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The mind and the Devil: porosity and discernment in two Chinese charismatic-style churches

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This essay explores otherworldly encounters and notions of mind across two charismatic-style churches in China. In Zhao Village Church in rural Henan province, Christian congregants more often approached the mind as porous to the Devil’s corruption. In Living Church in Shanghai, congregants were more influenced by bounded, psychological notions of the mind as an entity; although the mind was also held to be permeable to spiritual personae, its interior workings stood as the central hindrance to discernment, rather than the externality of the Devil. And while those in Shanghai stressed a gradual, retroactive verification of potential spiritual signs, those in Henan strove for a rhythm of immediate response. Meanwhile, Shanghai congregants described fewer sensory and embodied encounters with divine voice, pain, and healing than congregants in Henan. Such divergent theories of mind, virtuous rhythms, and distributions within the Christian spiritual sensorium might be understood in part through styles of engagement accentuated at these churches, and in part through the uneven unfolding of religious abolition and revival in China, including the heightened urban presence of psychotherapeutic genres and the rural presence of spirit mediumship in recent decades. These variations in personhood and otherworldly encounter, including deeply porous ones, were thus co-present in an atheist secular milieu, after what have been seen as some of the most thorough secularization campaigns conducted by a modern state.

‘The problem with so-called “charismatics”’, Pastor Chen mused, ‘is that they see meaning in everything and anything. Any coincidence’. It was a casual dinner with a group of congregants in central Shanghai, where struggles and contradictions in the practice of Christianity were often hashed out. Pastor Chen continued. He critiqued the over-eagerness to see meaning only because he sympathized with it. He himself was once of this sort, finding divine significance in every coincidence. But over time, he realized that this was also a form of superstition – that Christianity too could come to resemble idolatry. Seen from without – from the eyes of mainline Chinese churches, for instance – Chen’s commentary may seem paradoxical, given that Living Church could in some sense be considered an emblematic charismatic house church, one that encourages a...
direct, experiential relationship with God. Yet it was precisely through the continuous undoing of easy surety that those at the church learned to discern whether any given experience was indeed from God. Pastor Chen’s critique of ‘so-called “charismatics”’ was part of a long-standing discussion at the church surrounding ‘caution’ (jinshen) towards the interpretation of potential spiritual encounters.

The importance of caution arose in part from what Pastor Chen and the congregants took as a central hindrance to discernment: the human mind. For those at Living Church, the difficulty of knowing God stemmed in large part from the pernicious presence of the mind and the self; humans are wont to mistake their own desire and rationale for divine will.

Meanwhile, at Zhao Village Church in rural Henan province, concerns with discernment were as pressing as they were in Shanghai. Yet while troubles of human desire were also contended with, the mind was not the central figure leading one astray – it was the Devil.

‘The Devil tells lies and leads you to believe falsely’, Pastor Zhao explained as we discussed the possibility of mistakenly taking an experience to be from God. The Devil may mislead through several means, he continued: by direct influence and the instillation of temptation, or by entry through a breach opened in the human heart-mind owing to the impurity of one’s desire. Moreover, the Devil can exploit such human emotions as anger, fuelling the fire to ignite a murderous rage. For Pastor Zhao and congregants at Zhao Village Church, ‘corruption’ (baihuai) by the Devil must be contended with day to day, through practices of confession and repentance. While evocations of human intention were by no means absent, danger arose by way of infiltration: being entered by the Devil in place of being entered by God.

The avoidance of corruption and the need for caution signalled two distinct approaches to the mind. In Zhao Village, the mind posed a spiritual risk owing more to its fundamental permeability to demonic influence, and less to its tendency towards excessive interpretation. Conversely, congregants in Shanghai explicitly denounced excessive ascriptions of immoral and spiritually mistaken thoughts to the Devil, and turned their concern towards the dangerous self-certainty of the human mind. While discussing the misrecognition of divine messages at Living Church with Mei, a former industrial designer in her late twenties, I asked her if such errors originated in the Devil. ‘No’, she shook her head, ‘it’s from yourself, because you have the freedom of will . . . In fact, it’s you yourself making the choice . . . one might mistakenly take oneself to be God’.

As part of this special issue on theories of mind and spiritual kindling, this essay describes styles of charismatic Christian engagement across two churches in China, with relation to porous and buffered notions of the mind and self. Expanding theory of mind from its usage in developmental psychology, anthropologists have used the term to describe cultural variations in how mental states are apprehended, with consequences for how one operates in the world (Keane 2015; Luhrmann et al. 2011; Robbins & Rumsey 2008). Here, I approach porosity and bufferedness as a dimension of mind, linked to such other dimensions as epistemic stance and relational responsibility (Luhrmann et al. 2011).

In A secular age, Charles Taylor (2007) describes two senses of religious selfhood. The porous self, for Taylor, is one open and vulnerable to spirits and other supernatural forces. Meaning, including thoughts, feelings, and spiritual forces, does not merely reside within the mind, but can reside fully outside the mind – coming from without, including the presence of spirits, possession, and charged objects. By contrast, for the
buffered (or bounded) self, exemplified by modern Christianity in secular contexts, the interiority of the human mind becomes the site for spiritualities. Meaning is turned inwards towards a sense of mental depth. Boundaries harden between mind and world, mind and body, interior and exterior. Taylor brackets out Pentecostalism as a counter-movement external to more ‘in the head’ versions of ‘official Christianity’ (2007: 555). Here, by approaching porosity and bufferedness through styles and variations, I take Taylor’s concepts as a point of departure, to illustrate tensions and potentialities internal to Christianity (Bialecki 2017; Reinhardt 2015).

My encounters in Shanghai and Henan province suggest that any theory of mind in China today must be approached vis-à-vis distinct landscapes of historical inheritance and religious revival. Twentieth-century translations of Western psychology and recent urban proliferations of psychological discourses, transmitted in part through schooling and urban sociality, may have provided conditions for more self-consciously ‘buffered’ notions of mind in discernment practices among middle-class congregants I met in Shanghai. In Zhao Village, concepts of direct otherworldly transmission common in rural revivals of temple rituals and spirit mediumship, along with a more distributed sense of personhood, were echoed in more ‘porous’ notions of mind in discernment among congregants I met. These two approaches to the mind were accompanied by divergent styles of spiritual engagement. Those at Zhao Village Church described more sensory and corporeal encounters with the divine and demonic, and strove for a virtuous rhythm of immediacy, while experiences of God through thought, inspiration, and beyond-coincidental events were more common at Living Church, accompanied by a spiritual emphasis on gradual verification.

These theories of mind were thus linked to particular sensational forms that mediated possible modes of relation with the otherworldly (Meyer 2010). Such ‘distributions of the sensible’ (Rancière 2004) varied without being entirely distinct, given their shared Chinese Protestant sources. Within the overlapping yet non-identical semiotic ideologies at the two churches, the mind held a different place in ‘the sorting out of proper relations among, and boundaries between, words, things, and subjects’ (Keane 2007: 4). The human mind mapped differently onto which (and how commonly) particular objects and sensations were considered divine or demonic, what (and in what contexts) genres of religious speech were considered legitimate, and which (and under what circumstances) spiritual personae were considered agentic.

Such distinctions were by no means absolute, and the rural-urban divide does not fully account for questions of difference – a wide array of churches exist in cities and in villages. Even within a single congregation, Christianity can be taken up and actualized differently (Bialecki 2017). The portraits of the mind, the senses, and temporality I sketch in this essay foreground contrasts rather than similarities, in part because the presence of sensory spiritual encounters between the city and village was more marked in China than in other sites of this collaborative project. I thus use these distinctions to consider multiple modes of Christian engagement in China today, after a lengthy history of secularization campaigns. Attending to critical responses to Taylor’s account of the secular – particularly his spatial and temporal relegation of porosity to the world of ‘our ancestors’ and ‘almost all other [non-Western] contemporary societies’ (2007: 1, 42) – I show how buffered and porous engagements are co-present and variously manifest within a contemporary atheist secular nation-state.
Christianity in China

China holds the world’s seventh largest Christian population despite Christianity’s minority status in the country, estimated at around 5 per cent (Pew Research Center 2011). According to some projections, it is slated to become the largest Christian nation within a matter of decades (Micklethwait & Wooldridge 2009). Following anti-superstition campaigns across the twentieth century and the official abolition of religion during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Christianity – Protestantism in particular – has ‘returned’ amid broader scenes of religious revival since the 1980s (Bays 2012). While most Chinese churches have remained non-denominational since severing their ties with foreign missions in the 1950s, scholars have suggested that many are ‘Pentecostal by default’ in their styles of worship, even when the churches themselves reject being identified as Pentecostal or charismatic (Y. Liu 2017; Oblau 2011; F. Yang, Tong & Anderson 2017). Given the rise of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity across the globe since the 1970s (Jenkins 2002), China offers a lens into how Christianity manifests and transforms in the contemporary world, particularly in contexts of secular governance.

Beyond numbers, the history of Protestantism in China is entangled, not unlike elsewhere, with that of secularization. Prior to missionary efforts to define Chinese religion for purposes of conversion, the concept of religion as a distinct domain did not exist in there (Goossaert & Palmer 2011). By the nineteenth century, in the face of military, political, and economic threats from British, Japanese, French, and other forces, modern religion – exemplified by Protestantism – was seen as both an agent of foreign imperialism and a potential resource for anti-imperial efforts, given its associations with military-political brawn. By contrast, temple networks and ritual practices were often seen as ineffectual in securing national sovereignty despite their cultural-spiritual value, and were variously placed on the other side of the Protestant conceptual divide as outmoded superstition. Such concepts had profound consequences; whether a temple was kept or displaced depended on its categorization (Nedostup 2010). By introducing religion as a modern concept, Protestant missions simultaneously offered categories for its governance. Following the victory of the atheist Communist Party over the comparatively Protestant-friendly Nationalist Party in 1949, all religion would come under suspicion, including Christianity. As noted above, religious suppression reached its heights during the Cultural Revolution, when all practices were officially banned. After the ban was partially lifted in the post-Mao economic reform era, Protestant churches were still placed in two state-designated categories: illegal, unregistered ‘house churches’ and legal churches registered with the Three Self Patriotic Movement.

Christianity in China today must thus be understood through its formal abolition and revival, which varied by context. In much of rural China, Protestant congregations had been devastated since the 1950s, with churches shut down as property was redistributed during Land Reform. Yet subsequent enforcement varied with shifts in political atmosphere, and in some cases the persecution of religious authorities inadvertently drove the underground growth of experiential, charismatic-style religiosity (Kao 2009; Lian 2010). With the legalization of religion following Mao’s death, the 1980s saw a ‘rural decade’ of Protestant revival (Bays 2012). Given the concurrent rebuilding of Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian temples and the return of ritual and spirit mediumship in villages, Protestant concepts once again commingled with Chinese ‘popular’ religious concepts, from eschatological themes to petitioning the divine for healing (Dean 2003; Lian 2010).
In the cities, modern police forces established in the early 1900s enabled more thorough enforcement of anti-superstition campaigns than in rural regions, though Christianity was treated separately, protected by extra-territoriality rights under which foreign missionaries were not subject to Chinese law (Goossaert & Palmer 2011). Such laws lost their effect with the end of the Second World War, and by the start of the Cultural Revolution, all churches were officially closed (Lian 2010). While Protestantism first flourished in rural regions upon religious re-legalization in the 1980s, by the 1990s, Christian growth gained speed in the cities. White-collar converts and entrepreneurial ‘boss Christians’ grew in parallel with an intellectual scene of ‘cultural Christians’: academics at elite secular universities seeking Western ‘lessons’ from Christianity on such themes as civil society and capitalistic development, regardless of their own faith (Bays 2012; Cao 2011). Meanwhile, psychological discourses were also on the rise in cities. Variously adopted and spurned historically, psychotherapeutic ideas, practices, and institutions have seen an explosive growth in urban China, particularly since the early 2000s (H.-Y. Huang 2015; J. Yang 2015; Zhang 2017). Paralleling privatization and middle-class consumerism, academic psychology and psychiatry, private sector psychotherapy training, and popular psychological media have flourished in cities like Shanghai. These psychological discourses, I suggest below, have also influenced urban Christianity.

Such rural-urban distinctions are by no means total, and the urbanization of rural towns and massive rural-urban labour migrations since the 1980s continually blur and remake such conceptual boundaries (Kipnis 2016). Nonetheless, regional histories make various modes of engagement more or less available across religious landscapes. Rural and urban congregants have differed in their socioeconomic worlds and general familiarity with Christian doctrines, with rural churches marked by tendencies toward charismatic engagements and pragmatic dimensions of conversion (Bays 2003). In his work at a rural migrant Protestant church in Beijing, Jianbo Huang (2014) writes that while urban Chinese Christians tend to emphasize intellectual and text-centred approaches, rural migrant Christians tend emphasize charismatic-style experience and emotional worship. Liping Liang (2012) finds that while urban Protestants often convert after learning about Christian doctrines and values, rural Christians tend to do the reverse, converting first, then learning of Christian values. I suggest that in the urban and rural churches where I worked, distinct theories of mind were linked to particular rhythms and modes of spiritual experience.

Two churches
The work presented here draws on eight months of fieldwork, undertaken as part of the collaborative, multi-sited Mind and Spirit project. The Mind and Spirit project is a Templeton-funded, Stanford-based comparative and interdisciplinary project under the direction of T.M. Luhrmann (PI), drawing on the expertise of anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and philosophers. The project asks whether different understandings of ‘mind’, broadly construed, might shape or be related to the ways that people attend to and interpret experiences they deem spiritual or supernatural. We took a mixed-method, multi-phase approach, combining participant observation, long-form semi-structured interviews, quantitative surveys among the general population and local undergraduates, and psychological experiments with children and adults. We worked in five different countries: China, Ghana, Thailand, Vanuatu, and the United States, with some work in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In
each country, we included a focus on an urban charismatic evangelical church, with additional work in a rural charismatic evangelical church, and in another urban and rural religious setting of local importance. In China, I worked in a charismatic church in Shanghai and a charismatic-style church in rural Henan province, and among Buddhist cultivators in Shanghai and those who practise spirit mediumship and possession in rural Henan. In this essay, I focus on the two churches, drawing on my work in non-Christian settings only when exploring contrasts and mutual influences.

The first church I turn to below is situated in Zhao Village, a village of several thousand in Nanyang County of Henan province. Termed by some as the ‘Galilee of China’, Henan province holds China’s largest and fastest-growing Christian population (Hattaway 2009). Zhao Village Church was a state-sanctioned Three Self church. It was founded following a revelation received by Pastor Zhao’s wife in the mid-1990s, after which they applied for an official permit and built the church on their own land. Himself a first-generation convert, Pastor Zhao represents the sixth generation of Christians locally since the nineteenth-century arrival of Norwegian Lutheran missionaries. Around sixty to eighty congregants attended the church on Sundays, though I was told that during national holidays, when younger villagers return home from work in the cities, attendance reached over a hundred. When I first arrived there, I was struck by the ever-present accounts of revelations, gifts, and miraculous healing. Yet it is important to note that Pastor Zhao and most congregants explicitly condemned ‘charismatic’ (ling’en) Christianity, a term that carried intensely negative connotations at the time of my stay, owing in part to the state’s association of charismatic Christianity with ‘evil cults’ (xiejiao) and thus the risk of legal persecution.

The second church I describe below, Living Church in Shanghai, was a church of similar size but the reverse of Zhao Village Church on paper. It was an unregistered house church outside of the state-sanctioned system, and explicitly drew influence from transnational charismatic movements. Alongside contemporary charismatic scenes in Korea, Taiwan, the United States, and beyond, the pastor and congregants were also influenced by Pentecostal-inflected Chinese theologies and an eclectic range of spiritual sources across geographies and histories – from Chinese theologian Watchman Nee to Spanish mystic Miguel de Molinos. But despite their status as a charismatic house church, as we will see, congregants in Shanghai described fewer encounters with embodied experiences often associated with charismatic movements than those at the state-sanctioned, explicitly anti-charismatic Zhao Village Church. This thus complicates conventional depictions of fiery underground house churches and staid state-sanctioned churches.

The Devil and the moralized intensification of porosity: Zhao Village Church
When I first arrived at Zhao Village Church, I was quickly brought into a world in which the self and the mind were intensely porous to external otherworldly influences. One’s own morally loaded thoughts, affects, and actions were often said to originate from or be propelled by God or the Devil; the human mind was by no means autonomous. As Xiu Li, the 60-year-old hymn leader put it:

Anger is from the Devil. God causes people to love one another, causes people to be harmonious. When demonic spirits arrive, they come to corrupt people, causing competition and slander . . . If the Devil assaults me, my heart-mind feels a sense of unpeace.
The Devil (*mogui*) – often used interchangeably with demons (*xieling*) – could also escalate otherwise negligible affects, until the human fails to be self-contained. In the words of Xiao Fang, a congregant in her mid-thirties who worked at the village credit union:

For instance, when one is angry, demons corrupt you and drive you to strike your child . . . [At first] you are just a little angry . . . Demons will borrow this and aggravate you through your children, making it so that you must hit them and sin. Those imprisoned for murder . . . that’s all the Devil. They end up killing someone over something very minor.

This particular articulation of porosity, wherein the demonic acts through the intensification of affect, was resonant with non-Christian accounts of spirit possession and mediumship practices I encountered in rural Henan. Although congregants at Zhao Village Church strongly condemned such practices, many had paid visits to temples and spirit mediums prior to conversion, or had family members who did, and were likely familiar with these concepts of spiritual action. As Birgit Meyer (1999) found in her work in Ghana, the power of non-Christian spirits was reformulated into a Christian image of the Devil and remained a real force to be contended with. Here, Buddhist, Daoist, and other regional deities and spirits were relegated to a language of ‘fake gods’ (*jiashen*) and collapsed into a monotheistic concept of the Devil.

In Zhao Village, the Christian emphasis on good and evil not only sustained but also intensified the sense of porosity to ongoing demonic influence. Rather than the emphasis on good and bad minds in both Christian and non-Christian settings in Ghana, where evil intention to harm others took central stage in ideas of witchcraft (see Dulin and Dzokoto, this volume), the non-Christian mediums I met in rural Henan presented spirits as driven not always by evil, but also by coincidence, rightful desire (including anger and revenge), and personal greed. For the most part in non-Christian settings, only dedicated spirit mediums struggled directly with the spirit world day to day, and not, for instance, those who engaged more broadly in common temple rituals and visited mediums as supplicants. Moreover, troubling encounters with ghosts and spirits were not always linked with the wrongdoing of the affected human. By contrast, when such spirits were deemed demonic at Zhao Village Church, and engaged through a constant monitoring of individual good and evil, encounters with spiritual entities became ongoing for regular congregants, not just for pastors and preachers. Porosity was thus moralized and intensified, and distributed more broadly across the church community instead of engaged regularly by the select few as in the case of mediumship. As Smith (this volume) shows for Vanuatu, Christianity seemed to have polarized and interiorized the battle between good and evil, escalating a sense of moralized self-reflection and attention towards individual sin. And like in Vanuatu, an increased focus on interiority did not diminish material experiences of the otherworldly.

For those at Zhao Village Church, human minds and bodies, along with one’s material surroundings, were rarely considered spiritually inert. The village temple, homes of non-Christian villagers, and objects deemed idolatrous exuded demonic potency. Moreover, influence by the Devil was transparent to God, evoking his immediate displeasure. This ever-present porosity to the divine and demonic was linked to an ethics of immediacy and a grammar of the body.
Corporeal discernment, acute pain, and the virtuous rhythm of immediacy

Among the range of spiritual experiences that the Mind and Spirit project explored, those of direct revelation through hearing the voice of God, internal visions, and dreams were strikingly common in Zhao Village. More congregants in Zhao Village described more of these particular experiences than in most other charismatic Christian sites in this collaborative project. Yet, despite the presence of such sensorial spiritual encounters as an audible voice from God, accounts of voice and visions were often deemed ‘small’ testimonies in Zhao Village. The term ‘big testimony’ tended to be reserved for miraculous healing. Alongside healing, the body was central to discernment day to day, particularly in the form of acute pain.

Xiu Li, the hymn leader, spoke of her own gift of discernment. When someone arrived to speak with her, if it was in accordance with God’s grace, she received a pulsating headache on the right side. If the person was sent by Satan (sadan), she received the same headache, but on the left side. The pulsing pain allowed her to recognize whether a given person was affected by demons.

While Xiu Li stood out for the consistency and specificity of her localized headaches, discernment through pain was familiar to most congregants I met at Zhao Village Church. Acute pain served as a crucial sign for recognizing the presence of evil and sin, inextricably linked to God’s displeasure. Lian, a congregant in her mid-thirties, spoke of visiting a neighbour, a member of Eastern Lightning, a self-identified Christian group outlawed as a cult by the state and deemed heretical by many Christian communities. Upon entering her neighbour’s home, Lian recalled,

My head felt the pain of being pricked and pricked (zhu, as in stung by a needle) again and again. I knew in my heart-mind, this is the same feeling as when I think of something not in line with God’s intention – my head will also hurt as if it’s being pricked again and again.

This style of discernment through acute pain appeared to be absent across other sites of this collaboration, including Shanghai, while resonating with similar accounts of pain among spirit mediums I met in rural Henan. For the spirit mediums, tutelary spirits often communicated their desires and displeasures through signals of the human body, particularly pain and other forms of corporeal torment. Pain, within such collective repertoires, can be transformed into or experienced as a form of virtuous comportment (Throop 2010).

The significance of pain, embodiment, and otherworldly transmission here can in part be understood in relation to rich renderings of body and illness in China historically, from demonological medicines to medicines of cosmic correspondence (Unschuld 1985). While no single theory of the mind or body would capture these schools of Chinese thought, the body often held sociomoral and cosmological significance, and the dualist divide between mind and matter often did not provide the central conceptual tension or point of interest (Jullien 1995). With the twentieth-century scramble for Western scientific solutions, Chinese medical thought and practice saw dramatic changes amid efforts to ‘get on track with the world’, and became more engaged with Western medical and psychological concepts (L.H. Liu 1995; Zhan 2009). Nonetheless, the body remained a salient site of social and political signification thereafter, continuing to register shifting histories (Farquhar 2002; Kleinman 1986).

Pain and other bodily sensations were centrally important in contemporary Christian spiritual practice in Zhao Village. Not unlike the moral torment of internalized sin introduced by Christianity elsewhere (Robbins 2004), congregants in Zhao Village
articulated daily worries over individual evil. But this sense of interiority, often associated with Protestant mentalization, did not exclude the body. Indeed, congregants seemed to use corporeal signals as one of the primary means for detecting sin. Moreover, the sensational form of the embodied experience tended to operate as a seemingly self-sufficient or nearly self-sufficient method for distinguishing between godly, demonic, and other influences – what I am calling here corporeal discernment. This is in contrast to modes of discernment that emphasize, for instance, the use of reason or other forms of verification beyond the legible form of embodiment, even if bodily signs are engaged. This is a distinction of degrees and variations rather than in kind, particularly in charismatic settings in which bodily techniques are common, but may be linked variously to other modalities.

More generally, what might be called an ethics of immediacy was ever-present at Zhao Village Church. Discernment, whether through acute pain or other modalities, was often presented as an instant, direct gnosis – ‘I simply knew’ (wo jiu zhidao), ‘I knew in an instant’ (wo yixia jiu zhidao). A perceived sign should be taken up, judged as a manifestation of the godly or the demonic, and acted upon quickly – the truly faithful reacts fast, and delay may be punished. While this might appear unremarkable considering the centrality of immediacy in charismatic Christianity at large, it was a virtuous rhythm different from (even if at times co-present with) one of gradual verification, emphasized at Living Church in Shanghai below.

By virtuous rhythm, I am referring to recurrent temporal aspects of one’s comportment and disposition that constitute and signal the good, situated within a shared repertoire. Such temporal aspects form a constellation, explicitly and implicitly, with other concepts and embodiments. In the case of charismatic and Pentecostal movements, for instance, immediacy points at once to the temporality of instantaneousness, spontaneity, and rupture, as well as the ideal lack of mediation between the faithful and the divine. Such spontaneity and immediacy may coexist, if tacitly, with other temporal engagements, and might themselves be seen as cultivated forms (Bialecki 2017; Brahinsky 2013). In Zhao Village, this more broadly shared charismatic-style emphasis on immediacy was enmeshed, for instance, with more specific corporeal genres of pain, bringing together rhythmic and sensorial forms that together provide the contours of how one ought (and ought not) to live. The weaving of bodily encodings and rhythms conditions the entire field of religious experience (de Abreu 2008).

On one occasion, Pastor Zhao relayed the case of a congregant whose leg had been struck with inexplicable pain for several days. It turned out that he had knelt at a funeral without realizing this was considered sinful of worship of the dead. According to Pastor Zhao, the congregant then confessed and repented, and his leg pain was alleviated immediately. The risk of delay was also central in the founding story of the church. One day, Pastor Zhao’s wife heard God’s voice: ‘Give your house over and build a church’. She hesitated, as the family would have no other place to live. In the days that followed, her son, who suffered from haemophilia, began bleeding day and night, reaching the brink of death. In fear of losing him, she agreed to the request. ‘After offering the place to God, this fulfilled God’s entire desire … [my son] stopped bleeding.’

Aside from discernment and proper response, the pronouncement of faith also reflected this ethics of immediacy. The most dignified form of conversion was a speedy utterance of ‘I believe’, without full or even partial understanding, often accompanied by instant miraculous healing. The ethics of immediacy in Zhao Village may thus
help illuminate the link between charismatic-style experiences among rural migrant congregants (J. Huang 2014) and the tendency in rural regions to convert before learning the tenets of Christianity (Liang 2012). The implicit form of the divine pact across the conversion narratives and testimonies I heard in Zhao Village seemed to be that of immediate loyalty accompanied by immediate effects. While the general theme of immediacy is common to charismatic Christianity at large far beyond China, and the rhythmic sensibility described here may of course be taken up in settings beyond the so-called ‘rural’, the religious logics implied by this ethics of immediacy came to be an explicit source of contention across rural-urban and intergenerational divides.

Flesh of the immaterial: discernment and the entification of mind at Living Church

In Shanghai, those I met at Living Church often denounced what they called a superstitious ‘exchange-style faith’ (jiaohuanxing de xinyang). In these denunciations, offering one’s faith for the gift of God’s healing – the ideal mode of conversion and subsequent engagements in Zhao Village – became a paradigm case for flawed faith. As Pastor Chen put it during a sermon: ‘Many people go to church, asking God for this or that, asking for God to heal this and that illness. Once they’re healed, then it’s “Amen! Thank the Lord! I believe!” This is much too elementary!’ This mode of engagement was often associated with the ‘traditional’ Christianity of villagers and older congregants.

One reason for repugnance towards this so-called ‘exchange-style faith’, at times implicitly and at times explicitly, was its resemblance to what those at Living Church called traditional Chinese religion or Buddhism, where the petitioning of gods and bodhisattvas for health and fortune in exchange for ritual offerings, they suggested, was a central motif. Christians, by contrast, should not be grounding their faith in the hedging of bets, but rather out of desire for the love of God and for serving him. Those at Living Church insisted on a radical asymmetry between creator and created, against the sense that God could be manipulated by human action (cf. Miyazaki 2000). The critique of material exchange and ritualization in Christian practice was also paired with a focus on a sincere spiritual attitude. As many have suggested, Protestant sincerity is often built on critiques of ritual efficacy in colonial and postcolonial worlds, even if the objects of such critiques are wide-ranging (Engelke 2007; Handman 2015; Keane 2007). The denunciations launched at Living Church similarly inherit China’s semi-colonial legacies and historical missionary attacks on Chinese religion (Reinders 2004).

Moreover, at Living Church, sincerity and the critique of material exchange were paired with concerns over the perils of the mind. Compared with the sense of permeability and ongoing back-and-forth with the divine and demonic in Zhao Village, congregants in Shanghai articulated what Taylor (2007) would term a more buffered sense of self and mind, particularly in relation to the Devil, even while inhabiting a sense of self far more porous to spirited presence than the non-charismatic Christians and self-described atheists around them. Recall Pastor Chen’s musing from the opening: that charismatics were at risk of spiritual error given their tendency to see meaning in anything and everything. Despite a co-present sense of partial porosity to the otherworldly, human interpretation – routed through the mind – was seen as a central hindrance to spiritual engagement in Shanghai.

When describing their own spiritual encounters, many congregants at Living Church, as noted, relayed an attitude of caution. Facing potential instances of divine encounter, they aimed for a simultaneous stance of suspended disbelief and suspended
belief, owing to the fundamentally flawed mediation of the mind. This dual suspension is reminiscent of T.M. Luhrmann’s (2012b) descriptions of the ‘epistemological double register’ in US neo-charismatic settings such as the Vineyard. In particular, a ‘self-conscious combination of reification and qualification’ was similarly taken up by those in Shanghai (2012a: 380).

Yet, unlike the light-hearted uses of imagination at the Vineyard, where God was described as real while one’s own direct spiritual experience was often marked in part as play, the double movement of faith and suspension marked the serious effort of spiritual verification at Living Church. One suspends scepticism towards potential divine manifestation to remain porous to divine encounter, while suspending conviction towards one’s own interpretation of spiritual occurrences until certainty can be reached regarding its divine status. This is not to say that engagements with God could not be playful in tone; they were at times for many. But rather than simply treating potential spiritual experiences as ‘deeply satisfying daydreams’, as at the Vineyard, most congregants I met at Living Church would consider a mere satisfying daydream to be a failed instance of discernment, to be discarded (albeit at times reluctantly) in the patient anticipation of a verified instance of divine encounter.

Li, a congregant in her mid-thirties known at the church as among the most enthusiastically engaged with direct spiritual experiences, spoke of her past interpretative errors.

When I went to my first church back in 2013 . . . I erred on many things. At the time I felt, ‘This is so spiritual! It’s so great!’ But after verifying (yingzheng), [the signs] turned out to be incorrect . . . I then concluded that I myself wanted some particular things, and packaged it in a façade of ‘loving God’. I gave people the impression that these things came from God, when [in fact] the origin was my own desire.

When I asked her if the Devil was the source of these errors, she responded: ‘We cannot blame the Devil for everything, because the Devil is very busy . . . the problem is also with ourselves’.

Rather than daily concerns with demonic influence, as in Zhao Village, congregants in Shanghai much more commonly cited human misinterpretation as a hindrance to spiritual life. While the Devil was also considered a dangerously powerful entity, he was assumed to maintain a distance from their daily affairs.

This focus on the mind in Shanghai may be linked to the longer history and recent boom of psychotherapeutic practices in urban China, and also specifically the influence the church draws from twentieth-century Chinese theologian Watchman Nee. Following Nee, those at Living Church emphasized not a dualist distinction of body and soul or flesh and spirit, but a triad of spirit, soul, and body (ling, hun, ti), where the soul was equated with modern Western psychological notions of mind. As Wu, a technological investor in his mid-forties, put it:

Spirit, soul, body; spirit, mind, body, three strata. Sometimes people confuse the soul and the spirit. Thoughts, the will, and emotions are more of the soul. Spirit is level of the spiritual, higher than the level of the soul. [Spirit] is the level of faith and the supernatural.

For Watchman Nee, the body allows for what he calls ‘world-consciousness’, through which one comes into contact with the material world. The soul, in turn, is responsible for self-consciousness, including such faculties as volition, intellect, and emotion, and is explicitly linked with what’s addressed in modern psychology. The spirit, by contrast, is the portion of the human that communes with God directly and is capable of
God-consciousness: ‘God dwells in the spirit, self dwells in the soul, while senses dwell in the body’ (Nee 1968: vol. 1, 26). In coming to know God, although the soul can be deployed to help ‘activate’ spirit in prayer practice, it is ‘never a substitute for the spirit’, and is instead the source of much error and human ‘folly’ (1968: vol. 2, 170; 1968: vol. 1, 167-71). The ‘soulish’ tendencies of humans, for Nee, can be seen in the self-centred desire to take pleasure in spiritual sensations, erroneously taken to be in the service of God. Nonetheless, Nee emphasizes, the soul – and by extension the self and the mind – is the most prominent aspect of humans, thus an entity to be reckoned with. Nee’s writings can be considered alongside a lengthy history of debates on tripartite versus bipartite biblical formulations of spirit, soul, and body, from early Christian apologists through the Reformation (e.g. Delitzsch 1867 [1855]). Here, what interests me is the way this trichotomy made theological space for secularized concepts of mind in Shanghai.

For those at Living Church, what Watchman Nee terms the soul – seen as interchangeable with the psychological mind – became the main hindrance to discernment. The mind-soul, as Pastor Chen once put it, is ‘the flesh of the immaterial’, the non-material site of sin. In contrast to the externality of the Devil in Zhao Village, one’s own mind was the central locus for thoughts and actions not in accordance with God’s wishes.

Watchman Nee first came to prominence in China when such neologisms as the ‘self’ were imported for rethinking a new national subject (L.H. Liu 1995). Inheriting the historical encounter between Protestantism, Chinese anti-imperialism, and Western psychological sciences, the equivalence Nee drew between the Christian soul and secularized articulations of mind offered a theological language for those at Living Church nearly a century later, resonant with an urban culture saturated by psychological discourses.

Thus, while part of a broader apparatus of secularization, psychological concepts also deeply influenced modern religious texts and contemplative practices through which Shanghai congregants accessed the divine. Notions of the soul continued to find new elaborations alongside notions of the psyche, opening up new theological spaces for encounter (see Pandolfo 2018). Many congregants were familiar with psychological theories, and some attended psychotherapeutic workshops in their spare time. By gaining a deeper understanding of the mind, they hoped to better identify and thereby cast aside their own psychic barriers for the sake of true discernment. These more buffered, psychology-inflected notions of the mind were linked to tempos and textures of spiritual experience that differed from the ethics of immediacy accompanying more porous renderings of the mind in Zhao Village.

**Caution, verification, retroaction**

At Living Church, critiques of so-called ‘exchange-style faith’ implied a distaste for the rapid rhythm of a tit-for-tat relation with God. If those in Zhao Village Church abided by an ethics of quick response, Pastor Chen often reminded congregants of the patient, expansive temporality of the divine, God, he would say, is not that stingy. God doesn’t fuss over your minor infractions and niceties day to day, but rather awaits the unfolding of your faith and orientation towards him across your lifetime. In place of frequent confession and repentance, Pastor Chen emphasized congregants’ attitude and stance towards God. A rightful attitude involved the desire to know God, and such knowing could include ‘porous’ spiritual encounters: hearing from God, receiving visions and
differences, feeling the tingle of the Holy Spirit. Yet, while Pastor Chen encouraged openness towards such experiences, he also stressed the need for caution in discernment owing to the unreliable instrument of the human mind.

Many I met at Living Church yearned for an immediate, direct knowledge of God, including through sensory and embodied experiences. Yet, compared with congregants in Zhao Village, those at Living Church described far fewer encounters of this sort. Much more common were the sense of God guiding them through thoughts in their mind, inspiration in the spirit, and contextual circumstances that moved beyond coincidence. Moreover, spiritual encounters of any modality were subject to retroactive confirmation; their status often stood tentative until verified. As Sheng, a 30-year-old corporate trainer and Bible study leader, put it:

In general, people don’t realize at the moment [that they’re being guided by God] . . . Usually it’s after an event has passed that one realizes in retrospect. The problem is, many believers in fact have some degree of selfish desire in their own heart-mind. They will say that God is guiding me this way [when he is not] . . . This is quite horrifying.

Given that the mind was deemed a significant barrier to discernment, signs that appear to be divine were prone to human error; spiritual lucidity entailed the test of time.

Like many I spoke with at Living Church, Sheng’s own encounters with the divine often came in the form of beyond-coincidental events, thoughts from God, and a sense of inspiration. His eyes widened as he described a form of sudden and intense inspiration during his painstaking preparations for Bible study. ‘At times I would have no inspiration while examining scripture, then . . . I suddenly have a thought, and realize this passage could be interpreted in this way . . . it’s an indescribable feeling’. Although such instances were exhilarating in the moment, Sheng was hesitant to tether discernment to the time of the experience. ‘Even though you might say that this is inspiration from God, from the angle of caution, you need to conduct more textual research to confirm’.

Sheng was considered among the more cautious at Living Church, a self-described rationalist ‘without many experiences’. But even those, like Li above, who were more disposed towards embodied and gnostic modalities abided by an emphasis on caution, requiring a virtuous rhythm of gradual, retroactive verification. Like congregants at Zhao Village Church, those at Living Church also held that direct, immediate discernment was possible (by way of the spirit, as it is the spirit that discerns the status of an embodied sensation). Yet, in contrast to the ethics of immediacy so prominent in Zhao Village, in which delayed interpretation and response to a potential divine sign signalled one’s weakness of faith and corruption by the Devil, a protracted period of substantiation was seen as testament to one’s spiritual maturity, even if one revelled in experiential gifts. Given the fallible mediation of the human mind, even the most potent sensations could not be taken as self-evident, as the potentiality of the sign awaits its subsequent confirmation.

**Porosity after secularism**

Recent discussions of religion and secularity have turned their attention to how secularism takes shape not only through institutional transformations, but also through attendant shifts in how the human mind and sensorium are conceptualized and inhabited (Asad 2003; Descola 2013; Hirschkind 2006; Meyer 2010). One influential, if contentious, account, as noted, has been Charles Taylor’s description of porous
and buffered selves, wherein the buffered self is produced by the specificities of a secular context. Beyond the institutional compartmentalization of the religious sphere and the sense of disenchantment, secularism for Taylor importantly involves a third dimension: a distinct condition of belief. Whereas belief in the otherworldly, according to Taylor, is ‘unchallenged, and indeed, unproblematic’ in non-secular worlds, under secular conditions, belief comes to be ‘understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace’ (2007: 3, 19). This account of secular selfhood, located largely in the modern West, is often defined by Taylor against what some have seen as an oversimplified mapping of the past and the non-West (Mahmood 2010).

In Taylor’s rendering, what produces the sense of a spiritually inert mind closed to supernatural influence is in part the awareness of others’ doubt. Knowing that one’s neighbours abide by a humanist, spiritless universe, one’s own religious selfhood is reconfigured. By this definition, my Christian interlocutors in both Shanghai and Zhao Village would be well suited for speaking to such secular conditions. Following violent secularization campaigns – the desecration of religious infrastructure, the arrest and punishment of religious leaders – across the twentieth century in Chinese cities and villages, these two churches would on no account be considered sites of ‘never-secular Christianity’ (Luhrmann 2012a). Congregants at both churches declared that while the world around them is brimming with atheists and Buddhists, Christians choose to bear the burden of the cross against an unbelieving majority. Indeed, 77 per cent of those surveyed in China identify as atheist or non-religious (WIN-Gallup International 2012). Yet, despite both holding a strong sense that belief in God was but one option among many, the sense of porosity and bufferedness in discernment practices varied considerably.

At Zhao Village Church, congregants held a relatively porous notion of the mind under constant influence from God and the Devil, and described many more sensorial and embodied experiences of the otherworldly than those in Shanghai (and in some modalities more than many other sites of the collaborative project). At Living Church in Shanghai, congregants held a comparatively buffered, psychology-inflected notion of the mind; repeated calls to bypass the mind in spiritual practice simultaneously reified it as an entity. With this sense of the mind as a bounded entity, those in Shanghai also described far fewer sensorial and corporeal encounters with the otherworldly than those in Zhao Village (and most other sites of the project). Whereas three-quarters of those I interviewed at Zhao Village Church described having experienced the externally audible voice of God, for instance – the sensory modality that offered the initial impetus and design for this project for T.M. Luhrmann – only one-quarter of those at Living Church did. It is a divergence greater than any cross-church comparison within any other national context of the project.

Given that congregants at both churches were well aware of the overwhelming presence of exclusive humanism around them – from that of the Communist state to that of their atheist kin – it seems that at least in the case of China, the differential presence of porous and buffered elements cannot be understood simply through the cognizance of others’ doubt or lack thereof. The question of porosity thus cannot be taken, to evoke Jeanne Favret-Saada (1980), as one of the credulous subject, non-Western, non-modern, non-urban, or otherwise. Here, the salience of porous and buffered renderings is better understood through divergent modes and contexts of post-secular religiosity, and their attendant notions of mind and selfhood. At the same time, partly in line with Taylor’s suggestion, ever-present elaborations of a self-sufficient
humanist mind through the urban rise of psychology may have contributed to this contrast.

As described above, cities in China have seen a proliferation of psychological discourses in recent decades. Psychotherapeutic practices were much less prevalent in Zhao Village, and psychological languages held less sway. While the rise of individualism has deeply affected both urban and rural China across Maoist and post-Reform eras (Yan 2010), rural life might be considered more relationally enmeshed with neighbours and kin when contrasted with the heightened sense of atomism in major cities, where, as many in Shanghai relayed, one often did not know one’s neighbours. Notions of freedom, autonomy, and self-reliance – echoed in congregants’ evocations of free will in Shanghai – were central to neoliberal discourses that saturated cities and special economic zones amid post-Reform labour migration (Zhang & Ong 2008). In Zhao Village Church, by contrast, concepts of otherworldly porosity and distributed personhood implicitly shared with non-Christian revivals of spirit possession and mediumship seemed to be of stronger influence than psychological theories of self. But in their Christian rearticulations, such concepts were differently moralized and diabolized.

These divergences in concepts of mind and person may also have been influenced in part by immersion in secularized theories of the human through state-run schooling. Most congregants at Living Church were college-educated. By contrast, most congregants I met in Zhao Village had spent much less time in formal education. Most had never attended high school; many had not completed elementary school. Indeed, a few younger preachers in Zhao Village who had undertaken more formal schooling, including state-sanctioned seminary training, described some hesitation towards the quick interpretation and constant engagement with spiritual experiences, particularly among the older generation. The contrasts I draw between the two churches is thus by no means stable or tied simply to rurality and urbanity, but also tied to ongoing productions of difference across an array of social schisms and imaginaries. I foreground the rural-urban distinction to consider one axis of variation in spite of a shared (if uneven) history of secularization campaigns, and the notable rural-urban contrast in China when compared to other sites of the project.

At the same time, the two churches also held qualities in common when juxtaposed with other sites. While congregants I met in both Shanghai and Zhao Village, like those in the United States, were reaching for God in contexts often considered intensely secularized, their concerns clustered less around what Brahinsky (this volume), in the United States, called ‘ontological anxiety’ and the need to repeatedly demonstrate the reality of God. Although practices of verification were as important in Shanghai as they were in San Francisco, unlike their US counterparts, congregants I met in Shanghai rarely qualified their spiritual encounters as ‘crazy’ (see Luhrmann 2012b). And while embodied encounters with God, as in the United States, were considered crucial in Zhao Village, accounts of these encounters – save those for the purposes of evangelizing – were rarely used to re-confirm God’s existence. Instead, in both Shanghai and Zhao Village, discernment centred on what God wants from oneself, and the avoidance of God’s displeasure. After the initial process of conversion, congregants focused their doubt more on their alignment with the desire of the divine other – more of a sense of ‘relational concern’, if you will, than a sense of ontological anxiety regarding the realness of God.

This divergence from the United States might be considered through religious-philosophical inheritances from various strands of Chinese thought; in particular,
the still-salient concerns with kinship and filial piety in spite of modern ruptures, and the historical focus on moral and cosmological analogy rather than ontological distinctions (Hall & Ames 1998; Jullien 1995). Some congregants, particularly those who were previously Buddhists or temple-goers, also shared an implicit sense of ‘ontological pluralism’, as described by Aulino (this volume) of Thailand, before their conversion. Although Christianity radically transformed this sense of multiplicity, the implicit need for ongoing demonstrations of ontological consistency did not seem as pressing as in the United States, where a history of philosophical and scientific interest in securing and purifying ontological categories (Descola 2013; Latour 1993) – in part inherited from Christianity – might inflect contemporary charismatic anxieties.

Such contrasts and parallels, whether within or beyond China, suggest that theories of mind present across histories and geographies – which entail different construals of reality and materiality – are deeply intertwined with the spiritual world and sensorium. Critical responses to Taylor’s mapping and periodization of porous and buffered selves have suggested that disenchantment through the absence of spirits must be disentangled from both institutional secularism and unidirectional temporal claims, as the presence of spirits can also intensify in contexts of explicitly secular governance (Meyer 2012; Warner, VanAntwerpen & Calhoun 2010). The present essay shows that porous and buffered selves do not map neatly onto geopolitical borders. To understand construals of mind after secularism, at least in the case of China, one must attend to uneven landscapes and myriad styles of religious revival, which inherit and take up overlapping yet divergent histories of transformation, and are manifest through the most intimate sites of spiritual encounter. Deeply porous modes of personhood may be co-present with more bounded ones, even after what’s been seen as some of the most thorough secularization campaigns conducted by a modern state.

NOTES

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1 Given the wavering political status and continued persecution of Christianity and other religious engagements in China, Living Church, Zhao Village, Zhao Village Church, and all interlocutors’ names are pseudonyms.

2 To note, Pastor Chen and congregants evoked an array of terms when speaking of discernment, including ‘self’ (ziji), ‘heart-mind’ (xin), and xueqi – literally blood-breath – referring to human tempers. Despite formal conceptual distinctions (described below), many Chinese linguistic-conceptual inheritances do not carry the post-Enlightenment mind-body dualism that the English ‘mind’ connotes. Moreover, the word xin refers to both the English ‘heart’ and ‘mind’ (hence the gloss ‘heart-mind’). In this essay, I use ‘mind’ as a heuristic in dialogue with the other contributions to this special issue, letting its connotations unfold through my interlocutors’ accounts.

3 I am drawing on Ngo and Quijada’s (2015) description of atheist secularism in communist and post-communist worlds, distinct from Protestant-inflected secularisms.

4 Numbers only offer a general picture. Reliable estimates on religion are notoriously difficult to secure in China. The lowest estimates suggest 1 per cent, while church membership reports suggest 8 per cent (Pew Research Center 2011).
I heard this phrasing at several churches across Shanghai. In Zhao Village, this sentiment was mentioned by several younger, seminary-trained preachers, partly as a critique of the older generation, but it was not a prominent concern overall.

Yet many white-collar Buddhists I met in Shanghai similarly condemned such exchange-like relations with bodhisattvas as ‘superstitious’. Protestant-inflected critiques are thus taken up in contemporary religious engagements beyond Protestantism proper.

Of course, Protestant concepts were themselves precursors of psychological discourses (Foucault 2006 [1961]). And, Nee was popular not only in urban regions (Lian 2010), though elements of his thought may be emphasized with different aims across contexts.

Psychological anthropologists, of course, have long been exploring religion through embodiment and the psyche (Csordas 1997; Hollan 2000). But concerns with secularism in this manner were less central until more recently.

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L’esprit et le Diable : porosité et discernement dans deux Églises charismatiques chinoises

Résumé