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Culture Reproduction or Value Conflict?
The Morally Fraught Experience of Chinese Christians in Virtual Communities

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Abstract: Based on Robbins' understanding that both Durkheimian and Weberian approaches could help the study of social morality, this paper explores the dynamics of cultural reproduction and value conflicts in Chinese Christians' communication on the WeChat platform. It evaluates ten religious WeChat groups' norms and activities and categorizes them into four typologies according to their group inclusiveness and interactivity. It collects group chats from the WeChat platform and reveals the forming dynamics of group verbal abuse, and further explores the Chinese Christians' morally fraught experience in the virtual communities. This research shows that Christian values as an external force encourage Christians to fulfill their gospel mission and seek their group identity. Christians exhibit their discursive power through group norms and group behaviors. Cultural authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism are the ideological factors that underline the exclusive group behaviors of the Christian virtual communities. The contradiction between exclusive and inclusive group cultures reflects the incompatibility between Chinese authoritarian tradition and the call for a more open society. Under the current social structure and cultural environment, particularistic ethics and exclusive practices would still be dominant in Chinese Christian virtual communities for a comparatively long time.

Key Words: Inclusiveness; Interactivity; Morality; Verbal Abuse; WeChat Group

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There has long been a dispute between the two typical paradigms of the study ofmorality. The first is the Durkheimian approach, which sees culture or collective life as morally charged and considers all routines or normative social actions as moral and reproductive. The other approach, as Laidlaw explained, when taking freedom and choice as essential criteria of the moral domain, not everything people do would be considered as a moral activity; in contrast, it is the reflective choice and decision making rather than the reproduction of the social practice that makes room for moral existence and development.[1] Robbins argues that, in different contexts, both approaches are helpful. He quotes Dumont's hierarchical value model saying that different values rank in a pyramid of values, with the paramount value at the top and the less important values at the bottom. Through the internal exchange of values within the hierarchical value structure, cultural reproduction achieves

[1] Joel Robbins. "Between Reproduction and Freedom: Morality, Value, and Radical Cultural Change." Ethnos 72, no. 3 (September 1, 2007): 293-314.

harmony. Robbins contrasts this model with Weber's model, in which different values conflict with each other without reconciliation. For Weber, value is like a black or white choice that cannot compromise. It is under these circumstances that the person comes to see the self as a decision-maker and moral agency with free will.

Based on the interpretation of Dumont and Weber's models, Robbins makes a typological distinction between "stable conflicts that are an enduring part of the culture and those conflicts that arise as a result of change."[2] Moral changes occur when the places of different values in the hierarchy change or exchange, or, in other cases, new values from outside the culture system come in and replace the old ones. To explain the dynamics of culture change, Robbins goes into the details of a single ethnographic case of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. The Urapmin is a group with around 390 people. They converted to charismatic Christianity in the late 1970s. The traditional Urapmin society values relationalism as a bond of the interdependence of livelihood and interest distribution. After the Urapmin society accepted the Christian value of individualism, they tended to view the seeking of new relationships as a sin. The conflict between traditional and Christian values makes their existence morally fraught. Their way of social production and structure remained the same, whereas their value system turned upside down. Therefore, the Dumont version of the hierarchical model of moral value would not work in them. In contrast, the Weberian conflict value model explains the tension and anxiety in their social life. Robbins considers that there could be no equilibrium of values reached within the Urapmin society until the social structure and the way of production could finally get in line with Christian individualism.

Data and Methodology

To test Robbin's unbalancedgames of values in the Chinese context, the author observed more than 20 Christina WeChat groups for three years. This research exam ten groups with steady group members and interactive frequencies. Membership in these groups ranged from 50 to 500. There are about 2800 people involved in these ten groups in total. The group leaders of the ten groups are Christians of different theological traditions. Four of the group leaders are Catholics, and six of them are Protestants. Some of the group leaders are conservative, and some are more liberal-minded. The faith backgrounds of these group members are mixed. Some of the groups welcome members of different faiths, and some are not open to people of certain religions. Among the ten WeChat religious groups observed, nine of them fall into theological or cultural debates from time to time. Still, only two of these groups encounter disputes with abusive language repeatedly.

According to Habermas, a valid social norm and a noncoercive intersubjective commonality are the characteristics of a healthy society. In an ideal society, people will treat others' humanity never as a means but as an end. The members of a community establish moral norms through interaction and put one another under moral obligations. They perceive the others "as members of an inclusive community no person is excluded from."[3] Based on Habermas' model of an ideal society, this paper

〔2〕 Ibid.

〔3〕 Ju rgen Habermas. The Future of Human Nature Cambridge, England: Polity, 2003. p. 56

adopts inclusivity and intersubjectivity as the two variables to evaluate the moral status of virtual Christian communities. It uses the method of content analysis to assess group notices and chats collected from the WeChat groups. The author also calculated the frequency of interactivity of these groups on a daily or weekly basis and discussed with some Christian group members about their value outlook and their understanding of the possible moral change in Chinese society.

Based on the observation of the ten Christian virtual communities on the WeChatplatform, the author argues that Robbins's conclusion can help understand the present conflict of values in the Chinese context. Both Durkheimian and Weberian approaches could explain part of the change of social morality in China, while the equilibrium of values can hardly be achieved among Christians when China's social structure and the way of social production remain the same. With the development of modern technology, Christians preach the gospel on social media and encounter religious others in virtual religious communities. Christians' attitude toward religious others tests the Christian teaching of universal principles under one God and the freedom of religious belief. During this process, Christians in virtual religious communities inevitably encounter morally fraught experiences when inconsistent rules and values are applied to the rights of Christian groups and religious others. Also, Christians with different theological traditions may face hostility and attacks from each other, and they may face the choices of tolerating or excluding the religious others. Though they may feel like retreating from the real or virtual society, their sense of the Gospel mission still encourages them to act out Christian values as universal care for human beings and respond to the religious others in equal terms. They work as the agency of Christian morality in Chinese society and bring about possible moral changes in the future.

Norm, Inclusiveness, & Interactivity

In the little society of the WeChat groups, the group notices usually express the group leader's understanding of desirable social order and norms, and the rules of a group serve as the guidance of group members' behavior. An exclusive announcement will usually encourage antagonism against other social groups, while an inclusive rule often ushers in kindness, respect, and trust among people. Many WeChat virtual groups are established to exchange faith-related information as well as to evangelize the unbelievers. For example, Father Jia[4] is the leader of the group "The Courses of Religious Culture and Classics." He attended a Protestant Theology school about 20 years ago and later became a Catholic Church priest. He had many years of experience working with Christians of different faith backgrounds. Tired of the conflicts among churches and church followers, he gave up his official position in a church and began to run his own business and sell snacks. Father Jia knows well the advantages and disadvantages of different religions and theologies, and he never forgets his mission to call for the unity of the Christian churches. He has been giving a series of lectures on religions since the founding of his WeChat group. His group announcement says:

〔4〕 This paper replaced the real names of the people in this research with their initials or pseudonyms for the protection of their privacy.

> This group focuses onsharing religious classics and explaining Western philosophy of God,Confucianism,Buddhism,and Taoism. You can share in the group two links or pictures per day,and the content shared shall be relevant to the topics of religion and philosophy. I hope that you could respect and tolerate each other. Personal attacks, obscene words,commercial advertising,political announcements,and forced conversion are not allowed in this group.

Another group named "Olive Spring" is established by a woman in Hongkong. Her hometown is in mainland China,and her husband is a priest in Hongkong. She invited Christians of different traditions into her group. The group announcement warmly invites the seekers to join the online Bible study. Later,with the help of another young man serving in a Catholic church in Dalian,she updated her group announcement and clarified that her group should conform to reach the unity of the Catholics and Christians in Jesus Christ.

Holding the Holy Bible as the common ground for group discussion seemed to be a consensus among group leaders of different traditions. A group named "Church and Holy Trinity" hosted by a British-born Chinese Catholic follower posted some Bible verses as their group notice. By quoting Timothy 2:15-16,it suggests the group member should avoid profane and vain talk. By quoting Romans 14:3,it warns the group members not to judge others,for it is God who makes the final judgment;and by quoting Timothy 2:23-25,it asks the group member to be gentle and patient with others,and to instruct those who oppose themselves in humility. One cannot tell if it is a Catholic or Protestant Group only by reading the group notice.

Another group named "Love Each Other in Christ" also expresses similar stances and concerns. Its group announcement says:"Welcome home;don't rush to leave. You are welcome to participate in our Bible discussion. Regardless of gender,race,ethnicity,party,sects,or church,we are in the home of God. As long as we are in the Triune God,we shall unite to fight against the anti-Christ,and prepare for the kingdom of God." Most groups make it clear that the group leader and administrator can remove the member from the group,while the leader of a WeChat group named "Everyone talks" claims that the group leader will not exclude anyone from the group. The group notice says that "the group welcomes all friends who are not anti-Christian and can chat rationally. You can share what you think,and if you don't like the values treasured here,you can choose to leave. God gives everyone the right to speech. The group owner and the administrator should not kick anyone out of the group."

There is a Bible study group named "Good news English learning." The group leader is a Christian scholar who has published many books on different religious traditions. According to the announcement of the group,the purpose of this group is to read the Holy Bible(English Standard Edition,ESV) together with the group members and to guide Bible study. A teacher will read the Bible verses in English with voice messages in the WeChat group on weekdays and then interpret the Bible in Chinese. This 15-minute Bible reading guidance has started every morning since 2018,and a group of seven teachers takes turns to serve the group and lead the reading. With their efforts,more and more young people joined them for the English Bible study,and many formed many 500-persons WeChat groups. According to the rules of this group:"It is not allowed to bring any topic other than

the Bible verses to the group chat (including advertisements, articles, pictures, and comments). The managers of the group would remove anyone violating the rules." Another Chinese Christian scholar who owns a WeChat public account also established similar rules for his WeChat group "Cypress Discussion." His group rules encourage discussion and critics of content released on the group leaders' WeChat public account, but it forbids information irrelevant to the group leaders' articles. The group announcement encourages mutual respect and trust among the readers. Those who violate the rules will be removed from the group.

The "Justice Academy" is a reading group that focuses on theBible's truth, the redemption of Christ on the Cross, and Christian homeschooling. The host of this group is a Christian freelance writer who published his book of politics and law comments. On the one hand, this group holds the principle of "Sola Scriptura" and tries to establish the Holy Bible as the source of norms for the group members; on the other hand, this group hopes to bridge the differences between different Christian churches with the Word as the common foundation for discussion. They also tried to keep a distance from sensitive political topics. According to the group announcement, this group is a strictly closed community:

> The group discussion shall be rooted in the Holy Bible and avoid the comments on different churches. For the unity of the Christian Church in truth and the Holy Spirit, any critics of churches shall only quote the Holy Bible; any non-biblical references are not allowed. Those who violate this rule shall leave the group voluntarily once and for all.

Rachel is a student in a Protestant theology school in mainland China. She sets up a WeChat group to share the Bible and the experience of God. According to the group announcement:

> This group is for people who have visions for God's kingdom orhave served the church for many years. New believers, atheists, and seekers might not be suitable for this group. Please try to respect and love each other during the group discussion. Those who use vulgar words, quarrels, or curses will be moved without notice. This group is not open to Muslim friends at present, but if there are Muslim friends around you, please pray for them.

A group named the "Holy Family" is one of the most representative cases of group exclusiveness. The group leader is a university teacher in Guangzhou; he used to be a Protestant church follower. After converting to Catholicism, the group leader became a hard-core defender of the Catholic faith. To convert more Protestants to Catholicism, he keeps inviting people from Protestant WeChat groups to his group. He identifies his group as a conservative Catholic group that embraces traditionalism, and he released a group announcement saying:

> This group is open to thoseinterested in the Catholic Church's truth, especially those who are well-educated. This group does not welcome those who are hostile to

Catholicism and those who advocate faith and ethical teaching opposite to the Catholic church. Any Protestant links and Protestant terms are strictly prohibited. Anyone who ignores this alert will be removed swiftly.

To find out the factors that might have contributed to different group cultures, this paper compares the theological and social backgrounds of these WeChat groups. The ten groups are categorized into four types according tothe degree of group exclusiveness and interactivity (See Table 1). Type A includes group1 and 2, type B (group 3 to 5), type C (group 6 to 8), and type D (group 9 and 10).

Table 1 Inclusiveness and Interactivity of Different WeChat Groups

	Type	Group Name	Tradition	Identity	Inclusiveness	Interactivity	Excludes those who
1	A	Religious Classics study	Comprehensive	Former priest	Very High	High	Break the group rules
2		Olive Spring	Catholic	Pastor assistant	High	High	Break the group rules
3	B	HolyTrinity	Catholic	Student	High	High	Act or speak rudely
4		Everyone talks	Protestant	Staff	Very high	Median	None
5		Love in Christ	Protestant	Freelancer	Very high	Median	None
6	C	English Bible Study	Protestant	Professor	High	Low	Group theme, group leader's authority, the rules of the group
7		Cypress Discussion	Protestant	Professor	High	Low	
8		Justice Academy	Protestant	Freelance Scholar	Median	Median	
9	D	Rachel's Friend share	Protestant	Student	Low	High	Faith,idea,value
10		TheHoly Family	Catholic	University teacher	Very Low	Very high	Church affiliation

Type A. Inter-religious, High Inclusiveness & Interactivity

Type A groups are the most inclusive among the ten groups, and the interactivity of the groups is very high. The number of people in these two groups is 180 and 330, respectively, and there are usually 10 to 20 of them actively involved in everydaygroup Chat. Christians of different traditions, Muslims, Buddhists, and Taoist followers share their faith traditions on the WeChat platform. Only religious extremists or fundamentalists will be removed from the group. The leaders of the two groups are in their 40s or 50s. They belong to the middle-lower or lower class of the society, and they do not have as much access to various social resources as those who work with the government or work as public officials. They have access to different religious institutions, and they have many years

of experience serving in churches and getting along with people of other faiths. They know the sin of human beings, and they are ready to love those sinners in their everyday lives.

Type B. Interdenominational, High Inclusiveness & Interactivity

The leaders of group type II have some formal or informal experiences of theological training. The number of people in these two groups is between 70 to 180. They are in their 20s or 30s, and they are representative of the younger generation of Christians with a strong sense of Gospel mission. They do not set up strict rules for the group, and their group notices are inclusive and inviting to people of different faiths. When some newcomers talk rudely, the group leaders usually don't know how to respond since it is not written in their group notice that they could remove those aggressive newcomers from the group chat. The frequent speakers in their group are not always the same active ones. With the changing of topics, different people will initiate or respond to conversations.

Type C. Scholarly, Formatively High Inclusiveness & Low Interactivity

Groups six to eight are hosted by scholars age between 45 to 60. They all have their own publications, and the number of people in their groups ranges from 350 to 500. The group leaders released more than 80 percent of the total contents in the WeChat group. Though the group norm welcomes people of different backgrounds to join them, only very few people talk in the group chat. The content shared in these groups is highly focused on the designated topics and themes; different theological or social ideas are usually discouraged or criticized. Those who talk about unrelated matters or inappropriate topics will be swiftly removed. Although the numbers of people in these groups are big, the interactivity of these three is pretty low compared to other groups.

Type D. Single Tradition, High Exclusiveness & High Interactivity

The hosts of Group No. 9 and No. 10are theologically fundamentalists, and they are in their 20s or 30s. Both of them are exclusive to some specific traditions and social groups. There are about 70 people in the protestant group (No. 9) and about 450 people in the Catholic group (No. 10). Both groups' interactive frequency is pretty high, and people in these two groups are highly like-minded. Once there are different ideas and opinions, many group members would stand out to refute them. Therefore, the higher interactive frequency in these two groups does not mean a higher chance for different thoughts to be communicated. The messages repeated most frequently in the group are the ideas and thoughts allied with the group leaders.

From the above-listed facts about the ten different groups, we see that both the most inclusive and exclusive groups enjoy high interactivity. The groups with inclusive norms encourage religious others to join them, and their interactions are between individuals of different faith communities. They encourage followers of different religions to listen to each other and be open to the various interpretations of the Holy Bible. In contrast, the group with exclusive norms blocked different ideas from the very beginning. The group leader's all-or-none thinking resonated with the group members, and very soon, only one stance will take over in the group discussion.

In summary, group Type A is the most inclusive and interactive type. They usually have a Catholic background, and they have a sense of responsibility to promote the unity of different faith groups. Both the two type A groups put great emphasis on social norms. Type B could be either Catholic or Protestant traditions, and the leaders are inclusive of different faith traditions. Their

group notices express a willingness to understand others,but they do not have a clear norm for group management. Elites,professors,or writers are the leader of the type C group. They welcome listeners to their groups,but they do not welcome topics and ideas irrelevant to their concerns. Type D are the youngest groups,they have a strong identification with a particular tradition,and they are exclusive to other religions or denominations. (See table Two)

Table 2 Typologies of Different Groups

Type	Tradition	Social Class	Inclusiveness	Interactivity	Management Style	Group Members
A	Catholic	Middle or Lower	High	High	Representative Democracy	490
B	Catholic or Protestant	Middle or lower	Median	High	Democratic	500
C	Protestant	Elite,middle class	Median	Low	Authoritarian	1200
D	Catholic or Protestant	Middle or lower	Low	High	Totalitarian	600

Given Habermas' principles of inclusiveness and interactivity,group type Aexhibits positive and normative characteristics. This type of group culture could possibly cultivate the moral progress of society. However, considering the limited social status and resources of the group leaders and members,their influence on society as a whole could still be limited. Anyway,they belong to the marginal social groups of the middle-class Chinese. Groups type B readily express their respect for people as a moral choice, but they do not have a good sense of normative management. When inappropriate behaviors or words appear in their groups,they do not have adequate measures to bind those group members. The leaders demonstrate a friendly attitude toward religious others,but they are not effective in promoting group morality as a whole. The elites-led group type C has good access to various social resources,but once the elites become an authority in some field,their authoritarian impulses will take over. There could also be less room for moral progress in their group because what they had demonstrated to the group members is similar to any other authoritarian social group. Group type D,the fundamentalist faith groups,could hardly bring the morality of mutual respect and love into the virtual community.

If interpreting the characteristics of the four types of groups with politicalterms,representative democracy,democratic,authoritarian,and totalitarian politics could be their analogies,respectively. In group type A, there are representatives from different religions to help with the group's management,and the representatives can implement the group rules independently without the group leader's consent. In group type B,the democratic group fully respects the group members'free speech rights,but the group rules are not binding enough to the group members. When abusive or offensive statements appear in the group chat,the group leader has no way to counter them. In group type C, all the members fully respect the group leader's opinions. They are attentive listeners of the group leader and follow the group leader's direction in every way. In group type D,the group leader has a strong will to power,and he decides to keep or remove people from his group,and he motivated the group to fight along with him against the dissidents. As for the group's size,990 people joined the

more liberal groups (type A and B), and 1800 people rallied in the more authoritarian group (type C and D).

Group Discourse and Group Culture

The next part of this paper introduces some typical scenarios in Group No. 1 and Group No. 10, respectively, and explains how group norms shape the inclusive and exclusive culture group culture. Usually, the group leader is the key to the forming of the group rules and group culture. A more inclusive group leader will forbid the use of abusive language in group discussions and maintain a pleasant atmosphere in the group chat. On the contrary, an exclusive group leader may encourage offensive language among people of different faith traditions, and (s)he may be the one who takes the lead to launch an attack on others.

Since the establishment of group No. 1, "Religious Classics Study," the Catholic and Protestant Christians have been criticizing each other's church doctrines, Bible translations, and traditions. The group leader, Father Jia, always encouraged both sides to express their understandings rationally. He explained to both sides the historical and contextual reasons for the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. Mr. Yi, the group leader of group No. 10, "Holy Family," was an active speaker in Father Jia's group. He time and again called Martin Luther a wicked apostate who had intentionally split the church and condemned Protestantism as a heresy. Feeling harassed deeply by the talks of Mr. Yi, a Protestant Ms. Bin in Father Jia's group volunteered to serve as the group manager, and she won the support of Father Jia. Whenever Mr. Yi disparaged Protestantism, Ms. Bin would remind him about the group rules that no one shall force others to believe or to convert. Soon after that, a Catholic, Ms. Ding, volunteered to be the group manager on behalf of the Catholics. She got Father Jia's support too, and she posts information about Catholicism in the group daily. The followers of the Orthodox Church, Islam, and Buddhism in the group also readily share the links of articles about their traditions. Father Jia used either text or voice messages to communicate in the group, and the group members gradually formed a consensus that people of different faith traditions shall respect each other and love each other. Exclusivists like Mr. Yi were usually criticized by the group members when he tried to make fun of the Protestant followers. Finally, one day, Ms. Bin removed Yi from Father Jia's group.

In contrast, the atmosphere in Mr. Yi's group is entirely different. In Yi's WeChat groups, disputes among followers of various faith traditions usually result in verbal abuse. Evans defined verbal abuse as words that attack or injure and words or attitudes that "disempower, disrespect, or devalue the other."[5] Evans sorted the ways of verbal abuse into five levels: 1. denial and avoidance; 2. Angry addiction and name-calling; 3. Orders, threats, and intimidation; 4. Undermining attacks; 5. Withholding. All these levels of verbal abusive frequently appear in Yi's WeChat groups.

Denial is one of the most commonly used methods to trivialize and discount religious others. In Yi's group, the Catholics express their pride over the Catholic apostolic tradition, and they deny the

[5] Patricia Evans. The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond Updated ed. Avon, Mass: Adams Media, 2010.

Protestant Church as a church. They deride the music and ritual of Protestant churches as rustic, and they think that the Protestant Bible is full of mistakes.

Name-calling and abusive anger are what people usually encounter in some of the extremist religious groups. Some people enjoy calling other religious traditions by insulting names or express their anger to religious others. For example, in Chinese, the academic term for Protestantism is Xin Jiao (新教), which literally means "the New Religion." This translation is to differentiate Protestantism from the old Roman Catholic tradition. However, in Yi's WeChat group, the Catholics only call the Protestantism "Shifan Jiao" (誓反教), which suggests that Protestants are those who swear or defy death to fight against the Roman Catholics. Some of them claim that the Protestants do not deserve to be called Christians, for they are the Catholics' heresies. As Boyarin discussed, an injurious name derogates and demeans the other party. It also brings the other party into a menial existence; thus, it could arouse counter offense action.〔6〕

Order and threaten are also commonly found in Yi's WeChat group chat. Yi keeps a close eye on the content of the conversation in his group. Once a Protestant term appears in group chat, he wouldimmediately warn them and threaten to remove them from the group. In his group, everyone is supposed to use the terms in the Studium Catholic Biblicum, which is the only Chinese Catholic Bible officially recognized by the Vatican. The Studium Bible was translated to Chinese from the Hebrew and Greek Bible, and the Union Christian Bible was translated to Chinese from the English Bible. Therefore, the transliteration of proper names in the two Bibles is quite different in Chinese. For example, in the Chinese Protestant Bible, "God" is translated as "Shang di" (上帝 the Supreme King) or "Shen" (神 the Deity), and Abraham as Yabolahan (亚伯拉罕). In the Chinese Catholic Bible, "God" is translated as "Tian Zhu" (天主 The Lord of Heaven), and Abraham as Yabalang (亚巴郎). In Yi's group, anyone who uses the term "Shangdi" or "Yabolahan" will be warned and threatened to be removed. Yi would tirelessly remind the group newcomers about the taboos and ask them to follow the translation of the Studium Bible. Whenever Yi warn the newcomers, many group members would rally with Yi and express their contempt for the Protestant Bible. Many Protestants questioned this rule, while Yi insisted that there is no other way to keep the purity of the Catholic discourse. One of the Protestants criticized Yi's rule, saying that "the Protestants hold the Sola Scriptura, and your group of Catholics hold Sola Studium Bible. Ironically, you narrow the teaching of the holy catholic church into the translation of the Chinese Studium Bible." As Michael Signer suggested, followers of different religious traditions need to understand that language is used symbolically. The vision toward the absolute truth goes beyond what terms and names seem to be, "Therefore, a coincident logic requires elevating the intellect above the force of words rather than insisting that they possess only one-dimensional meaning."〔7〕

In Yi's group, disputes alsoarise in the form of mutual criticizing. One side usually accuses the other side of immoral motivation and of distorting the nature of things. Yi considers that most group

〔6〕 Boyarin, Daniel. Border Lines : the Partition of Judaeo-Christianity Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. p. 9.

〔7〕 Michael A. Signer. "'Seeing the Sounds'": Intellectual Humility and the Process of Dialogue. Firestone, Reuven, James. Heft, and Omid Safi. Learned Ignorance: Intellectual Humility Among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. New York, N. Y: Oxford University Press, 2011. p. 58.

members are not well-educated; they cannot distinguish the right teachings from the wrong ones. Therefore, whenever Yi gets a chance to criticize Protestantism, he will always repeat the importance of excluding Protestant terms, concepts, historical figures, and teachings to prevent the group members from being captured by false ideas. Yi's assertions arouse discontent among the Protestants in the group from time to time, and they criticized the historical mistakes and the teachings of the Catholic Church in return. Thus, the debates between Catholics and Protestants never reach a consensus due to the gap between different traditions and individuals' understanding. As time passes by, the anti-Protestant voice dominant Yi's group. Evans listed withholding as the highest level of abuse and explained that some religious groups withhold from others as a form of shunning to punish those who don't conform.[8] Cyber technology makes the measure of withholding very easy. The group leader and group manager just need a click on the screen to remove people from the group conversation. This way of social-emotional deprivation could create depression, anxiety, and other symptoms in the abused party.

Evans considered that both verbal and physical abuse cases are the abusers' control tactics or a means of holding power over others. They act indifferent to others' feelings and views and are inexpressive of warmth and empathy to others. Most importantly, they tend to control and manipulate. Through accusing dissidents, the accuser accumulates their moral authority and gains status in front of the witness by showing discursive power over others.[9] When the community members follow the opinion leaders to assault dissidents, abusive group behavior became a tool to confirm one's theological understanding and group identity. As Boyarin discussed, the discourse of religious orthodoxy as an independent category of human identification may not serve the interests of certain economic class, "but they do serve in the production of ideology, of hegemony, the consent of a dominated group to be ruled by an elite."[10] Charles Tilly explained a similar mechanism in violent rituals. He used the example of a ritual before the football game as an extreme case of activating boundaries and excluding the others, which "incorporate all the relevant actors and social sites into a single connected set of performances."[11] Among virtual religious communities, the process of group debate and casting out of different ideas, languages, and religious others exhibit a similar mechanism suggested by Tilly. First, they differentiate the boundary between "them and us" by those symbols and further clarify within-boundary and cross-boundary interactions. Next, they push the uncommitted or moderate actors toward one or the other extreme. If the newcomers do not abide by the group rules, they take the risks of being cast out of the group and may allegedly lose their tickets to heaven. In these groups, the abuser reinforced these stances with the competitive display of continuous signals. By correcting terms and translations different from the Studium Bible, they get to unify their identity as Catholics. Finally, they monitor constant surveillance over the virtual

[8] Patricia Evans. The Verbally Abusive Relationship: How to Recognize It and How to Respond Updated ed. Avon, Mass: Adams Media, 2010.

[9] Qing Li, Donna Cross, Peter K. Smith (Eds.) Cyberbullying in the global playground: research from international perspectives. Wiley-Blackwell. 2012. p. 8

[10] Daniel Boyarin. Border Lines: the Partition of Judaeo-Christianity Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. p. 27

[11] Charles Tilly. The Politics of Collective Violence Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Chapter 4.

community's discussion and eventually nullify the Protestants. The abusers justify their actions with religious reasons like maintaining the community's purity and preventing ignorant followers from being cheated by heresies. In the name of justice, absolute truth, or solemn purpose, they load their narratives with exclusivity, hostility, and hatred. As Moyaert explained, by strengthening the other's negative image, the internal division could be covered. "The more others are othered, through exclusion and marginalization, the more one's own identity is preserved as elevated and exalted."[12]

Girard's interpretation of the scapegoat also helps to understand theabusive culture of religious groups.[13] The act of searching for scapegoats serves as a protection of the religious community. When the outsider is cast out, the harmony of the community resumes, and the social fabrics are reinforced. The newcomers of a social media group usually lack a social link with other members of the community. Thus the old group members are easily assembled to expel the dissidents with harsh words without fear of reprisal. Especially when the outsiders are cast out from the virtual community, the outsiders do not automatically stand a chance to take revenge. As Girard put it, "the whole of human culture is based on the mythic process of conjuring away man's violence by endlessly projecting it upon new victims. All cultures and all religions are built on this foundation."[14] The Chinese culture and Chinese Christians are no exceptions, as the examples of exclusive group behavior in this research showed.

Group Culture & the Individual Moral Choice

Oneinteresting thing about the religious WeChat community is that many people join different WeChat groups simultaneously. Among the ten WeChat groups in this research, some people could belong to four or five of the groups. Many people are group members of both groups No. 1 and No. 10. Some of them could be very active in one group but keep silent in another group. To investigate the factors that influence individuals' moral choices on the WeChat platform, I asked some group members about their understanding of different group cultures.

Mr. Wu is one of the active speakers in both groups. The first time I talked to him was about two years ago when he was standing as an ally with Mr. Yi in the "Holy Family" WeChat group. When I shared some of Augustine's writings in this group, Mr. Wu commented that what I shared smelt like a foxtail of Protestantism. However, just two months later, when I saw him again in the "The Religious Classics" group, he criticized the moral defects of both Catholic and Protestant churches. He even claimed himself an advocator of the ecumenical movement and said:

The disputes between the Catholics and Protestants are not doctrinal problems but rather the issue of human sin. Some Protestant and Catholic churches were corrupted. They turned the churches into a family business. I know a Catholic who indulged in alcoholism, gambling, and prostitution, though five members in his family are priests. After seeing those, I decided to become a Protestant.

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[12] Marianne Moyaert. "Making Space for the Other: From Religious Ideology to Narrative Hospitality." Polyakov, Emma'Donnell. Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and Interreligious Hermeneutics: Ways of Seeing the Religious Other. Leiden, Brill/Rodopi, 2019. p. 39

[13] Girard, Rene, and James G. Williams. The Girard Reader New York: Crossroad, 1996. p. 118

[14] Girard, Rene, and James G. Williams. The Girard Reader New York: Crossroad, 1996. p. 162

Later,when I saw the evils done by Protestants,I converted to Catholicism. Both Catholics and Protestants criticized the government. However, they could not allow any criticism within the church. They are another partisan organization. Once they come to power,they might be worse than the present party.

I was surprised to see this sudden shift in Wu's position. I was wondering what provoked his change from a conservative Catholic to an ecumenical advocator. To find the answer,I talked to Mr. Wu via WeChat in private. I asked Wu if it because of Father Jia and his WeChat group that brought him different perspectives. Mr. Wu said:

> Father Jia is not the only reason. I also have to thank a sister who taught me a method of spiritual practice. Under the present social circumstances, Christians are polarized,beingradical liberal or fundamentalist. Those who truly adhere to justice may face enormous suffering in the soul. I'm not working in my name but inspired by the Holy Spirit to do the work.

Actually,in the past several months,I saw that Mr. Wu has been working hard to promote mutual understanding between different WeChat groups of different faith traditions. When I asked about his view on Mr. Yi's group,he said:

> To groups likes this,you can choose to leave or escape. The Persian Empire,the Babylonian Empire,and Egypt were all like Sodom and judged by God. Lot decided to leave the city of Sodom. In today's China,God's purpose is to let the righteous people to "escape." It was a struggle to refuse the evil and promote the good.

Wu seemed to suggest that there is no point in arguing in the WeChat group,for you can never change people's minds if they have made their decision. He used,again and again,the story of Lot's wife,who looked back to Sodom andwas turned into a salt pillar,to explain that there is no hope for Chinese culture to change. Wu explained that people are obsessed with inviting disputes in the WeChat groups,and there is no difference between them and Lot's wife.

Chinese Christian intellectuals hope that the gospel could change China. In the WeChat group chat,two of the most frequently mentioned topics are "only God can change China" or "God will let this land be destroyed." When I asked Wu's opinion on the possibility of moral change in Chinese society,he was still pessimistic:"Are you sure that those people do not believe in an idol called "God"? How many of them can follow the way of Jesus? Not all baptized people are Christians. I feel that God sometimes does more work on unbelievers than on believers." Wu's narration echoes the scenario of the good Samaritan in the Holy Bible. Those who never heard of the gospel could exemplify humanity and tolerance to different thoughts and traditions. Instead, some Christians justify pride and prejudice in the name of faith,and some use the name of God to fulfill the individual and group desires. I asked Wu,"Do you mean that general education is more important than faith to China?" Wu answered:

> Christians kept fleeing from their hometown and motherland. To survive, they must continuously change careers and acquire skills and knowledge. In this sense, Christian education has the characteristics of general education. Practically, survival is general knowledge; spiritually, the purpose of education is to know and experience God. Gods' people will not be controlled by the Persians who treat them favorably or Egyptians who oppress them.

I was deeply impressed by what Wu said. Culture or faith, which will win in China? It is the question that underlined this conversation. I saw that Wu was very disappointed with Chinese society and Chinese Christians' present status, and he was also not optimistic about the future of China. He said that Chinese society could turn a person into a devil, and there is no chance for faith to win under the present cultural and political circumstances. However, when talking about general education, he suggested that it could not be complete without recognizing God's presence.

Wu himself has experienced morally fraught conflicts during his stay in these WeChat groups. When entangled with the disputes among different religious groups on the WeChat platform, he sometimes was unkind to others. He tried to keep away from the quarrels on the WeChat platform. However, when disputes arose, Wu would quickly jump out to preach the gospel to both sides. To prevent himself from becoming a devil in the current culture and society, he even thought of giving up his well-paid and steady job. He said that when he encounters the morally fraught moments and finally makes a hard decision, he felt like renewed spiritually. Six months after this conversation, Wu left China and accepted a Catholic monastery teaching position in south-east Asia.

Cultural Roots: Authoritarianism and Fundamentalism

Smith identifies the sense of self-identification of fundamentalist Evangelicals in America.[15] These Christians have a clear sense of identity, and they maintain a sense of tension with the broader society to keep their evangelical identity. They have a strong sense of boundaries, which distinguishes them from other social groups. They believe that they hold the ultimate truth revealed by the Holy Bible. They have a clear sense of evangelical mission, and they hope to testify and convert people and change the world. They hold practical moral superiority over other groups, believing that the truth can shape individual life and society. These characteristics of the fundamentalist groups are not unique to American Evangelical groups. The more conservative churches of different traditions in China carry similar traits. A Chinese Christian, Garfield, introduced her experience of debating online with some fundamentalist Christians. Those Christians posted much false information about Catholicism; they registered many online accounts to join a debate, giving people the impression that they were a big group of the same mind. Garfield explained:

> Both extreme and moderate fundamentalists are exclusive. They view things as

[15] Smith, C., 1960, & Emerson, M. (1998). American evangelicalism: Embattled and thriving. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

> either black or white. They attacked other religions as if they were superior to others, and they are the only ones who know the truth. They considered that for so-called eternal life, lies and dirty means should be tolerated. From the ordinary followers to the church leaders, the fundamentalist Christians would always justify cheating in the gospel's name.〔16〕

The prevailing conservative and fundamentalist teaching amongChinese Catholic and Protestant churches have their roots in history. The flourishing of Christian fundamentalist teaching among the Protestant churches in China paralleled the Christian Fundamentalist Movement in the United States since the 1920s.〔17〕 During the fundamentalist-modernist controversy in the US, Dr. Watson Hayes established the North China Theological Seminary (华北神学院), a fundamentalist seminar in 1919. It became the "Westminster Seminary of China" and played an essential role in training and providing financial support to the Chinese fundamentalist churches in the 1930s. This academy cultivated some of the most influential pastors and leaders for the Chinese churches from the 1930s to 1960s, whose influences are still dominant in the houses churches in China today.

After 1949, the Chinese Catholic Church was put under the Chinese government's supervision and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA). It did not accept the primacy of the Papacy. Not willing to submit to the CPA's leadership, the underground Catholic Church managed to survive and established an underground system. Thus, both the official and some underground Catholic churches cut themselves off from the Roman Catholic Church's official teachings. Most Chinese Catholics nowadays do not know about Vatican II documents, and many still follow the Catholic teachings of the 19th century. Many Chinese Catholics reject Vatican II's teaching and view it as a surrender to modernism and other religions. Mr. Yi once commented on the Vatican II document, Dignitatis Humanae (Declaration of Religious Freedom), saying:

> I think that the Catholic Church did not want to recognize those heresies and false religions. This document is no more than a diplomatic gesture. Since only the Catholic Church holds the truth, there is no need for the Catholic Church to make this unnecessary pacifying gesture. Moral relativism and pluralism will only mislead people and harm the Catholic Church as a whole.

Yi's understanding also has its roots in the soil of traditional Chinese patriarchal and authoritarian culture. Jiang analyzed the authoritarian crisis of the Chinese churches; he considered that monopoly of authority, pyramidal centralization, and the emphasis of absolute obedience to the

〔16〕 Garfield 大黄傻猫. "Resigned from Christianity after 23 years of journey"结束 23 年基督徒生涯, 辞别基督教. March 4, 2009. Accessed on May 22, 2020. https://exchristian.hk/home/article/show/159.

〔17〕 Zhenmig Wang 王政民. "The Origin and Resound of the Conflict between Chinese Fundamentalist and Liberalist Christians in the 1930s" 三十年代中国基督教基要派与自由派之冲突的起源与回响. Gospel and Modern China 福音与当代中国. Aug 20, 2018. Accessed on May 23. 2020. http://www.gospeltimes.cn/index.php/portal/article/index/id/45611

church's superiors are the three major problems of Chinese Christian Churches.[18] The 2000-year old authoritarian cultural tradition had permeated into every household and integrated into Chinese people's way of life. Chinese churches and virtual religious communities are not immune to such influence. The Chinese Communist party's rule and repression against religious organizations in the past 70 years only reinforced the Christina churches' backlash to the government and other religious groups. The binary ideology of the CCP government toughens the friend-foe and insider-outsider mindset among different social groups in China.

According to Yan, the discriminative in-group and out-group moral reasoning is still dominant in China today, which could be entirely counterproductive in an open and mobile society. The mutually beneficial behavior among Chinese people is mainly based on past favors and social exchanges. "Such a relation-based morality is particularistic in nature and highly flexible in practice; many of the behavioral norms and moral values do not apply to people who are outside one's network of social relationships."[19] When Christians on the WeChat platform call each other brother and sister intimately in the all-ranked and differentiated Chinese society, the WeChat platform becomes an agency to break the discriminative rules. However, the Chinese traditional culture gene tenaciously grows via different norms and practices of social groups. In the cases of this study, the social elites hold content-based discriminative rules. The younger generation of fundamentalist group leaders accepts discriminatory rules based on church traditions, discourse, and doctrines. When people suffer discrimination on the WeChat platform, they may take it for granted and discriminate against others.

Social injustice could also contribute to the formation of an exclusive culture. After 1949, the Chinese Party-state exacerbated the culturally formed social inequality with its institutional measures. For example, the Hukou registration system divides people into urban and rural residents. The rural population can not enjoy food, housing, pension, education, and other social welfares as the urbanites. The Hukou system cultivated a strong sense of superiority of the urbanites over the rural population and a habit of ruthless exploitation of the "lower-end" population.[20] It supported the us-them and insider-outsider mindset with institutional means by distributing dignity and social wealth unjustly among city and rural citizens.

Living in ablatantly exclusive culture, people's dissatisfaction with the unjust social institution can develop into aggressive behavior toward a stranger. Many WeChat users usually talk about how national security officials visit them for releasing inappropriate information on social media. Many of them encountered the shutdown of their WeChat accounts for using sensitive terms or violating the national security rules. For example, the police and party secretary in Mr. Yi's university warned him repeatedly for releasing inappropriate information on WeChat and finally removed Yi from the teaching podium. The examples of fundamentalist Christian communities in this research are the epitomes of surveillance in China today. The members of the religious WeChat group exhibited similar traits of particularistic communitarian

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〔18〕 Dengxing Jiang 江登兴. "The Authoritarian Crisis of Chinese Christian Churches"中国教会的专制主义危机. Church China 教会. Nov. 2018. (74)6, Accessed on May. 22, 2020. https://www.churchchina.org/archives/061101.html

〔19〕 Yunxiang Yan. "The Moral Implications of Immorality: The Chinese Case for a New Anthropology of Morality." Journal of Religious Ethics 42, no. 3 (September 2014): 460-493.

〔20〕 Mo Zhixu. "In Beijing, Who Is and Isn't a 'Low-End Person?'" China Change, December 14, 2017. https://chinachange.org/2017/12/14/in-beijing-who-is-and-isnt-a-low-end-person/.

ethics. Just as the government has excluded them, they control and exclude the religious others.

Conclusion

All four types of religious WeChat groups in this research contributed to the preaching of the gospel. Among them, type A, B, and C could promote mutual respect and understanding in different ways. In contrast, group type D could more often trigger disputes and conflicts among various religious groups. On the one hand, among the WeChat groups observed in this research, the number of groups advocating tolerance and mutual respect is the majority. If the samples of this research could represent the distribution of value stances of the faith groups on the WeChat platform, an inclusive culture could progressively prevail in Chinese society.

On the other hand, the private chat on the WeChat platform is invisible to the public, and we do not know what consensusis formed between individuals. Anyway, an exclusive virtual community could easily find resonance from people living in an exclusive society. When the social structure and resource distribution system remain the same, social morality could hardly improve only because of information exchange technology development. As Laidlaw (2014) quoted Bourdieus to explain that, "Whatever one thinks one is doing, one is always, in fact, playing a maximizing game in such a way as to reproduce the structures in which one is placed." Society is always reproducing itself according to the dynamics of the material structures and the interdependent agency. It would be a miracle if society could change without reforming its political institution and economic foundation.

By comparing the two polar groups' activities and behaviors, we see that group values, norms, discourses, and practices all play a role in cultivating the group culture. The group culture may further shape the outlook and practice of the newcomers. Though preaching about the same God, the four types of groups exemplified very different approaches. When people come to different groups for information and spiritual support, they may be bewildered about Christianity's nature. Is Christianity an ecumenical faith tradition, or is it just an instrument to achieve individual power or group interests? It is a choice an individual has to face now and then in the virtual communities. An instrumentalized Christianity can hardly change the culture but instead being distorted by various cultural forces.

In conclusion, the Durkheimian paradigm of value reproduction dominates, and Dumont's value exchange between different social hierarchies works to some extent. Simultaneously, the Weberian paradigm of value conflict also exhibits in Mr. Wu's example. It is still too soon to jump to a conclusion to the question of "which culture or value will win China?" With the human agency of Christians actively communicating values of inclusiveness and love in their daily lives and on virtual platforms, Chinese society's morality might improve slowly. Echoing Robbins' diagnosis of the Urapmin society, if the legal and judiciary institution and the Chinese society's political and economic structure remain the same, the individual Christian's effort could still be nothing more than a drop into a bucket. It might take tens and hundreds of years for Chinese people to accept universal values and norms.

中文题目:

文化复制抑或价值冲突? 虚拟社区中基督徒的道德困境

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摘　要:罗宾斯认为,涂尔干和韦伯的理论路径都能有效解释社会道德变迁。基于这一认知,本文探讨了微信平台上华人基督徒群聊中的文化复制和价值冲突动态机制。本研究评估了十个宗教微信群的群规和互动内容,并根据其群体包容性和互动程度将其分为四种类型。通过从微信平台上收集的群聊内容,揭示了群体语言暴力的形成机制,并进一步探讨了中国基督徒在虚拟社区中的道德困境。研究表明,基督教价值观作为一种外部力量,可以鼓励基督徒践行福音使命并寻求群体认同。基督徒通过团体规范和团体行为实践话语权;虚拟社区中基督教排他性群体的行为具有文化威权主义和宗教原教旨主义的意识形态特征。在微信平台上,排他性和包容性群体文化之间的矛盾反映了中国威权社会传统与时代对开放社会需求之间的不匹配。在当前社会结构和文化环境下,特殊化伦理和排他性实践仍将在相当长的时间内在基督教虚拟社区中占主导地位。

关键词:包容性;互动性;道德;语言暴力;微信群