and modernity over the whole missionary enterprise in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China. Although missionary activities were forcibly terminated and intentionally discredited by the ruling Communist Party, their far-reaching influence has never been eliminated. Certainly, colonial and missionary modernity left a profound imprint on the collective psyche of Xiamen society. Xiamen citizens’ internalization of Western forms of modernity, seen in the Western-style architecture and heard in the collective enthusiasm for Western-style music, has certainly been shaped and maintained by the romantic temperament of the city. Thus, the successful construction of reform-era Xiamen’s romantic image must in part be credited to its Christian legacy.

In modern China, Christianity has invariably and inextricably been associated with imperialism. The missionaries’ privileges were the fruit of China’s defeat by the major Western powers and its subsequent fall in a rapidly changing world order. The Chinese people’s hatred of foreigners and the denunciation of Chinese Protestants and Catholics, who were condemned as traitors to their country, surged around 1900, eventually culminating in the massive Boxer Uprising. During the Republican period, the sentiment was taken on board by nationalists struggling to build an independent nation-state. The Communist Party inherited the prevailing public perception from peasant rebels and nationalists. After 1949, the CCP exploited the discourse around Christianity to proclaim its historical mission to put an end to China’s long suffering and humiliation and liberate the people from imperialism.

Since the Communist Party rose to power in mainland China, the reconstruction of historical narratives has been a national project in which
the Marxist social engineers continually strive to dictate what citizens remember and forget. The Christian past has been an inescapable part of the official memory project. During the 1950s, there was a series of nationwide accusations whose principal target against the backdrop of the Korean War and the Cold War was American missionary activity. The Xiamen region was no exception to the general trend. Missionaries, once privileged and respected, became the targets of public humiliation.

Church-related schools, hospitals, and other carriers of memory ceased to function, some of them smashed or appropriated during the Communist era, some later transformed by government-led tourism projects. With these material reminders of the missionary past gone or absorbed into another system of meaning, the social frameworks on which collective memory was established and shared have eroded. This environment exacerbates the difficulties of retaining a complete picture of the past, since the concrete sites of memory have faded. Fortunately, many Christianity-related buildings across the city—churches, mission schools, and hospitals—were not demolished during the extreme campaigns but expropriated for government or public use and preserved in relatively good condition. Other forms of carriers of historical memory like the foreigners’ cemetery and the more ephemeral archives and the like were not as fortunate and were destroyed, partly because they were regarded as useless in the process of socialist construction.

Historical writing is among the most significant forms of official memory. The PRC government’s collection and compilation of personal testimonies served as a way to demonstrate the new leadership’s commitment to absorbing those experiences within a unified, coherent narrative that would simultaneously affirm the Party’s legitimacy and the part it played in a continuous lineage, as a liberator of the miserable Chinese nation. Christianity, which had been denounced for its entanglement with imperialism, was targeted in official historical works. The framework set up by the CPPCC project (for example, the Xiamen Historical Materials) further squeezed and colonized the space allowed for private memory. Even after the launch of social reforms and the policy of opening up to the outside world, the government has not slackened in its efforts to dominate narratives that deal with the Christian past. The Xiamen authorities’ as yet unsuccessful but still ongoing history writing project, initiated in the 1980s, reveals that a unified history for Christianity, like that for any other religion, is still an item on the agenda of the state.

The grassroots efforts to write history in Xiamen is not an isolated episode; rather, it is part of a nationwide oral history movement. Although
ideological control lies at the center of the Party’s rule, governments and officials on local levels are not particularly motivated to take a firm grip on ideology-related matters at all times. Consequently, ordinary citizens’ historical reconstructions of less sensitive issues are achievable in some locales.

The central state has become aware of the booming civic movement and has given a proactive response. The label of “historical nihilism” (lishi xuwuzhuyi) is attached to those who “deny histories of the Party and the nation” and even “rewrite history.” “Historical nihilism” has been under heated debate since 2013, when a few scholars with quasi-official backgrounds began to publish in the official media. Xi Jinping openly opposed “historical nihilism” and, on different occasions, has blamed it on “domestic and foreign hostile forces.” In Xi’s words, the primary hazard posed by “historical nihilism” is that it will “deny the guiding position of Marxism, the inevitability of China progressing to socialism, and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party.” Following Xi’s guidelines, some official theorists have advocated reconstructing grand narratives to combat this emerging “historical nihilism.”

Like many other memory studies, this research shows that the official manipulation of social memory is no longer effective in China today. A number of history enthusiasts, Christians and non-Christians alike, within and outside of churches, are dedicated to reinterpreting the legacy of Christianity and, in the course of their work, publicly commemorate its connections to the past. This civic movement is not confined solely to Christian groups or individuals. The majority of the people who organized the commemoration of John Otte (described in chapter 2) were non-Christians, and their efforts were spurred by their affection for the city’s past rather than any religious motivation. Missionaries in Xiamen presented themselves as leaders of modernization, establishing a variety of modern institutions, and few expressed their power by exploiting any connection to the imperialist forces behind them; they won the respect of the people of Xiamen. Virtually no stories about any kind of antimissionary struggle have been transmitted to the present generation.

Churches or individuals have gained considerable space for publishing (albeit sometimes “illegally”) about historical matters. They are now able to reconstruct the history that is premised on their own understanding. History matters considerably to them because the version made and endorsed by the state appears to conflict strongly with their own understanding of their shared past. However, the fact that people do not believe in the state narratives does not mean that the great master narratives disappear.
State discourse shapes or even manipulates people’s ways of thinking and doing; authority has been incorporated into the structure of social memory. This was clear in the recurrent theme that emerged at the beginning of my interviews, when respondents invariably referred to Christianity’s inglorious entanglement with imperialist aggression before going on to make other points.

Although the state is a shrewd and often relentless manipulator of society’s memory, ironically, it is the local government’s pragmatic purposes (for example, the World Heritage Site application, or the competition for an international award for livable communities) and tacit approval that make alternative historical discourses on Christianity possible. The source of the socialist regime’s legitimacy has, to some extent, shifted from its historical discourse or political ideology to economic performance. The socialist ideology that Christianity is facing today is far different from what it was in 1949. As Frank Pieke has argued, “Socialist ideology is no longer the end served by Communist Party rule, but the mere means by which party rule is perpetuated... The specific relevance of ideology in justifying the CCP’s rule means that... ideology [is deployed] as part of the party-state’s ongoing quest to reproduce and reinvent itself: ideology is treated not as the objective of rule but as an inseparable aspect of practical governance.”

In the study of contemporary Christianity, it will no longer be seen as a consistent victim of the atheistic or antireligious socialist ideology. The relationship between Christianity and state ideology is not fixed but fluid, a fact that is exemplified in official attitudes toward the production of Christian history. Despite authorities’ greater tolerance for narratives about Christianity before 1949, the history of Christianity after 1949—particularly stories about political movements that highlight the errors of the Communist regime—is still subject to extremely stringent restrictions. The revolutionary Party now tends to dilute its revolutionary image; the Party agenda has shifted to harmony and social stability. Under the circumstances, the production of Christian history is getting easier, as long as no reference is made to Mao’s political campaigns. When it speaks of the traumas it inflicted on ordinary people, by and large the Party usually blames the Cultural Revolution but balks at allowing details to be publicized. The authorities still close archives and force publishers to delete details about the repression of Christianity, since they are well aware that these would damage its hard-won legitimacy, sustained by thirty years of economic achievements. Hence, the Cultural Revolution has been used as a handy vehicle to vent public grievances.
The reconstruction of the Christian past is actually an ongoing and dynamic process of negotiations. It illustrates the limits to the power of different actors—the state, churches, grassroots groups, and individuals—to remake the past according to their present interests. It also demonstrates that official projects and unofficial attempts at history-making often intertwine and infiltrate one another’s domains. Consequently, memory viewed from a dynamic perspective should not reduce remembering to either an instrument of official manipulation or a form of popular resistance. In the context of postsocialist China, social memory inhabits the space left over between the ideology enforced by the state, suggesting other potential ways of understanding the Christian past. This perspective acknowledges that various elements that make social memory constant are often at play together. It postulates a complex view of how the relationship between past and present forms social memory. Importantly, it treats social memory as an active process of sense-making that has been taking place over time.¹⁰

Though it is still under one-party rule, it is not easy for the state to continue to monopolize the social memory related to Christianity. However, the people’s ability to challenge official ideology should not be overstated. Any attempt to probe the reconstruction of the Christian past should investigate the negotiating mechanisms that have spontaneously formed in the social fabric. These do not function in any united or fixed form; rather, they are everyday maneuvers located in a particular social and cultural context and should be treated as a process that incorporates conflict, contestation, controversy, and cooperation as the hallmarks of memory.¹¹

The historical and social changes in the landscape of Gulangyu and the collective passion for history there did not originate directly from a denial of official narratives. Intriguingly, the changing trajectory of Gulangyu represents two diametrically opposed discourses. Following the logic of market economy, the local government maximizes the potential of the island for economic purposes. In contrast, citizens with a sense of nostalgia see what is happening there as a process of “deterioration” and are convinced that excessive tourism exploitation is the main culprit. Gulangyu Island was once the center of the historical Three Missions and witnessed the flourishing of missionary enterprises in the region. Today, its shrinking congregation numbers show it is doomed to decline. In recent years, the center of gravity of Christianity has shifted to the main island of Xiamen, which has experienced a surge in the number of its Christian population. The changes on Gulangyu and within the church community there have triggered a series of subsequent events in Xiamen, including a growing
nostalgia for the past glory, church anniversaries, and a commemoration of the late missionaries. In making sense of the collective passion for reinventing the past, it is important to understand local pride and nostalgia as ways in which individuals and social groups resort to reconstruct the past to relieve their strong sense of regret about the present.

The citizens who are engaged in the civic movement to (re)write history do not intend to challenge state ideology, even though the challenge does arise as an unintended consequence. This explains why, in the early stages of the cultural reinvention movement, its members did not envision the prospect of a more civil society. It might also help elucidate why clergy and lay Christians in Xiamen have no interest in present-day American evangelists, however much they cherish mission history and endorse the missionaries’ contribution to the prosperous history of the area. There is no clear boundary between Christianity and the state, between unofficial narrative and official discourse, to define the space of each. The production of history texts described in chapter 4, for example, shows that official projects and unofficial attempts often permeate each other’s narratives; they do not represent two completely separate domains. And, as long as the movement continues, what it produces will gradually enter the public consciousness, particularly when official narratives are contradictory to public understandings of the city’s past. In the long term, this process will contribute to the growth of alternate viewpoints on history and what might be called civil society.

In Xiamen today, the writing of Christian history remains largely a passion of the cultural elite. They have devoted significant attention to the respected Christians who made such a large contribution to the city’s glorious past and thus its local pride. Yet in stark contrast, the voices of early converts who were frequently uneducated, economically deprived, and socially marginalized are still largely unheard.

There is also a gender imbalance in how Christian history is told. Compared to male converts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the vast number of female converts in the Xiamen area, with the exception of a very few examples of outstanding women, are often left nameless. In Christian history, the pioneering Chinese women of the early missionary period have left very few personal records and were given scant coverage in missionary reports. This situation is not confined to China; it can be found throughout most of the world. For example, in her study of Christianity in the Middle East, Heleen Murre-van den Berg points out that the most difficult question to answer is how the early missionary activities
informed women’s daily lives (such as marriage and career) and stimulated women to rethink their roles in family and society.\textsuperscript{13} Recently, this issue has begun to receive some attention, albeit very limited, in the historical study of Chinese Christianity.\textsuperscript{14}

Finally, there is still relatively little research on how Christians or members of Christian-influenced communities understand their own past. My intention has been to record how such a group of people view and reconstruct the Christian history that has substantially shaped their sense of identity and local pride. The case of Xiamen shows that a civic movement to produce alternative narratives brings Christian history into the mainstream. Nevertheless, it does not mean the spiritual aspects of Christianity have entered the mainstream. Christianity remains a minority religion on the periphery of Xiamen society. Therefore, I am dubious about Nanlai Cao’s argument that “the presence of a business community organized at the grassroots level can . . . move Christianity from the margin to the mainstream of Chinese society in everyday maneuvers.”\textsuperscript{15} I am convinced that we need to distinguish between the presence of the religion of Christ and Christianity-related issues.

Reestablishing Links to Global Christianity

Thirty years of isolation from the outside world in the Maoist era once estranged the Chinese Christian community from the Christian world. Since 1979, the Xiamen church has resumed connections with Chinese diaspora churches, most of them in Southeast Asia. Members of the Southern Fujian church who fled abroad prior to October 1949 created a bridge between the Xiamen church and overseas Chinese Christian communities, who contributed huge amounts to the Xiamen church during tough times. This sort of Christian network was stimulated by state-led economic reform and the opening-up policy. In the early reform era, the government indirectly encouraged the reestablishment of transnational religious connections in order to attract foreign investment and boost the economy. In the course of negotiations, both sides made compromises.\textsuperscript{16} For example, in the mid-1990s a county-level government permitted overseas Chinese Christians to rebuild a church on the condition that the latter agreed to bear the construction costs of a public hospital for a local township.

Since the late 1990s, China’s economy has continued to develop and Xiamen became one of China’s most economically prosperous regions.
Conclusion

The China side is no longer as hungry as it once was for economic investment or assistance from overseas Chinese; in fact, the latter have lost their economic superiority. This considerable change in their economic situations has substantially reshaped the network between Fujian and Southeast Asia. Another important point is that the restoration of transnational connections originated from the long-term emigration tradition of Fujian. Since the turn of the century, transnational networks based on geographical and lineage origin have weakened as more and more elderly overseas Chinese Christians have died.

Nevertheless, the Southeast Asian churches are still very much present. Alongside the decline in their economic contributions, these churches have initiated other channels to engage in the Xiamen church. The foremost among these is the training of clergy and church workers for both registered and unregistered churches. Hence, instead of making economic contributions, Southeast Asia is now influencing the Xiamen church through theology and training. This connection has been stimulated by prestigious and influential evangelists from Chinese Christian communities such as Stephen Tong, an Indonesian Reformed pastor who was born in Xiamen. Tong’s Reformed theology is attractive to many Xiamen Christians, and his promotion of this tradition is boosting its recovery in the mainstream church in Xiamen.

Of the Three Missions, the RCA was the first to reconnect with the Xiamen church after 1979. In 1992, the RCA headquarters in the United States invited Zhu Siming (1923–2015), a respected Christian, to attend the 150th anniversary of its mission to China as a representative of the Xiamen church. At Trinity Church’s eightieth anniversary in 2014, a representative of the RCA was sent to attend and give a public speech. The publication of a history book about the RCA in the Xiamen area has helped to expand the historical knowledge of the local Christians. All these events have contributed to the Christian community’s emerging sense of adhering to the authentic RCA tradition. A deaconess of Trinity Church who was studying Reformed theology in a Southeast Asian seminary once told me that she was hoping the RCA would produce a detailed instruction manual on how to lead a church in the RCA tradition. It is clear that many Xiamen Christians relate to the global church in two senses: first, relishing the heritage of the historical church as a part of nineteenth- and twentieth-century globalizing Christianity; second, wanting to strengthen the Reformed theology and church governance structure so as to make it conform more closely to their mother missions. Apart from these two aspects, they do not really
have a sense of integrating into the world Christian community in other forms. The Xiamen church shows no desire to regain its former place in the global institution of Christianity.

In her study of a Shanxi Catholic village, Henrietta Harrison found that the new generation of priests have attempted to retrieve the faith community’s connection with the global Roman Catholic Church by asking the Vatican for recognition and by “rejecting some of the community’s traditional practices and imposing new practices that they defined as belonging to the global church.” In contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition that the Vatican exercises authority over faith communities across the world, there is no such institution that Protestant communities have to obey in terms of either theology or church structure. Although the Reformed tradition has had far-reaching effects on the Xiamen church, the latter does not necessarily have to conform to the institutions of its mother missions.

This institutional disconnect between the Xiamen church and historical Western missions is largely the result of the fact that early missionaries purposefully worked to establish a native church of China rather than a branch of foreign missions. As Mark Noll remarks, the missionaries’ forced departure was “the birth of Christian China,” prompting local communities to turn inward for spiritual sustenance. In the absence of Western missionaries, Christianity grew deep roots in Xiamen during the series of violent Maoist political campaigns. As soon as political space was opened to religious practices, Christianity reentered public life.

At the beginning of the century, as it faced the problem of a declining congregation, Trinity Church did seek cooperation with international Christian organizations. At present, the ambitious American church has been attempting to play a greater role in the global missionary enterprise, particularly in the Global South movement. As a consequence, the Xiamen church is once again encountering the American church. This time, both Xiamen society and the global missionary enterprise are very different from what they were in the era of imperialism. In China, the stigma once attached to membership in a foreign religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has been transformed by the widespread yearning for all things Western, a desire especially apparent among young people. Unquestionably, its foreign background has been crucial to the success of the American Christian agency in converting a large number of college students and young professionals. In contrast to the negative connotations associated with nineteenth-century Western imperialist powers, in the current international environment Rainbow’s American-ness contributes
to its competitiveness in attracting young potential converts. The English language, American faces, and Christianity together construct a cosmopolitan, global image. Through contact with and acceptance of American Christianity, the young people expect a fuller involvement in the global world.

Despite the enthusiasm it generates, for political reasons Rainbow’s American image hampers its acceptance by the local church. The success of the historical Three Missions and the indigenized church provides a good lesson for present missionary groups. They cannot truly survive and expand in contemporary Chinese society if they refuse to become rooted for a second time. The reencounter of Chinese Christianity with the global missions today is inevitable. The internet, tourism, migration, and many opportunities to study abroad allow Chinese people easier access to world Christianity. Whether or not the Chinese state allows it, Chinese Christians can now frequently interact with the world Christian community and will integrate more actively into the global missions (for example, the mission-oriented “Back to Jerusalem” movement).

As this research indicates, scholars of world Christianity should probe more deeply into the connections between Chinese Christianity and global Christianity today. As the Christian networks are contextual, fragile, and continually changing, the nature of Chinese Christianity and its place on the global stage should not be taken for granted. Some Chinese Christians might say “All believers under heaven are brothers and sisters,” but they are saying this mainly in terms of faith. It is not an indication of any plans to integrate more deeply into the world community. Conversely, researchers should not see Chinese Christianity as being isolated from world Christianity. Scholars should attend to how local traditions and international Christian presences interact. Therefore, a perspective that combines globalization and localization, both in the past and in the present, can help us better understand Chinese Christianity in a local, national, and global context.