Chapter 1

Introduction: Putting Christianity and Capitalism in Their Place

On December 22, 2006, the traffic police department of the Public Security Bureau of Wenzhou issued a public notice, "On enforcing traffic control in the downtown area during Christmas."[1] It read, "In order to ensure traffic safety and smoothness in the downtown area during Christmas 2006, a decision has been made to enforce traffic control according to the Law of the People's Republic of China on Road Traffic Safety." The decision was to ban all vehicles except public buses, taxis, and two-wheeled motorcycles in the entire city center from 5:00 p.m. December 24 to 3:00 a.m. December 25. The word "Christmas" (*shengdanjie*) appeared three times in this short magisterial statement. Christmas is not an official holiday in China, but mass participation in the annual Christmas celebration left little room for the local state to maneuver. With memories of hectic traffic jams in previous years, the local police chose to intervene. The naming of this local festival period "Christmas" in the law and the state-controlled media, however, unwittingly granted legitimacy to Christianity. State "recognition" of Christmas is part of the story of the massive resurgence of Christianity in contemporary Wenzhou detailed in this book.

In the last quarter century, the southeast coastal city of Wenzhou has become the largest urban Christian center in China, popularly known as "China's Jerusalem" (*Zhongguo de Yelusaleng*).[2] Wenzhou is home, by some estimates, to as many as one million Christians (Protestant) and more than

two thousand churches.[3] However, the state officially designated Wenzhou as an experimental site for an "atheistic zone" (*wu zongjiao qu*) in 1958. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), church buildings were either closed or converted for other uses, and all Christians were driven underground. The great expansion of Christianity in Wenzhou took place over the past two decades. More than five hundred churches were built in the 1980s (*Wenzhou zongjiao* 1994: 27). Although Catholicism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religion are also on the increase, Christianity's growth has been the most significant in Wenzhou, especially in the urbanized area.[4]

The rise of Wenzhou Christianity is part of a larger revival of popular religious practices during the post-Mao period of political and economic liberalization (Chau 2006; Dean 1998; Jing 1996; Kipnis 2001b; Madsen 1998; Palmer 2007). This book seeks to understand the local significance of Wenzhou's Christian effervescence rather than studying it as an instance of a general religious upsurge. Because of its remoteness from the economic and political center, Wenzhou has been a relatively unique site since ancient times. During the post-Mao era, the development of Wenzhou Christianity has accompanied Wenzhou's evolution from an impoverished rural town to a dynamic regional center of global capitalism, the rapid growth of many small and medium-sized family-owned manufacturing enterprises, the city emerging as a world outsourcing hub, and the rise of an entrepreneurial class in the same region.[5] It is in the context of this changing regional political economy that I interpret Wenzhou Christianity and its relationship to larger discourses of modernity.[6]

Universal Celebration: Christianity as a Popular Participatory Domain

China's Christian population in rural inland areas tends to be homogeneously elderly, female, and illiterate (Li et al. 1999; Leung 1999). In contrast, Wenzhou Christianity constitutes a popular participatory domain in which a great diversity of people articulate subjectivities and interests and interact with one another through belief. This diversity is reflected in the rapid expansion of local religious space and the communal style of Christmas celebrations.

I began my fieldwork in Wenzhou right before Christmas 2004. Although I anticipated something unusual would happen during the celebration, I was still surprised by its grandeur and the combination of various popular

cultural elements. Deliberately portrayed as an occasion of universal joy and celebration (*putian tongqing*), Christmas has become a public community event open to all. Local bosses, cadres, migrant workers, students, men and women, young and old, believers and nonbelievers flock to the various church sites as well as hotels and theaters to experience what local preachers proudly claim to be "the [world's] most authentic Christmas." This massive flow of participants in previous years caused the traffic jams that led to the intervention of the local Public Security Bureau in December 2006.

The Wenzhou churches' Christmas celebrations combine grand feasting, performance watching, and evangelical preaching in a festival atmosphere. Most large Wenzhou churches hold Christmas celebrations for several consecutive days, with Christmas Eve being the most elaborate and splendid celebratory gathering. One church in the city center, for example, held an eight-day Christmas banquet and series of performances. People ate while watching a variety of artistic shows on the stage in the main church hall. Each day sixty-five tables of food were served. In all, more than five hundred banquet tables were prepared and five thousand people attended. The church subsidized the 25 yuan admission ticket. At the feasts, hymns were often played as background music. In another large church, a recording of Handel's *Messiah* was played, and hundreds of people gathered while dozens of uniformed female church workers served dishes to each table. At such Christmas banquets, one church member usually pays for an entire table of his or her friends, relatives, or business partners. Wealthy bosses may buy several banquet tables to entertain their extended social networks. Sometimes they also invite their managers and employees as part of a year-end reward for good performance at work. As a vital part of Christmas evangelization, a sermon is usually inserted in the middle of the eating and performances, but it is always kept short. After banqueting one can overhear people enthusiastically commenting on the quality of food and performances and making comparisons with other churches' banquets and the ones they held last year.

This somewhat chaotic Christmas scene has shocked many visitors, including overseas Christians. One cannot help but wonder: How has it been possible for Christianity to achieve such high visibility and popularity among diverse groups of people in one of China's most commercialized regional economies? Who are the key social actors maneuvering behind such high-profile activities? How have they managed to negotiate such a massive space for the local church and refashion a nontraditional religious identity

Figure 1.1 A Christmas banquet held by a local church in a hotel ballroom. Note the robed choir on the stage. (Photo by author.)

in the public arena? This study addresses these questions by presenting an ethnography of the daily practices of local church members. The revival of Christianity among diverse socioeconomic groups points to the multiplicity of attitudes, motivations, and meanings among modern Chinese believers. I detail the diverse subcultures, motivations, and actions of the people involved in Wenzhou's churches. As the church's Christmas celebration suggests, Wenzhou's Christian revival has not taken place in an empty cultural landscape. Instead, it involves a larger cultural system that conditions both local religious forms and state governance and is also transformed by Christianity itself. Although Wenzhou's cadres are officially banned from joining the church, an informal local network of churchgoing relatives and friends can embed them within a shared emotional structure, shaping their values and perceptions of Christianity. A view of Wenzhou Christianity as a popular participatory domain offers a vantage point to critically address the pattern of monolithic depiction of China's Christianity in the literature and ultimately the oppositional binary concept of civil society and the state.

Departure from a Domination-Resistance Model

Popular discourses dominated by journalists often politicize the issue of religious freedom in contemporary China rather than analyze the hybrid local sociocultural environment where the religious revival takes place.[7] China researchers have focused on the post-Mao revival of religion as a politically and ideologically charged process in which the local community resists the totalizing party-state (Anagnost 1994; Feuchtwang 2000; Jing 1996; Mueggler 2001; Yang 2000, 2004). Some studies of Chinese Christianity even embrace a binary construct of state domination and church resistance.

Although Christianity has an established place in modern Chinese history, it has been politically labeled as heterodox for most of the twentieth century. During the Cultural Revolution, Christianity disappeared from public view under the pressure of mass nationalism and militant atheism. Under Mao, Western missionary endeavors were linked to imperialism and colonialism. Today the death of Communism as a faith in China, along with the liberalization of religious policies in the 1980s, has led to a dramatic growth of Christianity. There may be more than sixty million Protestant Christians (twelve million registered) in China today, compared with seven hundred thousand in 1949 (Aikman 2003). The increasing significance of Christianity in local society intensifies church-state interactions.

Despite this "Christian fever," Chinese state restrictions on academic research have made contemporary Chinese Christianity an understudied topic. Political risks discourage scholars from conducting empirical studies of Christianity in China. Ironically, parallel to the party-state's view of Christianity as a "foreign religion," much of the literature has tended to take a more or less politicized, ideological approach to Chinese Christianity. For example, some scholars depict Chinese Christianity as a localized foreign faith, suggesting Christianity and local Chinese culture are two opposing categories (e.g., Gernet 1985; Uhalley and Wu 2001; Whyte 1988). By focusing on the foreign missionary impact, these studies contribute to the understanding of Chinese Christianity as an unfinished Western project. Not unlike early Western missionaries in China, many Western-based journalists and observers today still view Christianity as a transformative social force that has the potential to remodel the life of Chinese society with a single overarching church authority and ideology.[8]

On the basis of their understanding of the history of the harsh political

repression of religion during the Cultural Revolution, scholars of Chinese religion have also focused attention on the political context of state-society relationships. Viewed as inherently hegemonic, the state is presumed to have dominated the structure of religious expression and suppressed religious thought and ritual in a mechanical fashion (see MacInnis 1996). Such a politicized approach tends to assume that as the party-state dominates society, the church has two choices: to cooperate or to resist. Therefore, different categories of religious expression can be described mainly as collaboration (usually in the case of the official church), or as resistance (usually in the case of the so-called house church movement), or as a combination of these two. Kindopp (2004: 5), for example, interprets house churches as a form of "the systematic and widespread resistance of the majority of China's Catholics and Protestants." Leung (2007: 283) describes post-Mao church-state relations as an ideological struggle between religious idealism and dialectic materialism. In an essay with the dichotomous phrase "Official vs. Underground Protestant Churches in China" in the title, Wenger (2004) divides Chinese Protestantism into two segments. On this basis, she examines the organizational differences of the two churches and predicts the future difficulty of reconciliation. This stereotypical distinction between the official church and the house church, and the general conception of China's church-state relations as an opposition of resistance and dominance, result from the ideologically specific configuration of China's historical and structural conditions in the high socialist period.

In an analysis of the historical pattern of Chinese state-religion relations, Daniel Bays (2004) has pointed out that the state's registering and monitoring of grassroots religion can be traced back to the Tang dynasty more than a thousand years ago.[9] Therefore, state dominance is not a modern Chinese Communist invention but an ancient requirement of the Chinese political regime. The imperial Chinese state actively shaped and appropriated popular religious cults by imposing its own values and sponsoring the establishment of temples (Duara 1988b; Watson 1985). As popular religion provides an ideological alternative to the Chinese state mode of historization and political rationality (Anagnost 1994; Feuchtwang 2001), the presence of a strong central state power and its unchanging demand for loyalty seems to portend a rather pessimistic future for China's religious freedom, especially regarding Christianity.

However, in contemporary China church-state relations have evolved

alongside changing historical and political conditions. First, the state increasingly uses ideological power rather than domination and coercion.[10] A centralized, invasive, disciplinary state is becoming less visible in its exertion of ideological control (Friedman 2004; Yang 2004). This is particularly reflected in the consumer revolution in which a "new mode of governmentality of the Chinese state" has emerged and emphasizes consumption as the drive to modernity and consumerism as the measure of development (Pun 2003: 475). Second, Christianity is no longer a "foreign" religion, because it is mainly local Chinese believers who have revived the faith. In addition, an upwardly mobile stratum is beginning to join the urban churches in China's economically advanced coastal areas (Chen and Huang 2004; Yang 2005). This class generally supports the reformer-era state. Socioreligious dynamics are different in an urban commercialized economy like Wenzhou. Wenzhou Christian entrepreneurs are pioneers in the post-Mao "socialist market economy" and dominant partners of the state development project.

Rather than conduct this research in the conventionally defined political context of state-society relations, I use an ethnographic approach, which enables going beyond an emphasis on the political and symbolic dimensions of religion to examine embodied systems of beliefs and processes of meaning making in daily life.[11] It would be simplistic to take the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM),[12] the government-sanctioned Protestant organization, as a tool of the Chinese state and treat those who worship or minister "above ground" as state collaborationists.[13] It would be equally unsophisticated to interpret house churches as a form of resistance. The domination-resistance model often reflects the researchers' concern for moral clarity and an old political logic rather than the views of local believers. This model is overpoliticized, not only because things at the local level are much more complex and less directly observable but also because many local Christians defy this hegemonic framework for interpreting their religious experiences as acts of "resistance." Some house churchgoers simply take the label "underground" as an inferior term and claim that they "belong to heaven" (*shutian*). Under this model, scholars tend to ignore the local Chinese Christian experience whenever it cannot be easily categorized as "resistance."

The primacy of the domination-resistance model in Chinese Christian research owes much to Western theories of civil society. Western research has mainly conceptualized civil society in association with voluntary choices of autonomous individuals and in terms of organizational independence from

the state. The assumed opposition between state and society has guided much previous research on civil society in China that focused on social resistance to state domination, especially in the wake of the massive public demonstrations of 1989 (e.g., Gold 1990; Strand 1990). However, the concept of civil society is deeply rooted in a Western philosophical tradition that champions Enlightenment notions of individual autonomy (Seligman 1992). It can then be problematic when adopted unreflectively in analysis of non-Western societies. This is particularly true in the context of Chinese East Asia, where "the Confucian traditions of statecraft tended to see family, society, and state as smaller and larger versions of the same kinds of relationships: they related as microcosm and macrocosm, not antagonists" (Weller 2005: 6).[14] As Robert Weller (1999) aptly notes, Chinese social associations that lie between family and state, including business organizations, local popular temples, women's networks, and environmental movements, can all generate forms of civil democracy. Similarly, anthropologists working in other non-Western societies show that communal networks can form a foundation for civic culture and democracy, even though they are not civil society in the classic sense (e.g. Hefner 1998c; White 1996). Therefore, civil society as a liberal Western cultural ideal cannot be taken as given, and China's state-society relationship must be studied on its own terms.

Apart from a much-needed pluralistic understanding of civil association, the notion of the state ought to be thought of in plural terms. The state everywhere is composed of actors with conflicting and contradictory ideas, ideals, and interests. In China there is also a division between the policy-making central state on one side and the local state that implements and often bends the policies on the other (Chau 2006). Moreover, the state has been not only a political apparatus but also a cultural idea in the local community; cultural discourse is thus central to state-society relationships (Siu 1990). A binary construction of resistance and dominance places too little emphasis on the role of local culture, historical context, and the subjectivity of believers. By situating religious expression and representation within the specific context of local history and regional culture, I pursue a meaning-centered and historically grounded analysis of a Christian locality.