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Nanlai Cao, *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power and Place in the City of Wenzhou*

Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2010, 232 pp.

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- 1 Based on 19 months of anthropological field research and 70 in-depth interviews in 2004-2006, *Constructing China's Jerusalem* presents a rich, detailed, and particularly nuanced ethnography of the daily practices of Christianity in the city of Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, where over ten percent of the population is Protestant. The question driving the analysis is how Christian identities, values, and symbols are constructed and consumed in a manner that reshapes local power structures. The author argues that Christianity in Wenzhou “is a historically complex regional construct framed by a moral discourse of modernity” (p.12). Different actors inside the church take part in the constitution of Chinese Christianity. Cao brings particular attention to the active role of the local business community, which is composed of entrepreneurs who are Christian and active gospel preachers. Furthermore, the analysis explores Christian entrepreneurs’ informal ties with key authorities in the

locality, gender roles inside the church, and the dynamics underlying migrant Christian workers' interactions with local believers.

- 2 Cao's book is a significant contribution in three ways. First, it moves away from analyses that frame Christianity in China in a politicised manner and assume that church effervescence is part of a broader project of resistance towards the Party-state. Such understandings are subject to oversimplifications and misinterpretations insofar as church members and leaders have played the role of "partner[s] of the state in governing the local community" (p. 29). In Wenzhou, Christian entrepreneurs see themselves as serving God when working in the interest of the Party and the local government. The church leaders who play an influential role in local economic development have used their good business *guanxi* with officials "to obtain informal recognition from the authorities concerned" (p. 27). Rather than being politically motivated, Christian entrepreneurs and churchgoers view Christianity as a symbol of Western and cosmopolitan modernity, and migrant workers particularly associate church membership with access to urban citizenship.
- 3 Second, the book draws attention to the intimate relationship between the capitalist market economy and the practice of Christianity, which is particularly unique to Wenzhou. Cao draws upon numerous examples to illustrate it, including Christian entrepreneurs who work as house church leaders, enterprises owned by Christians named after places in the Bible, local chapels inside factories meant to attract and convert workers, and the role of Christian professionals' fellowships in "building attractive faith products" and "making Christianity a Wenzhou brand" (p. 39). For many Wenzhou entrepreneurs, the Bible is the road to material and economic success. Its principles are implemented in daily business management, and "good faith and high socioeconomic status [are seen as] go[ing] together" (p. 55).
- 4 Third, Cao provides a fascinating account of the gender- and class-based dynamics characterising everyday house church life, little of which has been touched upon in the literature on Christianity in China. The author observes that "female believers [...] outnumber their male counterparts" (p. 99), yet they are significantly underrepresented in the church leadership. Their roles inside the congregation revolve around daily household duties and involvement in artistic evangelising activities such as hymn singing. This division of labour is intertwined with "a widespread penchant to associate women with emotionality (*ganxing*) and men with rationality (*lixing*)" (p. 110). Furthermore, Cao shows how the social discrimination that migrant workers face in an urban context is reproduced inside churches in Wenzhou. Although the latter offer the migrant population a sense of belonging to a social community of support and give it access to urban modernity, "conversion or baptism does not guarantee [it] full membership in the larger Christian community" (p. 155). Migrant workers are an easy target for proselitisation by Christian bosses, yet they remain second class citizens and urban aliens in the local religious community.
- 5 Despite its significant contributions, the book has three weaknesses. First, although the author is right to claim that "it would be [...] unsophisticated to interpret house churches as a form of resistance" (p. 7), one cannot entirely isolate their study from broader questions of state control and church defiance. Insofar as house churches operate as informal organisations in a political setting where independent civil society remains prohibited, the choice to run an unregistered church is potentially political, and church leaders are constrained to bargain with local authority to secure

themselves some level of informal protection. That local authorities and Christian bosses share an interest in maintaining good *guanxi* does not suggest that there are no rules or red lines defining the boundaries of their interaction, or that the clergy do not occasionally seek to extend, renegotiate, or overlook them. In some circumstances, Christian bosses' very economic influence may facilitate their churches' ability to defy the state's formal and informal rules with respect to religious practice, whether they choose to do so or not.

- 6 The author's rejection of a domination-resistance framework may have been influenced by the focus on Wenzhou as a case study, namely a city where economics rule and where Beijing's concerns regarding the expansion of Christianity are of lesser relevance. Yet it may have also been symptomatic of Cao's predominant focus on church members (as opposed to the clergy) as a unit of analysis. While most churchgoers do not view religious practice as an act of resistance, they are also for the most part excluded from and unaware of the politics underlying house church-local government relations. Finally, the analysis' assumptions are not unrelated to the question driving Cao's research. While the author delves into some of the unregistered clergy's strategies of survival and expansion in Chapter 2, analysing the causes of church survival, some of which are inherently tied to the political context in which the clergy operates, transcends the scope of the study.
- 7 Second, the author rejects the domination-resistance approach, but it is unclear what the alternative theoretical framework of the book is besides Cao's claim to be adopting "a meaning-centered and historically grounded analysis of a Christian locality" (p. 8). Absent from the study is an inductively derived explanatory account grounded in theory that articulates the processes through which local believers experience Christianity. In accounting for how religion becomes a symbol of modernity, the author could have drawn inspiration from identity politics literature. What may make the building of an explanatory framework difficult, however, is the variety of topics the book touches upon, which are not all easy to reconcile – from Christian bosses' relationships with the local state to gender roles inside the church. In this sense, the book lacks a theoretical core that unifies all chapters into a cohesive analytical discussion.
- 8 Third, the author could have dug further into some of the examples used to describe the construction and reproduction of gender hierarchies inside the church. Cao observes that "elite male believers [have promoted] textual Christianity through publishing" (p. 105). Yet it is unclear how the content of such publications validates gender differences. The mere fact that such texts were written by elite male preachers does not make them gender discriminatory. A discourse analysis of texts illustrating gendered narratives would have more effectively tied this discussion to the rest of the analysis. Furthermore, while the author describes superbly how gender roles in the church are perceived and cultivated, the identity construction processes originating in such views have yet to be accounted for. Finally, although men and women have played an active part in maintaining gender divisions, to what extent have some challenged them?
- 9 Nanlai Cao's book remains a significant contribution that speaks to studies of state-society relations, religion, and politics, as well as gender and class relations in contemporary China. As yet, it is the most comprehensive account of the complex dynamics characterising everyday life in Chinese Protestant house churches.

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