

## ATTRACTION WITHOUT NETWORKS: RECRUITING STRANGERS TO UNREGISTERED PROTESTANTISM IN CHINA\*

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*Social movements research points to the role of networks in recruiting intimates and public spaces in recruiting strangers. But for Chinese Protestants, creative outreach strategies can be a substitute for existing relationships and initiate recruitment. In China, public proselytizing is forbidden, religion is rarely mentioned in the media, and direct contact with potential converts is discouraged. To attract strangers, evangelists in China rely on door-to-door proselytizing in the countryside, cultural performances embedded with religious messages in the cities, and one-on-one conversations when the opportunity arises. By contacting targets in the ordinary flow of life and fashioning appeals using resonant language, Protestant recruiters have become adept at attracting non-networked individuals in "safe-enough" spaces that appear in the creases of a reforming Leninist regime. At a general level, the analysis suggests that networks sometimes play a smaller role in recruitment than is commonly thought, at least at first, and that social bonds may be as much a result of recruitment as a precondition for it.*

New members do not join a political or religious movement simply because they believe in its message. More often than not, they must be recruited. Recruitment, even of the so-inclined, is far from automatic. Potential participants have many calls on their time and resources, which means that grabbing their attention usually requires effort—even for causes that speak to deeply felt needs or grievances. Based on studies of American social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, researchers have focused on social networks as a primary way to recruit new members (Diani 2004; Diani and McAdam 2003; Friedman and McAdam 1992; Gerlach and Hine 1970; Kim and Bearman 1997; Kitts 2000; Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Knoke and Wisely 1990; Lofland and Stark 1965; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; McPherson, Popielarz, and Drobnic 1992; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1983; Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Participants are typically drawn into political and religious movements by people they know, because "recruitment flows along lines of pre-existing, significant social relationships of positive-affect" (Gerlach and Hine 1970: 97). For political movements, it is typical that friends, roommates, coworkers, or relatives will bring a person to a march, a meeting, or a demonstration. For religious movements, it is typical that a

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current member connects someone they know with a community of believers, places a text in their hands, or sits alongside them through a broadcast (Gerlach and Hine 1970: 88).

In this way, social bonds with the already-mobilized can create a context for new identities to emerge (Kim and Bearman 1997: 74; Passy 2003: 23). Close personal ties enhance feelings of trust and offer newcomers reassurance (Gerlach and Hine 1970: 88; Mische 2003: 260; Nepstad and Smith 1999: 33; Passy 2003: 33, 41), while also providing recruiters with opportunities to apply subtle forms of pressure (“If you go, I’ll go, too”) (Diani 2003: 8; Gould 2003: 254; Klandermans and Oegema 1987: 529; McAdam 1986: 68; McAdam and Fernandez 1990: 5; Nepstad and Smith 1999: 34). Existing relations enable those who share values to influence each other (Kim and Bearman 1997: 90) and ease the circulation of information about a movement’s message and its activities (Diani 2003: 8; Kitts 2000: 244; Mische 2003: 259). Thus, social networks are a crucial “pull factor” (Kitts 2000: 241; Nepstad and Smith 1999: 26) that draw recruits closer to participation. Social networks have been found to activate feelings of solidarity (Kitts 2000: 245; Knoke and Wisely 1990: 68) and offer other interpersonal rewards (Friedman and McAdam 1992: 16; Gould 2003: 254; Stark and Bainbridge 1980: 1394). In a host of ways, social networks (and the bonds on which they are built) allow recruiters to exploit the rapport of friends, relatives, colleagues and neighbors, and to attract newcomers on the streets (for political movements), or jump-start the process of conversion (for religious movements).

Prior ties are generally thought to matter even more in nondemocratic states (Passy 2003: 27). They have been found to be especially important, for example, in Leninist regimes where they often substitute both for organizations and the media (Johnston and Mueller 2001: 360-61; Osa 2003: 78). In communist-era Poland, Osa (2003: 78-79) observed how social networks helped overcome barriers to participation by opening channels for uncensored materials to circulate, diffusing the risks of association, and, most broadly, substituting for a public sphere and forming a context for micromobilization. East German dissidents, in an effort to reduce the likelihood of repression, also relied on a circle of intimates to decide who could be trusted and with whom heterodox ideas could be shared (Opp and Gern 1993: 662, 674).<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, social bonds have been found to be important in drawing new adherents to religious groups, not least because conversion may entail a wholesale reordering of beliefs that requires regular confirmation from others. Networks provide opportunities to discuss an unfamiliar faith and ease the decision to make a commitment. For newcomers, personal relations with church members often carry feelings of warmth and friendliness, opportunities to be socialized to new beliefs, occasions to be urged to participate, and contact with people they already trust who can help them resolve doubts about a religion’s claims (Harrison 1974: 57-58, 62; see also Gerlach and Hine 1970: 88).

For over a generation, researchers have highlighted the role that social bonds play in religious recruitment, with some arguing that “faith constitutes conformity to the religious outlook of one’s intimates” (Stark and Bainbridge 1980: 1377; also Stark and Finke 2000: 118-119). In two landmark studies, Snow et al. (1980) showed that social networks yielded 60 to 90 percent of the new members of several religious groups and Stark and Bainbridge (1980) isolated personal ties to religious activists as the best predictor of recruitment to established faiths (Mormonism) and unconventional sects (doomsday groups) (see also Diani 2004: 341). Door-to-door proselytizing, on the other hand, seldom proved fruitful for Mormons (Stark and Bainbridge 1980: 1386) or American Pentecostals (Gerlach and Hine 1970: 82), and early efforts to recruit members to the Unification Church through radio spots, public meetings, and press releases usually floundered, once recruiters went beyond members’ extra-movement networks (Lofland and Stark 1965).<sup>2</sup> To this day, one of the key findings of research on religious recruitment is: “the network channel is the richest source of movement recruits” (Snow et al. 1980: 790), or even more unambiguously, “all faiths rest on network influences” (Stark and Bainbridge 1980: 1389; Diani and McAdam 2003).

## RECRUITING STRANGERS

Friends, acquaintances, roommates, coworkers, and relatives are, however, not the only recruits to religious or political movements. Sometimes strangers are drawn in. For example, animal rights activists in the United States relied on shared values, "moral shocks," and skillful use of the media to activate already-developed motivations and attract new recruits (Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 498-99). Dutch peace activists courted sympathizers with whom they had no links through appeals in local newspapers, peace stands, and posters, billboards, and banners (Klandermans and Oegema 1987: 525). In the 1960s and 1970s, Hare Krishna devotees in the United States adeptly exploited the biographical availability of alienated, isolated youth who had few other ties (Rochford 1982). Strangers also flocked to the American antiabortion movement in the immediate aftermath of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, largely owing to moral outrage (Luker 1984; Jasper 1997: 177).

Each of these non-network pathways to participation depended on unpatrolled spaces in which to act. Animal rights activists in the United States were able to set up booths where graphic, shocking images of laboratory animals could be seen (Jasper and Poulsen 1995). In the Netherlands, peace activists conducted their recruitment drives partly through publicity stands that distributed pamphlets and sold buttons, stickers, and posters (Klandermans and Oegema 1987: 522). Hare Krishnas flooded countercultural neighborhoods, such as Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, where they had the run of city streets to play their drums and chant (Rochford 1982). Even antiabortion activists in the United States enjoyed the right to advertise efforts to reverse *Roe v. Wade* and to picket clinics where abortions were performed.

What if public spaces are not readily available and if door-to-door recruitment and other types of direct, personal contact are discouraged or illegal? In China, public religious recruiting is forbidden, potential recruits hear little about religion in the official media, and receive nothing concerning any faith in the mail. How do activists in such circumstances reach out to strangers? What, in particular, does stranger recruitment to unregistered Protestantism in China tell us about the mechanisms that draw people into activism (Kim and Bearman 1997: 90; Kitts 2000; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Passy 2003) and about how networks are not necessary, at least initially?

## METHODS AND DATA

Studying religion in China is a very sensitive matter, often pursued through secondary sources. Yet, having gained official approval to examine the development of Protestantism in China, and with introductions to potential interviewees in hand, we were able to press ahead and conduct a study that relied primarily on interviews.

More than 50 interviews were conducted with current and former pastors, provincial religious leaders, unregistered church leaders, foreign missionaries, and members of both registered and unregistered churches. Most of our informants were contacted through long-term foreign residents who had won the trust of local Protestants. Church leaders themselves opened the door to some interviewees locally, regionally, and even nationally. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin and took place wherever informants felt most comfortable—in apartments, in secluded coffeehouses, in private rooms of restaurants, and, just once, on a busy public street. The varied locations meant that recording interviews was seldom possible and, with most informants, even taking notes created anxiety. For that reason, in many cases, responses were reconstructed after the informant left the interview site.

Given these challenges to data collection, we emphasize two points. First, the most telling information was derived from stories that informants recounted; and second, the recruitment techniques described below are illustrative rather than representative, mainly because it is difficult to gain approval to survey a population for which few records, public or private, exist.

In addition to interviews, the data come from a variety of written sources. Materials consulted include central and provincial government descriptions of Protestant home meetings in the 1950s and 1960s, policy texts and document collections used to train religious affairs cadres at the Central Party school, a provincial official's account of more than ten years of managing religious affairs, narratives of Chinese evangelism penned by Western missionaries and foreign church scholars, and studies of Chinese Protestantism by researchers in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States. Northeast China proved to be an apt site to study religious recruitment, partly because access to both registered and unregistered church leaders could be obtained and partly because the main research location, Heilongjiang Province, has experienced church growth since the mid-1980s that is "nothing short of breathtaking" (Lambert 1999: 216). According to official figures, the Protestant population in Heilongjiang exploded from 35,000 in 1985 to 300,000 in 1995, before adding another 100,000 as of the year 2000 (Shu 2003: 115-116). This meant that many Protestant activists could do more than recite a long list of attempted recruitment techniques. They could recount successful outreach strategies that had stood the test of time. Last, the extraordinary growth of Protestantism in Heilongjiang is further reason to view the techniques discussed below as indicative rather than representative.

### THE GROWTH OF UNREGISTERED HOUSE CHURCHES

Shortly after the Communist Party took power in 1949, Protestant leaders established the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) to gather all Chinese believers into one party-approved organization. Pastors nationwide were pressured to join the TSPM association, while those who resisted were arrested or withdrew from public life, as their churches were shut down (Kindopp 2004a: 124; Wang 2002: 85). Throughout the latter half of the 1950s, many Protestants left TSPM churches, home meetings became more common, and lay leaders began to develop (Bush 1970: 204, 211, and 232; Guowuyuan Zongjiaoju Cailiao Weiyuanhui 1955; Hunter and Chan 1993: 83; Lambert 1994: 15-18). By the time Chairman Mao launched the Cultural Revolution and religion came under attack as a superstitious hold-over from the "old" society (Meisner 1999: 293-94), even Protestants meeting at home found it difficult to worship (Leung 1999: 81).

After the most violent assaults on religious believers died down in the late 1960s, Protestants once again began meeting in secret, recruiting new members to house churches that sometimes grew to several hundred believers (Adeney 1985: 144; *Heilongjiang Provincial Gazette* 1999: 301). These underground<sup>3</sup> or unregistered churches attracted old Protestants as well as many new converts (Lambert 1994: 18-21, and 80).

In the late 1970s, the party launched a full-scale reevaluation of the Cultural Revolution and made an abrupt reversal in its stance towards religion. This reversal can be traced in a number of steps. First, in a 1979 *People's Daily* editorial, religions were distinguished from superstition by their scriptures, doctrines, and religious rites (Lambert 1994: 34). Then, in 1982, Document 19 was promulgated. As the party's most complete and definitive statement on religious policy since the 1950s, Document 19 stated that religion would no longer "die out within a short period" and that cadres using "coercive measures" against religious practice were "entirely wrong." Instead, religion would only "disappear naturally" over an extended period of time (MacInnis 1989: 10-11). Accommodation of religion, not persecution, was the new policy, but only "normal" religious activities were granted protection.<sup>4</sup> In other words, religious practice was permitted only within authorized sites and under the auspices of approved religious organizations (Spiegel 2004: 41). Document 19 states: "No religious organization or believer should propagate or preach religion outside places designated for religious services" (MacInnis 1989: 8-26, 18).<sup>5</sup> By 1980, the Party had begun to re-open shuttered churches, into which rehabilitated TSPM staff sought to draw a growing population

of old and new believers (Chao and Chuang 1997: 278). This effort to corral all worship and recruitment into designated sites continues today, and means that all churches must register with the state, so that they can be monitored by the Religious Affairs Bureau and fall under control of the TSPM association (Interview, Harbin, November 2002). Registration also establishes where meetings can take place and who can attend, and requires that all religious leaders be approved by the authorities (Zhonggong Zhongyang Wenxian 1995: 222-25).

Many Chinese Protestants object to these restrictions for three reasons: inadequacy, excessive control, and lack of intimacy. They say there are too few registered churches, especially in rural areas and small towns. In 1999, there were 16,000 TSPM churches and about twice as many approved meeting sites in China (Gong 2003: 238). Many of these sites are only large enough for a handful of believers. By 2005, Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang Province, had only twenty-five registered churches for 160,000 Protestants and worship services there were often packed to capacity (interview, Harbin, November 2003; also author's observation). In the countryside and small towns where most Protestants live, the situation is more serious, as there are few registered sites and they are often far from the believers' homes (Hunter and Chan 1993: 84; Yamamori and Chan 2000: 69).

Moreover, some Chinese Protestants believe that registered churches are too dependent on the government, because party restrictions on religious preaching, worship and recruitment mean that while "the head of the house churches is Christ . . . the head of the Three Self churches is the government" (Lee 2001: 239; also Lambert 1999: 66; Leung 1999: 361-63).<sup>6</sup> Whether because children are officially not allowed to participate, or because public preaching is limited to registered sites (MacInnis 1989: 18), or because the government can close churches, as happened during the SARS outbreak in 2003 (Author's observation; Interview, Changchun, November 2003), unregistered Protestant leaders typically reject registered churches as "false" (*jiade*) and feel driven to create their own autonomous communities of believers (Interviews, Wenzhou, February 2003; also Hunter and Chan 1993: 81).

Churchgoers also complain that party monitoring of TSPM churches can create an atmosphere of mistrust that makes congregants uneasy about developing close ties with each other. Instead of lingering after services and chatting, members typically stream right out of larger TSPM churches once the last hymn ends (Kindopp 2004b: 259-60). In unregistered churches, by contrast, many participants discover a more trusting environment, in part because believers meet frequently in small groups (interview, Beijing, August 2003).<sup>7</sup> During these intimate gatherings, members may confess their shortcomings and discuss problems as sensitive as spousal friction, and so develop a familiarity with one another that is more difficult to achieve in above-ground churches. One unregistered leader in Beijing spoke of trust "like a family," such that when a member or even a member's relative falls ill, other Protestants hasten to deliver food and make bedside visits (interview, Beijing, August 2003). Unregistered Protestants also commonly play an active part in services and other small gatherings by taking turns preaching, singing, or leading Bible studies (author's observation; Kindopp 2004b: 372). And when the entire congregation meets as one, believers often feel free to relate their personal experiences to the whole church (Hunter and Chan 1993: 195), thereby creating an open, informal atmosphere unlike that found in the more impersonal TSPM services (Madsen 2003: 274).<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on these advantages, unregistered churches have grown to some 20 million to 40 million worshippers, compared to the 17 million to 20 million members of TSPM churches (Kindopp 2004a: 20, n. 3; Lambert 2005; Yang 2005: 427). However, uncertainty surrounding all estimates continues owing to persistent official underestimation of the number of Protestants (Kindopp 2004b: 3), the failure of many TSPM pastors to keep membership rolls (Yang 2005: 426), believers who worship in both above- and below-ground churches (Interview, Harbin, November 2002; Hunter and Chan 1993: 87), and the clandestine nature of many unregistered churches (Lambert 2003).

### NETWORKED RECRUITMENT TO UNREGISTERED CHURCHES

Though it is clear why unregistered churches are flourishing, we still need to know more about how their membership has increased so dramatically over the past twenty-five years. A large part of this growth, of course, took place through social networks, as Protestants introduced their friends, classmates and relatives to Christianity. In one North China location, for example, members of an unregistered church invited friends to attend a program of Christmas music (interview, April 2003). At the performance, the newcomers heard their Protestant friends play songs about the prodigal son and other Bible figures on traditional Chinese instruments. Without prompting, most of the potential recruits would have had no occasion to go unaccompanied to a service, and certainly none of them would have found this unadvertised event. Throughout the evening, the congregants introduced their faith by drawing on trust fostered in existing relationships, using a familiar style of music to communicate new beliefs, and demonstrating the pleasures of participation. These all made recruitment to Protestantism more attractive. By night's end, 50 of the 150 newcomers had joined the church and, after one year, church membership had doubled to 1,400.

Other unregistered churches use social networks to draw new recruits by tapping into widespread interest in contemporary Western culture. In northeastern China, for example, some Protestant students asked their university classmates to an American-style Thanksgiving dinner in a private restaurant (interview, Shenyang, November 2003). This invitation-only evening featured a variety show in which the centerpiece was a rendition of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with a new twist: a Christian wedding supported by the young lovers' families replaced the double suicide finale. In addition to engaging a fascination with all things Western, the event was both personal and participatory, as students recounted how conversion had changed their lives and wrapped up the night by initiating conversations with their classmates about their readiness to believe in God.

When networks connect activists to targets with whom they share an existing interest (such as Western culture), social bonds can facilitate recruitment greatly. As university classmates curious about Western culture discuss Christianity, their conversations fulfill a common desire to explore what makes the West distinct, and this can open the way to evangelism. Networks also offer opportunities for recruiters to interact with potential members in a variety of settings, as trusted friends, for instance, run into classmates in dorms, at the cafeteria, or outside classes, where they can bring them to the point of conviction and help confirm what commonly begins as a tenuous decision. Finally, when the political environment is laden with uncertainty, as in a corroding state-socialist regime, networks reduce risks. By connecting activists with a ready supply of prospective recruits whom they trust not to turn them in, networked recruitment may proceed in a discreet, even covert, fashion.

### ATTRACTING STRANGERS TO UNREGISTERED CHURCHES

Despite the advantages that networks afford, in the recruitment of unregistered Protestants in China, a surprisingly large amount of contact is made with strangers: individuals who only become part of an evangelist's social network after conversion (Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 494). Lacking bonds of friendship or family to prepare the way, recruiters have learned how to reach new populations without the long-standing trust, easy channels of communication, and social pressure that networks provide. To attract people with whom they have no personal ties, proselytizers have had to address three key issues: who is best at making the initial contact, how can non-networked people be reached, and where to do so.

Making first contact with strangers is facilitated when recruiting agents and potential recruits share the same social location. As religious and social movement scholars have long known, "like attracts like." The individuals most available for recruitment are similar to exist-

ing participants, since people have the most contact with others whose attributes mirror their own (Gerlach and Hine 1970: 92; Knoke and Wisely 1990: 70; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). This is true for networked recruitment; it also holds true for those with whom proselytizers have no personal ties. Along these lines, university students from an unregistered church in northeastern China served as natural recruiters for other students. While handing out pamphlets on the Four Spiritual Laws to passersby on campus, Protestant students struck up conversations about Christianity with students they did not know (interviews, Changchun, October 2003; Interviews, Shenyang, November 2003). Painters who established a Protestant enclave outside Beijing also sought to evangelize their fellow artists (interview, Beijing, October 2003) and some rural women in Guangdong Province set up a food stall to spread Christianity to farmers coming to market (Lawrence 1985: 86-87; also Lambert 1999: 165-167).

Homophily, however, implies more than just moving in the same circles. Individuals from a similar background are more likely to share attitudes, influence each other, and discuss common worries. Relying on this affinity, Protestant evangelists in China shape their appeals by using a vocabulary that is drawn from daily life that resonates with potential recruits. Two female recruiters from Henan Province, for example, made skillful use of agricultural metaphors from the Bible to attract rural strangers in the northeast (interview, Beijing, October 2003). The Henan women had grown up laboring in the fields, so they shared a mutual language with the northerners about planting, tending, and harvesting crops. Drawing on this familiar vocabulary and knowledge of the rhythms of the planting season, the Protestants knew how and when to communicate Biblical ideas via farming language. When the evangelists, for instance, spoke about "scattering seeds" (*san zhongzi*) on rocky or fertile soil, their targets could immediately grasp how this metaphor referred to spreading the faith among resistant or receptive people. "Harvesting the crops" (*shouge zhuangjia*), as a metaphor for recruiting new converts, also made sense to rural listeners and tied their new beliefs to everyday concerns.

Attracting strangers to Protestantism requires that recruiters know more than just what to say. Students of religious movements in other parts of the world have observed that successful recruitment depends on developing flexible strategies that attract target audiences (Gerlach and Hine 1970: 95; Rochford 1982: 400) and have called for more study of "how movements solicit, coax, and secure participants, and more attention to the factors that account for variations in recruitment strategies and their efficacy" (Snow et al. 1980: 799; Kniss and Burns 2004). Recruitment techniques are especially crucial for unregistered Protestants in China, given the many challenges they face eluding official scrutiny and avoiding repression. To gain access to prospective converts and draw them into their orbit of influence (much like Hare Krishnas in the United States in the 1970s (Rochford 1982: 400, 408)), recruiters have tailored how they communicate to suit different environments.

In the Chinese countryside, evangelists have at times used a private form of communication to attract strangers: door-to-door proselytizing. By going to one farmhouse after another, recruiters approach families one at a time until they locate someone who is receptive to their message (interview, Dalian, November 2003). Unlike evangelists in the West, who face a solicitation-weary population and are rarely successful in door-to-door recruitment,<sup>9</sup> strangers on one's doorstep are novel in rural China, and so strangers may be ushered inside the home, as much out of curiosity as out of spiritual interest. Unregistered Protestants using this approach make direct contact with potential recruits, gauge their interest in private, and avoid any public display that might invite official punishment. Once the first strangers are drawn in, further recruitment typically extends outward through existing networks of personal ties. The Henan evangelists mentioned above started with private, door-to-door proselytizing, and then turned to their recruits' social networks to spread Christianity throughout the northeast for a decade (interview, Beijing, October 2003).<sup>10</sup> In Liaoning Province, a team of ten rural proselytizers began by splitting into twos and threes to visit houses in search of new

converts (interview, Dalian, November 2003). If the farmers welcomed them and were willing to listen to their message, the recruiters sought to set up shop in their homes and offered to work alongside them in the fields while educating them about Christianity. The farmers in turn suggested who to seek out next and who to avoid, until dozens of villagers were drawn in through personal ties. By limiting all their gatherings to fifty people or fewer, the Liaoning recruiters also avoided unwanted attention from the authorities and managed to establish six sites for worship with 300 members in three years.

At times, attracting strangers has crystallized into immediate recruitment when sudden, providential healing backed up a recruiter's claim that divine power could cure physical ailments. For example, the Henan evangelists encountered one family in the northeastern countryside whose daughter had been stricken with cancer. Shrunken and yellowed by illness, the girl had seen doctors who diagnosed her case as too advanced for treatment. Desperate for a cure, the family promised to convert if their child was healed. The Henan women fasted for two days, praying that God might heal her. Upon the girl's recovery, the whole family converted and offered their rural home as a permanent Christian meeting place (interview, Beijing, October 2003). Similar reports from the countryside of "faith healings" are common (Lambert 1994: 147, 165; Yamamori and Chan 2000: 9-10, and 45-47). According to one provincial director of a Religious Affairs Bureau, the majority of rural believers in some counties attribute their Protestant faith to such events (Zhou 2002: 135).

Itinerant evangelists, in their work, tend to downplay doctrine while accentuating pragmatic goals (Leung 1999). By emphasizing signs "of the Spirit over theological rigor" (Kindopp 2004a: 135), their displays of supernatural power act as "demonstration events" that back up a recruiter's theological claims and provide evidence of trustworthiness. (These are not "demonstration events" in the sense that Snow and Machalek (1984: 171-73) use the term—public displays such as baptisms and speaking in tongues that act as status confirmation rituals—but instead are efforts to legitimize an evangelist's message to non-believers). Moreover, because tales of healing spread rapidly (Chao and Chong 1997: 282; Lambert 1999: 112-119), a private mode of communication can be transformed overnight into a semipublic one as the curious are drawn to hear more.<sup>11</sup>

Protestant recruiters often have relied upon public or quasi-public forms of communication as a second means to attract strangers, especially in China's cities. Students of political and religious movements have discovered that skillful cultural work can open a person to recruitment and build rapport faster than previously seemed possible (Jasper 1997: 76-77, and 172-174; Jasper and Poulsen 1995; Gerlach and Hine 1970: 88). By embedding religious messages in popular cultural performances, Chinese evangelists heighten interest in Christianity among nonintimates and circumvent state restrictions on religious propagation. These public performances are ostensibly set up to appeal to cultural fascination with the West, but their real aim is to provide an occasion to bring Christianity to a new audience.

Recruiters, for example, put on Christmas celebrations in university auditoriums to exploit university students' interest in Western society and culture (interview, Changchun, November 2003). These performances are tolerated by school officials and prove immensely popular with students, who flock by the hundreds to see the birth of Christ reenacted. By "staging events for public consumption" (Snow et al. 1980: 790), student evangelists make contact with new populations of potential worshipers, note the names of interested students, and often form small Bible study groups that facilitate conversion. An unregistered church in northeast China used this approach to attract newcomers at Christmas pageants that played to audiences of up to 900 students (Interview, Changchun, November 2003).<sup>12</sup> American Christians teaching English in China also have staged Christmas shows, inviting student onlookers to play Joseph or Mary and then helping them practice English and learn more about the Bible in small study groups (Author's observation, Harbin, December 2002). In this way, student recruiters attract strangers to Protestantism through enticing "contact events" that give young urbanites a sense of "being in tune with modern culture." These Western-oriented youths see

Christianity as “progressive, liberating . . . and universal” and are often recruited in places such as McDonald’s restaurants, a favorite haunt that evokes cosmopolitanism and conveys the flavor of American culture (Yang 2005: 425, 438). Unlike early Christian converts in Greek cities of the Roman Empire, many of whom according to Stark were isolated and without social ties (1987: 21), Chinese university students are attracted to Christianity through stranger recruitment, even while they remain connected to their families, friends, and classmates.

A third mode of communication involves one-on-one, public conversation with possible recruits. Evangelists plant themselves in highly visible and densely trafficked areas and start up conversations about how belief in Christianity has changed them and will transform their listeners. Unlike Hare Krishnas in the United States, who commanded attention with their distinctive dress and hairstyle, public recruiters in China drum up interest through the fervor with which they share their faith and the hardships they are willing to bear. One woman devoted much of her meager savings to renting a room in a busy hostel, solely to chat up travelers who were spending the night (interview, Harbin, April 2003). Fresh on the heels of her own conversion, the woman felt compelled to evangelize others, even if it caused her financial difficulty, and before she, in her words, “really knew who God was.” To travelers she approached, the evangelist seldom brought up church doctrine, but instead explained how her newfound faith had brought her “peace.” Years later, she could proudly point to over 200 churches in her county and more throughout the northeast, all set up as a result of her proselytizing. Such church growth is not unusual. The recruitment efforts of one Protestant leader in Heilongjiang Province resulted in three meetings in 1987 that grew to 20 the next year before finally generating 200 unregistered churches by 1991 (Lambert 1999: 217). A single church in rural Henan expanded from 10 members to 190 participants in the space of a year, as four new offshoots were formed (Lambert 1994: 149-150).

Initial contact at other times is more happenstance, as evangelism amounts to being ready to discuss Christianity when the opportunity arises, rather than setting out to disseminate one’s faith. Consider a troubled, young woman who “pour[ed] out her heart” to a Protestant recruiter she came across in a public park (Lambert 1999: 165-166). The young woman had been doing morning exercises when she noticed the evangelist’s “kind appearance.” The woman initiated a conversation and confessed that her parents had upset her by insisting she burn incense to Buddha—instructions that conflicted with everything she had been taught in school about eradicating religion. The evangelist patiently listened to the woman’s story and then shared the gospel with her. By being in the right place at the right time, and being attentive to a person who was searching for “inner peace,” the proselytizer showed that recruitment can occur in nearly any space that is free from direct surveillance (Gamson 1996: 27; Polletta 1999: 7; Sewell 2001: 69-70)—so long as one is alert. This chance encounter yielded a committed and energetic believer who promptly drew on her own ties to establish a new church. Within three months, she had evangelized ten coworkers at her factory and, after a year and a half, her meeting had grown to include twenty additional converts.

Beyond determining who to approach and how to draw them in, evangelists who operate beyond the reach of social networks need to address a third issue: where to communicate their beliefs. Recruiters of strangers to social movements in Europe and the United States often make initial contacts through the mass media, mailings, door-to-door canvassing, sister organizations, or tables on streets (Klandermans and Oegema 1987: 520; Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 499). In China, however, because the authorities frown upon religious activism, Protestants typically must forgo direct solicitation through the media, the mail, or public displays.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, evangelists create or appropriate “safe-enough” spaces that appear in the creases of a reforming authoritarian regime—spaces in which a religious message may be communicated without undue risk.<sup>14</sup> As we have seen, these spaces often emerge in the ordinary flow of life, be it in public parks, hostels, on farms, or in open-air markets: anywhere evangelists can engage individuals under the radar of a distracted, increasingly porous state. Locations for

proselytizing have multiplied largely because government control over the ideological realm has diminished and because recruiters deftly weave evangelism into their daily lives.<sup>15</sup> Protestants in China, like activists elsewhere, have become adept at exploiting spaces that are “at least temporarily shielded from social control” (Gamson 1996: 27; also Fantasia and Hirsch 1995: 156-57).<sup>16</sup>

When the goal is to reach many strangers at once, Protestants recruiters typically adopt a somewhat different strategy. They appropriate crowded public spaces<sup>17</sup> (such as university auditoriums) to draw in dozens of prospective recruits at one stroke. In so doing, believers enhance group solidarity through public expression of their faith, broadcast their joy to onlookers, and, should they succeed, boost their membership—all in a single event. In these semiautonomous spaces, unregistered Protestants are energized by bringing a faith nurtured in private into the open in front of a large audience. Furthermore, for more timid members, a first-hand experience showing how impassioned performances translate into new recruits may encourage them to evangelize more.

The larger lesson in this finding is that “free spaces” (Polletta 1999) perhaps do not have to be very free. Surveillance can be frustrated when public events have mixed purposes or when private recruitment is integrated into everyday life. Even in regimes where most spaces are penetrated by state power, policing is subject to intrinsic limits (Sewell 2001: 68-70), and “havens” (Hirsch 1993) can be found. Safe-enough spaces, more broadly, may well be available wherever dominant and subordinate groups face off (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995: 157; Johnston and Mueller 2001: 359-360; Gamson 1996; O’Brien and Li 2006: chap. 1; Scott 1990), inasmuch as only total institutions destroy all shelters and preclude all mobilization (Gamson 1996: 29).<sup>18</sup>

## PAYOFFS

What does Protestant evangelism in China tell us about stranger recruitment and about the role that networks play in building a political or religious movement? First, attracting strangers need not rely only on exposing potential members to “moral shocks” or exploiting an unusual degree of biographical availability. Beyond jolting would-be recruits into action or depending on their lack of countervailing ties, strangers may also be opened to new beliefs through timely interactions and “contact” or “demonstration events” that address interests and fulfill emotional needs.<sup>19</sup> In China, many are fascinated with contemporary Western culture, and, for some, emotional needs include overcoming a sense of powerlessness and searching for inner peace. By shaping outreach strategies to take into account the aspirations and longings of target audiences, Protestant evangelists have devised creative ways to draw in strangers.

A second payoff pertains to when networks promote movement participation (Diani 2003: 8; Diani 2004: 352; Friedman and McAdam 1992: 161). Often researchers assume that social bonds are critical throughout the recruitment process: vital before individuals join up and then necessary to sustain mobilization and envelop new recruits. Yet, as some have recognized, personal ties come into play at different points during recruitment or conversion (Passy 2003: 23). In China, the evidence suggests that social bonds at times play a smaller role; the evidence also suggests that social bonds enter later in the recruitment process than commonly thought. Of course, networks, when available, do facilitate recruitment to Protestantism. They offer evangelists channels for circulating information about outreach events. Networks also enable proselytizers to build on feelings of trust that make conversion less a question of accepting unfamiliar beliefs and more of an opportunity to join friends in fellowship. Further, social networks or bonds facilitate intimate conversations in which a reluctant relative, classmate, colleague, or friend can be urged to become a Protestant.

That said, social networks may sometimes matter less for drawing a person into a movement’s orbit, than for completing a conversion. Conversion (and its maintenance) may require

encapsulation in a network of believers, but that often occurs long after initial exposure, when newcomers to Bible study find their time quickly fills with group worship and prayer activities, and countervailing influences weaken. Attraction is the first order of business for Chinese Protestants, and evangelists have become skilled at finding ways to make Christianity attractive through “contact events” like Christmas plays that broadcast the pleasures of religious participation and “demonstration events” that relieve feelings of powerlessness through acts of healing. These events spark interest and open the door to further engagement.

Do these findings mean that networks play only a small role in attracting new Protestants? No. At the same time, scholars who focus too much on the structural aspects of recruitment can miss the cultural processes on which networked and non-networked recruitment rest. For Chinese Protestants, both types of recruitment build on an affinity and common identity shared by recruiter and target. It is, at least in part, the cultural meanings encoded in networks and the messages transmitted across them (Jasper 1997: 76; see also Mische 2003: 258-259) that constitute this identity and make networked recruitment effective. For non-networked recruitment, that evangelists can attract new believers beyond the reach of networks reminds us that there are other “workshops” (Kitts 2000: 241) in which mutual understandings and feelings of affinity can be tapped or discovered. Recruitment, at root, may trace back to common identities rather than existing social networks (see Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 494).

Moreover, in circumstances where religious activism is discouraged, the advantages that networks offer—credibility, trust, rapport, and an uncensored flow of information—still foster participation, but these can sometimes be mustered even when networks are absent, or have yet to be created. In an unwelcoming or even hostile environment like that of late Leninist China, attention to recruiting techniques such as locating targets who share a recruiter’s social background, entering their daily routines, speaking in idioms they readily grasp, seizing opportune moments, and capitalizing on their cultural interests or sentiments, can substitute for networks that do not extend as far as ambitious proselytizers might like. In private encounters between evangelists and potential recruits, Chinese Protestants endeavor to create an intimate, trust-filled setting by listening carefully and using familiar language that produces feelings of solidarity. More public forms of attraction, including “contact events,” build rapport through appealing cultural performances and also transmit the movement’s message outside the gaze of the authorities. All these recruitment techniques depend on carving out “safe-enough” spaces in which to operate. Creative strategies (often based on identifying existing or discovered affinities) help evangelists reach people where social networks do not extend.

Lastly, this research provides further evidence that no single factor explains the onset of participation in a political or religious movement (Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 508; McAdam 1986: 67; Opp and Gern 1993: 677). Although networks often facilitate recruitment, movements can still begin to grow without recourse to mobilizing friends, relatives, colleagues or classmates. Chinese evangelists have, above all, discovered that there are many ways to contact non-networked individuals, whether singly or en masse, and that even one-time events can get the effort underway. In the course of attracting strangers, Protestant recruiters have learned that new networks can be opportunistically stitched together when network intimates are not available. Social networks, in other words, are often a result of recruitment rather than a condition for it (Jasper and Poulsen 1995: 494).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Social connections have also been found to be crucial for recruitment to illegal organizations and subcultures with less mainstream messages (Diani 2004: 350-51; Passy 2003: 27-28).

<sup>2</sup> On the failure of Nichiren Buddhists to recruit new members in public spaces, see Snow et al. (1980: 791).

<sup>3</sup> House churches generally seek to avoid detection but some are “half-public, half-underground,” or known to local authorities, such as the neighborhood residents’ committee or the local police station, but not TSPM officials

(Interview, Beijing, August 2003; Interview, Harbin, November 2003; also Cheng 2003: 34-35; Hunter and Chan 1993: 192; Lambert 1999: 46).

<sup>4</sup> Since the 1990s, governments from the municipal level up have issued a stream of regulations that codify what constitutes “normal” (*zhengchang*) religious activities (see, for example, Guojia Zongjiao Shiwuju Zhengce Faguisi 2000). But even the latest national regulations in March 2005 are sufficiently vague that cadres have considerable flexibility in how to implement them (Lam 2005).

<sup>5</sup> This policy statement was ambiguous on the legality of home gatherings. It declared that these meetings “in principle . . . should not be allowed, yet this prohibition should not be too rigidly enforced.” Instead, “more appropriate arrangements”—such as registration or worship in a registered site—“should be made” (MacInnis 1989: 18). This ambiguity was reduced somewhat in 1994 when the National Religious Affairs Bureau issued study materials stating that registration does not apply to home meetings of a few family members and neighbors (Cheng 2003: 26). Yet because home meetings typically recruit new members, and the Religious Affairs Bureau requires that it be informed of all religious growth, the ordinance still implies that home meetings should register with the TSPM.

<sup>6</sup> One interviewee (Shanghai, February 2003) also explained: “Who is the King of the church? Jesus. Who is the head of the TSPM? Ding Guangxun.”

<sup>7</sup> Small, unregistered churches are also easy to set up, can be led by a non-ordained or enthusiastic believer (Hunter and Chan 1993: 82; Vala forthcoming), and can be located nearly anywhere.

<sup>8</sup> In general, Protestants in both unregistered and registered churches are conservative in their beliefs and evangelical in their attitudes. It is historical legacy, urban or rural location, and TSPM or non-TSPM affiliation that divide protestant churches into three broad categories. The oldest churches founded by missionaries prior to 1949 have led to theologically more liberal congregations that employ a professional clergy, recognize some form of institutional hierarchy, and meet in urban church buildings under TSPM authority. A second group of urban and rural churches that grew out of the missionary establishment are unregistered; they typically advocate more literalist views of the Bible and reject formal structures and clergy hierarchies. Instead, these churches favor autonomous congregations and preachers legitimized by gifts of faith healing and powerful speaking (Dunch 2001: 199; Kindopp 2004a: 188). Finally, indigenous sects with no ties to the missionary past have flourished in the countryside in the last 30 years by spreading a charismatic Christianity that “travels widely because it travels light” (Madsen 2003: 276). While some observers categorize unregistered Protestants as pentecostal (Oblau 2005), others are less sure, either because there is little reliable information about them (Tang 2005: 479) or because neat categories do not readily apply in China (Lambert 2006: 1).

<sup>9</sup> Stark and Bainbridge (1980: 1386) describe recruitment efforts by Mormon missionaries who gain an average of one new member per thousand households visited. Gerlach and Hine also found that efforts by American Pentecostals to recruit strangers door-to-door rarely worked. “Many of them responded to the religious faith of the minister and welcomed his visits. But in terms of movement growth, recruitment did not occur” (1970: 82).

<sup>10</sup> Though itinerant evangelism is still common, it was more widespread in the late 1970s and early 1980s before rural authorities revived religious affairs supervision (Lambert 1999: 69, 163, and 171-72).

<sup>11</sup> In Latin America and Africa, a belief in faith healing has made Pentecostalism popular (in Mexico, for example) and re-shaped mainline movements such as Lutheranism (in Tanzania, for example), particularly in communities that lack access to health care, have robust oral traditions, and are populated by rural residents or recent migrants to a city (Porterfield 2005: 174; Martin 1990: 165-67; Ludwig 1999: 184-86).

<sup>12</sup> This recruiting technique works best with students who are from other cities or the countryside, and who live in dorms. Most local students go home to their families every weekend and do not have time to participate in follow-up activities that complete conversion (Interview, Changchun, November 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Access to public areas or the media would undoubtedly boost recruitment. In Taiwan, radio evangelism and rallies on street corners, in parks or other public spaces were important recruitment techniques in the 1960s (Swanson 1970: 144-45). In a decade when Presbyterian membership doubled from 86,000 to 176,000, nearly 60 percent of new recruits joined through means other than social networks (Swanson 1970: 97).

<sup>14</sup> Regarding subcultural worlds that “exist relatively peacefully amid the folds of the parent culture,” see Fantasia and Hirsch (1995: 157).

<sup>15</sup> This is true for both unregistered and TSPM proselytizers. One elderly believer startled his fellow bus passengers by exhorting them to “believe in Jesus Christ” as he provided a tour of Harbin’s TSPM meeting points (Author’s observation, November 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Even when they are uncertain how safe a space is, some proselytizers test the limits of the permissible. These zealous evangelists feel impelled to recruit strangers, even in remote and politically sensitive border regions where authorities are wary of any religious activity. A few unregistered Protestants, for instance, have traveled beyond their social networks to reach Tibetans in western China and Uighurs in northwestern China. Here, they have worked one-on-one with local residents to learn the language while cultivating recruits by teaching simple Bible lessons. After detection, a number of these evangelists were sent to prison (Interviews, Harbin, January and April 2003).

<sup>17</sup> TSPM Protestants also appropriate public spaces for evangelism. In a southern coastal city, TSPM church members evangelized strangers at four McDonald’s restaurants over a period of four years (Interview, Guangzhou, January 2003; see also Yang 2005).

<sup>18</sup> For discussions of the role that spatial and ecological factors play in religious recruitment in the United States, see Harrison (1974), Rochford (1982), Snow et al. (1980), and Wang and Yang (2006).

<sup>19</sup> On linking recruitment with prior beliefs and feelings, see Jasper and Poulsen (1995: 494) and Luker (1984: 150).

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