



RESEARCH

Public Opinion on Proselytisation in China

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While proselytisation in public is prohibited in China, videos about Christian proselytisers in public spaces were recently posted on Bilibili, China's equivalent of Youtube, defying censorship expectations. I analyse netizens' comments in response to one of them, looking more specifically at public discourse about proselytisation in public and Christianity in China more generally. I find that for some netizens, discourse on these subjects is very much guided by the Chinese Communist Party. Some netizens choose to embrace the party-state's stance on proselytisation in public which is to condemn the practice as illegal. Society is also filled with negative preconceptions about proselytisation and Christianity which are unintended consequences of a long-time abolished Maoist policy of freeing China from foreign religious influence. Surprisingly, however, some netizens have moderate or even positive views about proselytisation and/or Christianity.

1. Introduction

The control of religious groups by the state is a highly sensitive matter in autocracies and in those where censorship is at its worst, one would expect not to find much information about breaches of regulations on religious activity in the media or on the web. While this is true in China, social media have created space for discussions about religious activity happening outside state-sanctioned religious venues. All legal religious activity must normally take place within the premises of state-registered religious venues. In reality, most churches in China are unregistered and religious activity that is prohibited by the government but encouraged by some unregistered churches, like proselytization, happens in the public sphere. If reported, Christian proselytizers might get away with party discipline, namely being lectured on government regulations by the public security bureau, but those preaching cults are subject to a detention of no less than ten days and fined up to 1,000 yuan. Videos about Christian proselytizers in public spaces were recently posted on Bilibili, China's equivalent of YouTube, defying censorship expectations. In this study, I analyze netizens' comments in response to one of these videos, looking more specifically at public discourse about proselytization in public and Christianity in China more generally. I find that some citizens choose to embrace the party-state's stance on proselytization in public, which is to condemn the practice as illegal. Society is also filled with negative preconceptions about proselytization and

Christianity that are unintended consequences of a long-since-abolished Maoist policy of freeing China from foreign religious influence. The video was an opportunity for these citizens to share these negative preconceptions with the public. Surprisingly, however, some netizens have moderate or even positive views about proselytization and/or Christianity.

This study contributes to existing scholarly work on religious practice occurring outside the reach of China's state. Most studies on the subject have centered on unregistered Protestant churches and underground Catholic churches. These studies explore churches' origins (Hunter and Chan 1993; Madsen 1998; Xu 1997; Yang 2011), the reasons for underground Christianity's growth in China (Cao 2008; 2010; Hunter and Chan 1993; Lee 2007, 277–278; Sun 2017; Vala and O'Brien 2007; Yang 2011), and how they survive in a politically unsupportive setting (Lee 2007, 288; Reny 2018a; 2018b). Very little information is available on the preaching of Christian faith in public, perhaps because the churches that are involved in such activity are oftentimes unregistered (or underground) and they are more difficult to investigate than the ones that are registered with the government. Media and scholarly reports were nevertheless published on one of China's high-profile underground congregations, Shouwang Church, when it organized outdoor worships during its conflict with Beijing authorities over its unregistered worshipping location beginning in 2009 (Reny 2018b). Vala and O'Brien's study of the conditions under which unregistered churches recruit new believers is another exception to the rule. They find that oftentimes recruitment happens in congregants' already existing social networks. Friends are invited by members of unregistered churches to a Christmas or a Thanksgiving party, and they subsequently decide to join their church (Vala and O'Brien 2007, 84). Some of the proselytization in cities also happens outdoors, with university students handing out religious pamphlets to others on campus, artists proselytizing among other artists, or proselytizers talking to strangers (Vala and O'Brien 2007, 85–87). In rural areas, proselytizers try to recruit others through door-to-door visits (Vala and O'Brien 2007, 85). Most of the literature on religious practice occurring outside the reach of the state in China is based on data collected from religious leaders and believers. Little information about public opinion on violations of central government regulations on religious affairs and non-Christians' opinions about underground Christianity is available. This analysis of netizens' comments on the illegal practice of proselytization in public begins to fill this empirical gap.

I show how Maoist policies have had long-lasting effects on public opinion about Christianity. Mao regarded foreign missionary activity in China as religious interference in China's affairs. When the Communist Party took power in 1949, it prioritized expelling Christian missionaries (Dikötter 2013, 118–120) and cutting local congregations' ties to foreigners (Lee 2007, 284–285). The party also called for indigenizing Christianity (Lee 2007,

284). Following Mao's death in 1976, and as China began to open up its economy, Chinese Christians were once again allowed to communicate with Christians outside the country (Lee and Chow 2022, 238), and local churches given the permission to work with foreign religious organizations under the state's close scrutiny (Lee 2007, 289). Missionary work, however, remained forbidden (Mok 2025, 164). Despite a relaxation in China's religious policy, mentalities remained old-fashioned, especially among non-Christians. Some Chinese netizens still think of Christianity as a foreign religion that is hardly compatible with China's cultural traditions, as well as a form of cultural invasion. Although today the Chinese Communist Party would not claim to treat differentially the five religions it recognizes as the official religions of China, its reemphasis on sinicizing the practice of faith since 2015 only contributes to sustaining perceptions of Christianity as foreign (Wang 2024, 247–248). Another important way in which Maoist policies affected public opinion about Christianity until today is that the staunch supporters of communism from the foundation of the People's Republic of China until today have framed religion and communism as incompatible belief wise, thinking that citizens had to make a choice between either one. But perhaps because Christianity was constructed as culturally foreign, that incompatibility might have been perceived as even starker in its case than in that of Buddhism or Taoism.

Findings presented in this study are significant since limited information is available on the web in China when it comes to religion, let alone religious practice happening outside the reach of the state. The state-controlled media seldom publish any news about Christianity so that few opportunities for netizens to voice their opinions on related subjects exist. Qualitative research on Christianity in China involving the conduct of interviews and participant observation has also become more difficult given the fact that all of China's cities are equipped with cameras at every street corner and the activities of researchers can easily be traced by the police. Conducting sensitive research under these conditions would constitute a serious breach of ethics. Analyzing netizens' comments in reaction to videos of Christian proselytizers in public is an interesting, although imperfect, substitute to the conduct of interviews on religious practice in China. In addition, it can serve as a substitute to the conduct of public opinion surveys. Online or door-to-door surveys on underground religious practice would be very difficult to conduct with the approval of the government.

The difficulty in obtaining data on religious practice stems from the fact that religious policy is one of the most politically sensitive subjects in China, alongside questions of ethnonationalism and separatism. This is a vestige of the early Maoist period that has remained almost unchanged until today. In the 1950s, Party leaders saw religious beliefs as hard to reconcile with communist convictions but decided that religious practice would be tolerated under strict government supervision. Many Protestant pastors, however,

chose to defy central regulations on religious practice and would not practice religion under the supervision of the state. While the political climate under Mao could not allow house churches to spread, the transition to a market economy in the late 1970s was followed by a revival in Protestantism, most of which happened underground. News about unregistered churches' activities have been strictly forbidden, although in 2010 and 2011 the Chinese media exceptionally published information about Shouwang Church's conflict with Beijing municipal authorities on its unregistered worshipping location (Wang and Xuyang 2011; Wu and Cui 2010). The central government does not want the public to know that many religious organizations in society do not conform to central government regulations on religious affairs. The fact that such violations are common is usually a sign that government regulations suffer from a crisis of legitimacy (Lee 2007, 303). Violators might consider these regulations unreasonable and unrepresentative of their needs and interests, and the state has reasons to believe that if information about these violations were made public, the public might side with violators. The state censors information about violations of regulations on religious affairs not just because these violations reveal that it is unable to enforce its own regulations, but also because it wants to prevent the public from siding with violators. As Keremoglu and Weidmann observe, autocrats censor information to contain the spread of government criticisms and prevent citizens from supporting the political causes of activists (Keremoglu and Weidmann 2020, 1691). For these reasons, no information on underground religious activity is usually available on China's web.

In 2024 and 2025, however, some videos of Christian proselytizers were posted on Bilibili, challenging censorship rules. These videos were not removed from the web after many months and following thousands of comments posted in response to them. I study netizens' responses to one of these videos posted in May 2024. The video showed a female Christian preacher who had just been caught proselytizing on the subway, sitting in a train being lectured by a young man who rather than telling her that proselytization was illegal, was educating her about the fact that China had had a long history of many thousands of years that had been culturally divorced from Christianity, and that not only was Christianity a form of cultural invasion, Chinese culture and Christian beliefs were also not easily reconcilable. The video ended with a second person intervening approving of what the young man had said and asking the female preacher if she was fed by the Chinese Communist Party, suggesting that being so and believing in God were incompatible. The video was shot by the female preacher's husband and subsequently posted on Bilibili with the following title: "My wife promoted a foreign religion on the subway and was educated on the spot by a young man who exported [Chinese] culture" (B1 2024, 19:23). The video triggered 3,000-plus comments by netizens, 1,355 of which I was able to access online. Reactions to Christian proselytization in public were mixed. Some netizens condemned the practice of proselytizing in public as illegal.

Some netizens overdramatized as unorthodox what might simply be the preaching of religious orthodoxy, while others thought that proselytization was morally problematic. Some netizens thought Christianity was hardly compatible with CCP ideology and science, while some saw it as culturally incompatible with Chinese culture. Some had other negative biases against Christianity and Christians which might have been unrelated to ideology or culture: they saw Christianity as an inherently deceptive religion that brainwashed people, and its followers as people with little education. Surprisingly though, a fair number of reactions to the video were moderate, and a few openly supportive of the female preacher on the subway. The remainder of the study makes sense of these various stances.

2. Discourse Guided by the Ruling Party

In response to the video of a female proselytizer on the subway posted on Bilibili, a fair number of netizens condemned the practice of preaching in public. Someone claimed, referring to the woman: “Auntie [an affectionate term for an elderly] broke the law” (B1 2024, 09:40). Another netizen called out: “it is illegal to preach in public, report her” (B1 2024, 07:58). Someone else similarly said referring to proselytization, “If you see this situation in a public place, just call the police” (B1 2024, 10:44). Someone claimed that “the subway station is not a religious place... if you insist on doing this, I can only call the police and ask the station staff to ask you to get off the train” (B1 2024, 03:52). One netizen invoked article 36 of the Constitution that protects the freedom of religious belief suggesting that proselytization might be okay, but another person responded saying that “Freedom of belief is not as simple as you understand it. That woman is preaching. The law has detailed regulations that prohibit preaching in non-religious places. That woman has broken the law” (B1 2024, 21:57). Perhaps hungry for drama and assuming that the female preacher would be disciplined by the authorities for breaking rules in one way or another, someone added, “I just want to know the outcome of the handling of this violation” (B1 2024, 08:31).

Underlying the rule that proselytization in public is illegal is the inevitable assumption that while the practice of Christianity should be accepted within designated state-sanctioned premises, it remains a threat when happening in public. One would hope that this is not a perception that the government deliberately seeks to disseminate in society, but the rule prohibiting proselytization in public has had the unintended effect of generating that perception among a non-religious public. Hence, a netizen commented that the young man who lectured the female preacher on China’s cultural history was stopping her from “influencing other people” on the subway (B1 2024, 07:00). What the netizen might have implicitly meant was that it was wrong for her to influence others to believe what she believed, not only because religious beliefs are personal and should not be imposed upon others, but also because there was something particularly problematic about her beliefs. Another netizen thought that Christianity, “for its own survival, allow[ed]

believers to go out and spread the word to attract people to join, which is really harmful” (B1 2024, 06:41). Someone who thought the police should have been called to report the female preacher exclaimed that she could not harm children (B1 2024, 08:12). Someone else thought that “Religious beliefs are necessary for many people, but it is even more necessary to respect others ... and not disrupt order” (B1 2024, 07:48).

Some people also sought to dramatize the situation making the female preacher seem like she had broken rules more than by simply preaching religious orthodoxy in public. Someone claimed that it was “very likely” that the woman was “spreading a cult” (B1 2024, 23:44), which if proven right, would have gotten her into real trouble. Another person similarly said, “You think she’s spreading the Gospel, but she might actually be in a cult” (B1 2024, 10:39). One netizen wrote: “Directly report the suspicion that this aunt is a member of a cult. Generally, people who are brainwashed in this way are [from] cults” (B1 2024, 09:26). Someone else added, “Can’t a cult, which preaches on all occasions, be controlled?” (B1 2024, 07:05). Another netizen added, likely referring to the female preacher and her husband filming the scene, “These two individuals promoting feudal superstitions [another way of talking about cults] on the subway should be sent to the police station for a proper investigation” (B1 2024, 08:03).

Some people who thought rules with respect to religious affairs had to be respected nonetheless had more moderate views than those expressed in the above paragraphs. Someone for instance said that one had to “respect personal religious beliefs, but proselytizing in public is illegal” (B1 2024, 01:02). Another netizen claimed that “China never restricts what you believe in, but you must still follow the rules when doing things” (B1 2024, 17:22). One netizen thought that “the way we promote cultural confidence should not be to belittle the culture of other ... groups,” yet that person still thought that the female preacher who was proselytizing on the subway still had to be stopped (B1 2024, 01:41). Someone else added that missionaries can (preach) at specific locations but subways were not among those locations (B1 2024, 14:23). Someone who sounded like he/she might have been from a government-controlled church advised the female preacher not to undermine her church by breaking government rules in public. That was a red line that no preacher should cross (B1 2024, 23:56). One person emphasized that religious preaching in public was not allowed, even for Buddhists, suggesting that there was no reason to assume that the rule only sought to restrain Christians (B1 2024, 08:57).

Finally, some people expressed moral disapproval of proselytization in public. Someone claimed to be an atheist and respected other people’s religious beliefs but still thought that “[that] kind of public dissemination of one’s religious beliefs [was ...] unacceptable” (B1 2024, 06:53). Another netizen thought that religious beliefs were fine, but “if you casually promote[d them]

or ask[ed] others to believe [in them] regardless of the occasion, then there [was] a problem” (B1 2024, 10:34). One netizen thought that a problem with preaching religious beliefs in public was that children could be the target of proselytization: “You put your children on the subway [...], misleading them into thinking that they were brought by Jesus. This is the problem” (B1 2024, 11:31). One netizen emphasized the coercive dimension of religious proselytization, thinking that proselytizing to children who could not make an opinion of themselves of religion violated the principle of freedom of religious beliefs (B1 2024, 18:59). Someone even compared religion with smoking in an effort to justify why proselytization was not allowed in public: “you can smoke yourself, [but] don’t influence others or persuade them to smoke” (B1 2024, 10:40).

3. Negative Preconceptions about Christianity and Religion

3.1. Political Resistance to Christianity

Some netizens expressed political resistance to Christianity. Political resistance implied that netizens thought Christianity was not easily reconcilable with Communist Party ideology and rule. That opinion is not sanctioned by the government because the government protects the freedom of religious beliefs. Yet decades of Communist Party rule nevertheless had negative unintended effects on public opinion and to some extent, some people’s opinions about Christianity in China are very much the product of pre-reform (Maoist) China that saw religion as being in tension with Communist ideology. The video of the female preacher on the subway was an opportunity for a netizen to recall that last time he/she was at a cafe, a lady approached him/her and asked if he/she believed in God, and the netizen simply answered “I believe in the Communist Party” and “in science” (B1 2024, 11:25). Another netizen recalled how in university two girls had asked him/her if he/she believed in God, and he/she answered saying he/she believed in Marx (B1 2024, 22:51). Someone else claimed that “New China was created with the blood of generations of revolutionary martyrs. It was not given by some God” (B1 2024, 07:37). Finally, in reaction to the video, a netizen wrote “Trust Chairman Mao, trust the Communist Party of China” (B1 2024, 01:18).

Some netizens simply placed religion and science at odds. One claimed that “We are a nation that is constantly striving for self-improvement. Without relying on God ..., we rely on our wisdom and hands” (B1 2024, 10:07). Another netizen wrote that Jesus did not put him/her on health insurance, adding that in a situation of emergency “Which number shall I call for him to come and save me?” (B1 2024, 07:03). Someone thought that “If you have any problems in China, find the government to be a better messenger than Jesus!” He/she suggested that Jesus could not be contacted but the government could (B1 2024, 11:44). Someone else wrote that it was “soldiers, scientists, doctors, police officers, firefighters ... who were [our] guardians! Not Jesus!” (B1 2024, 03:46). One netizen thought that believing in science

necessarily meant that one could not engage in feudal superstition, and one should trust the Party and the government (B1 2024, 08:58). Another netizen claimed that “in our socialist countr[y], we advocate science and humanities.” The person went on emphasizing the backwardness of religion, stating that “such things [as religious beliefs] will be eliminated sooner or later.” That claim used to be commonly made under Mao’s rule. Mao thought that religion should be tolerated for the time being and over time it would progressively vanish (B1 2024, 12:13).

3.2. Cultural Resistance to Christianity

Some netizens expressed cultural resistance to Christianity, and in that sense they sided with the young man who had lectured the female preacher on the subway. Cultural resistance to Christianity implied that netizens thought Christianity was not compatible with Chinese culture and history. Given the fact that the government protects the freedom of religious belief, the government would have unlikely sought to encourage citizens to believe that religions that are sanctioned by the state but are of foreign origins are incompatible with Chinese culture. This being said, the Communist Party under Mao was not supportive of foreign missionary activity in the country, considering it a cultural invasion. Decades later, parts of society continue to hold on to the belief that foreign religious practice is a form of cultural invasion. The central government’s call for sinicizing religions, including Christianity, under Xi Jinping’s administrations does not help rectify those perceptions (Mok 2025, 166, 172).

In reaction to the young man lecturing the female preacher on the subway about China’s long history having been divorced from Christianity, many comments showed support for the idea that Christianity was culturally foreign. A netizen thought that “Although our country advocates for the freedom of religious belief, Christianity is truly a foreign invasion” (B1 2024, 10:08). Someone reacted to the video saying: “Is Jesus Chinese? No, [so] why should I believe” (B1 2024, 08:41). Another netizen wrote “Western Christians want to come here to brainwash (people), but we are not like Koreans who are so easily brainwashed due to a lack of cultural confidence” (B1 2024, 21:28). Someone else called for “cultural confidence and cultural self-reliance!” (B1 2024, 01:02). One netizen added, speaking to young people, “don’t be fooled by foreign culture” (B1 2024, 09:24). Someone addressing Christian proselytizers asked, “Why do you, an alien religion, come to our country and fool the masses?” (B1 2024, 11:27). One person really didn’t know why she/he should believe in foreign religions (B1 2024, 09:45). Another thought that the Lord was Europe and America’s God (B1 2024, 03:06). For someone else, religion was an important way through which other countries were controlled by the West (B1 2024, 10:55). “Spreading religion in public areas and inducing children [to believe in God],” someone said, “would ... subvert China’s thousands of years of history” (B1 2024, 02:34). Another person claimed that “Belief in Christianity ha[d] destroyed many

traditional Chinese cultural customs” (B1 2024, 08:35). Another netizen thought that God “look[ed] down on non-white people” (B1 2024, 08:19). Someone finally claimed to “look down upon those who believe[d] in Christ” adding that Christ dared to challenge “established Chinese Gods” (B1 2024, 17:51). One netizen confidently claimed that the Chinese state existed before God created the world (B1 2024, 10:12). And someone else added, “how can the Chinese believe in Jesus. China went down several dynasties and Jesus [was] not even alive yet, let alone his nonsense stories” (B1 2024, 08:37).

Interestingly, however, the cultural bias against religion did not just apply to Christianity. The foreign religions that were said to have “culturally invaded” China were not just Protestantism and Catholicism. Someone, for instance, could not understand why people in China had, for thousands of years, worshipped foreign Gods like Bodhisattva rather than a local one (B1 2024, 09:39). That view however remained an exception among a larger pool of culturally unsympathetic comments specifically targeted at Christianity. In addition, not all netizens were convinced by the idea that Christianity was a cultural invasion. Someone claimed to be a Marxist and, like Christian beliefs, Marxism had been imported from the West (B1 2024, 18:04). Hence resisting Christianity because of the incompatibility of religion and science did not imply resisting Christianity as culturally foreign.

3.3. Personal Biases against Christianity and Christians

Many citizens expressed various sorts of negative biases against Christianity and religion more generally. One netizen thought of the female preacher in the video that “if [she] really had ... the ability to think critically, she wouldn’t be brainwashed into [being religious]” (B1 2024, 13:07). Someone whose mother was Christian and who claimed to have been forced to attend church similarly thought that Christianity brainwashed believers (B1 2024, 10:49). One talked about “a church in [his/her] grandfather’s hometown that specialize[d] in deceiving old men and women” (B1 2024, 04:29). One claimed that missionary work of Protestantism was outrageous and that old and young folks were fooled into becoming religious believers (B1 2024, 23:16). Another person had in the past encountered preachers handing religious flyers at the school gate and he/she felt like he/she was “being tricked into a pyramid scheme” (B1 2024, 10:17). Someone else thought that “Believing in Christianity [was] quite ridiculous.” That netizen recalled how he/she used to “be dragged to church” by his/her friends yet “[the preachers] speaking skills were not as good as those [giving] scam phone calls” (B1 2024, 08:01). One person finally had read the Bible and thought it was funny and couldn’t understand “why anyone in the world [could] believe in such things” (B1 2024, 07:02).

Christian believers were looked down upon by a number of netizens. One claimed that there were only two types of people who believed in Christianity: “one is the uneducated old man and the other is the old

lady” (B1 2024, 08:48). Another person similarly thought that “Uneducated elderly people [were] particularly likely to believe in Christianity” (B1 2024, 10:49). One netizen claimed that “The majority of religious people [were] uneducated, and uneducated people are stubborn and blind” (B1 2024, 05:12). Someone who had worked in Zhejiang and saw that there were many Christians in that province wrote: “As a highly educated atheist, I found it difficult to understand” (B1 2024, 04:06). Someone else who similarly could not understand why some people were religious added “Maybe it’s because they don’t have enough culture and lack common sense” (B1 2024, 09:21). One person went as far as saying that “Being religious only prove[d] that you are more primitive than others” (B1 2024, 11:17). Someone else claimed that “The people who actually [accomplish] things on the continent and get things done are atheists” (B1 2024, 09:23). Another person thought that when someone’s IQ and knowledge are insufficient, it is understandable that he/she would choose to believe in God (B1 2024, 15:11). One netizen went as far as saying that it was obvious that some missionaries had mental problems (B1 2024, 08:48), and that “there are no normal people who are religious” (B1 2024, 11:19). A preacher one netizen had bumped into was similarly described as “a crazy aunt preaching, saying something about Jesus” (B1 2024, 10:55).

For most netizens who were critical of Christianity, it was not conceivable that people might have had legitimate spiritual reasons for being religious and attending church. Someone wondered why so many people attended church in a city and then heard that they were given free food suggesting that that had to have been the reason why they went to church (B1 2024, 21:53). Another person wondered why someone would join a church, saying “Isn’t this just for free eggs, milk, and bread. Who would believe [in] this?” (B1 2024, 11:28). To these netizens, religion had no other appeal than material rewards.

Some netizens did not entirely discredit Christian beliefs but sought to challenge Chinese Christians or those who proselytized in public by questioning their understanding of what they actually preached. Christian preachers were presented as blind followers of a religion they did not even understand and who were in no position to share meaningful information about their faith to others. One for instance thought that “These people who ostensibly claim to be missionaries don’t even understand what the Bible means [and can’t] explain it” (B1 2024, 14:34). Another netizen claimed that “Most people who believe in religion don’t understand religious history at all. Those who believe in Jesus don’t ... understand [religion]” (B1 2024, 10:34). One said in reference to proselytization in public, “When I encounter this kind of thing, I usually ask [the preacher] if [he/she] knows about the New and the Old Testaments, ... Calvinism ... the wars of religion,” adding “don’t you know what you are preaching?” (B1 2024, 23:16). A non-Christian netizen talked about Christians he had had a religious conversation with,

saying they could not even tell what the differences between Old and New Testaments were, adding that all they said were simple things, all they sang were simple songs (B1 2024, 11:57).

4. Moderate Views on Religion, Christianity, or Proselytization

Interestingly, a minority of netizens took the female preacher's side. Some criticized the young man who had lectured her on the subway, thinking that he was "overly" or "excessively" culturally confident (B1 2024, 23:20). If the lady was brainwashed by religion, one netizen suggested that the young man was just as brainwashed (B1 2024, 01:10). Some expressed empathy for the female preacher saying that she had sat the whole time listening to the young man lecturing her with civility. One netizen criticized the young man for not letting the female preacher respond to his comments, saying "If you want to convince people with reason, you must let both sides fully express their opinions," adding, "This guy's logic doesn't work either... What kind of cultural invasion are you talking about, what kind of Chinese culture is better than the West?" (B1 2024, 11:28). One netizen claimed that "everyone should have freedom of belief as long as it is not forced preaching," adding that there was no use in arguing over "which belief systems (was) superior" (B1 2024, 00:21). Another person thought that what the young man was lecturing the female preacher on was "narrow-minded nationalism" (B1 2024, 09:50). And one netizen added that being culturally confident implied that one needed not be afraid of Christian preachers (B1 2024, 10:46).

Some netizens also sought to downplay the possibility that the female preacher might have been a threat because of her Christian faith. One person thought that there was no use in assuming that practicing a so-called foreign religion meant that one was less patriotic (B1 2024, 08:57). Perhaps in response to netizens who thought that one could either believe in God or in the Communist Party and science, one netizen questioned whether science and faith were truly opposites (B1 2024, 02:07). Another netizen reacted to possible accusations that what the female preacher practiced was a cult, saying "everyone had freedom of beliefs" and what she practiced was not a cult. She went on saying "You can directly point out to [this] aunt that you can't preach in public places, but you can't belittle [her] faith!" (B1 2024, 00:11).

While no netizen expressed open disagreement with central government regulations on religious affairs prohibiting proselytization in public spaces, some hinted that proselytization in public might not be that problematic a practice after all. One netizen asked, "which is more serious, yelling in public [referring to the young man lecturing the female preacher] or handing out small cards ...?" referring to the female preacher handing out religious leaflets (B1 2024, 17:19). Another netizen thought it was fine to preach indiscriminately and that religions ought not be divided according to whether they were local or foreign, noting that Christian churches had existed in parts of China "since ancient times" (B1 2024, 06:51). Another netizen responded

to the video in favor of the female preacher, saying “Freedom of faith, let it be,” indirectly implying that there was no reason why she should not be able to proselytize (B1 2024, 11:24). Similarly, one netizen reacted saying “Just believe in religion and spread that cult on the subway,” assuming that the female Christian had to be preaching something unorthodox and thinking it was no big deal (B1 2024, 21:28). It wasn’t clear whether these netizens were conscious that they were voicing a claim in opposition to central government regulations on religious affairs as one cannot assume that they were fully aware of those regulations and that they had read other netizens’ responses to the video when they wrote their comments. In any case, the fact that the comments had not been deleted by the internet police was in itself very surprising.

The video posted on Bilibili finally was an opportunity for some netizens to say good things about Christianity. One thought that religion encouraged people to be good. For that person, harm did not come from religion but from individuals (B1 2024, 19:26). Another netizen who was not religious but had religious friends thought that devout believers were generally good to others, they were not harmful to society (B1 2024, 08:49). Some netizens also tried to correct netizens who had insulted Christians and Christianity for believing in things that were non-scientific. Someone thought that one can choose not to believe “but there is no need to mock [religion]” (B1 2024, 09:41).

5. Conclusion

Despite overtures in the press with respect to the coverage of some politically sensitive news, very little information is found on China’s web on religion, let alone underground or unregistered religious activity. The government has consistently sought to limit conversations about violations of regulations on religious affairs, knowing that many religious leaders do not conform to these regulations, and perhaps anticipating that allowing the public to talk about these regulations would trigger criticisms of the government’s religious policy. Recent videos on Christian proselytizers posted on Bilibili were exceptions to this rule, and interestingly, they triggered thousands of comments from society. As I show in this study, society’s opinions on Christian proselytization in public and on Christianity more generally are divided. Some netizens’ opinions are very much in line with the Communist Party’s stance on religious practice, calling out proselytization in public as illegal and even suggesting that Christian proselytizers should be arrested. Some netizens overdramatize as unorthodox what might simply be the preaching of religious orthodoxy, while others think that proselytization is morally problematic. Some netizens see Christianity as hardly compatible with CCP ideology and science, while some see it as culturally incompatible with Chinese culture. Among some of the staunch atheists, some have negative biases against Christian beliefs and look down upon religion. Yet there are surprisingly a fair number of netizens who have moderate views

about Christianity, including some who are not opposed to Christian proselytization in public. The fact that these netizens' comments were not deleted by the internet police is unprecedented.

Discourse analysis of netizens' comments on proselytization and Christianity does not allow us to assess how representative of the Chinese population the multiple opinions presented in this study are. These online platforms are anonymized, thereby making impossible the task of tracking netizens' age, income level, gender, educational background, and regional origins. Only nationwide or regional survey data would give us a better clue of the representativeness of netizens' opinions. Younger generations of netizens who are technologically adept and located in cities might be overrepresented in online discussions in response to Bilibili's videos and Zhihu posts. This being said, some of the negative biases against Christianity, including opinions that Christianity is hardly compatible with communism and that it is a cultural invasion, were first and foremost held by members of the old generation of Chinese citizens. These views found their roots in pre-Maoist China but were reinforced by the Maoist regime and were sustained across generations over time. Aside from anticipating that religions would disappear as Chinese society became socialist, the Maoist regime saw the enduring presence of foreign missionaries in China following the foundation of the People's Republic as interference in its domestic affairs and prided itself in the fact that it subsequently freed the country from foreign occupation.

Comparing public opinion on proselytization by other religious groups in China is not an easy task given the fact that most other groups aside from Christian and non-Christian cults do not proselytize. The Christian cult that still heavily proselytizes today is the Church of Almighty God. Its activities are highly secretive, and it proselytizes among unregistered (underground) churches, making it very difficult to collect information on the matter. Aside from the Church of Almighty God, the Falun Gong is a non-Christian cult that also used to proselytize, but it has been banned in China since 1999. Public opinion on these two groups is no longer impossible to assess because online conversations about them are allowed on Bilibili.

While we might expect the public to be harsh on Falun Gong followers because of the government's past campaign against the group, an online discussion on Bilibili in response to a video about Li Hongzhi, the leader of the Falun Gong, posted in 2024 triggered comments on the part of netizens that were far from hostile. Many netizens had grandparents who followed the cult and they look back at the times when their relatives were Falun Gong members with amusement, laughter, or perplexity (B2 2024, 08:24; B2 2024, 12:46; B2 2024, 21:15). Some netizens ridicule the group as promoting nonsensical beliefs (B2 2024, 17:34). For others, cults and the government's officially recognized religions might not be that different from one another: their fundamental assumptions are generally hard to buy. A

minority of netizens expressed hostile views about the Falun Gong: someone asked how he/she might be able to report Falun Gong propaganda when he/she encounters it, while others claimed that the cult was harmful or that it was opposed to the Chinese Communist Party (B2 2024, 00:30; B2 2024, 17:23). The fact that Falun Gong was not imported from other societies (Palmer 2007, 27), and that it was confused for being a brand of Taoism or Buddhism by some (B2 2024, 14:41; Palmer 2007, 25), might have helped control negative opinions about it.

Yet looking at opinions on the Church of Almighty God, a Christian cult with no connection to Taoism or Buddhism that began to spread in rural areas in reform-era China, some netizens similarly recalled stories of family members or people they knew in their community having been members of the cult. Interestingly, some expressed no opinion about the group, while others dismissed it as preaching nonsense (B3 2022, 18:10). Negative biases against the Church of Almighty God were similar to those expressed on the Falun Gong. One netizen described the cult as anti-China (B3 2022, 13:39), another as an organization that brainwashed people (B3 2022, 14:57), while one thought that it should be eradicated as it was too harmful (B3 2022, 16:10). A person finally expressed puzzlement at the fact that some people actually followed that religion (B3 2022, 13:22). Interestingly, no netizen claimed that these cults were incompatible with China's culture. Perhaps the fact that they were homegrown and that a fair number of netizens had relatives who were members of either one of these organizations rendered such views irrelevant.

China has five officially recognized religions: Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism. Like Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam are generally understood as religions with foreign roots and for that reason, some people might consider them difficult to reconcile with Chinese culture. One might expect negative biases heard in the case of Protestantism to be similar in the case of Catholicism and Islam. Society's opinions on Buddhism and Daoism, however, are expected not to be as negative. Buddhism is also a foreign religion, but it was indigenized very early in China's history and became a central part of Chinese culture, unlike Catholicism and Protestantism that were fully indigenized only following China's expulsion of foreign missionaries in the early 1950s. This difference between Buddhism and Christianity must have inevitably impacted the way Chinese nationals think of these religions. Finally, Taoism is the only official religion in China that is homegrown. Negative biases of the kind that were voiced by netizens against Christianity are unlikely to be found in online discussions about it.

One's experience as a Christian in a society undeniably hinges on the degree of religious freedom permitted to citizens by state regulations. Yet regulations are not the only condition that makes religious believers' environment better or worse. Public opinion also has a direct impact on the lives of religious

believers. Hence, even when government regulations are accommodative of religious practice, negative biases and mentalities against religion can remain a significant obstacle to one's quality of life as a religious believer in a predominantly non-Christian society. Biases and mentalities can endure over a long time and need not change alongside positive reforms in government policy. Hence while the climate for religious practice became freer following the end of Mao's rule, negative biases against religion from the Maoist period endured among some citizens until today. The government clearly has a role to play, notably through education and the media, in rectifying negative biases against Christianity and old mentalities so that Chinese society becomes fully acceptant of its own diversities. It should have a particular interest in rectifying these biases because foreign audiences are undeniably going to assume that societal opinions, although a departure from the government's official stance on religious beliefs, are indirectly encouraged by the party-state. Sustaining the thought that foreign religions are culturally invasive and possibly threatening simply helps better justify why their practice should be tightly controlled by the state.

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