Claim-Staking vs. Claims-Making Resistance: The Politics of Religious Charity in China[[1]](#endnote-1)

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Abstract: Protest, dissent, and other forms of contentious politics are risky endeavors for those living under authoritarian rule. Would-be resisters in such regimes often employ indirect and unobtrusive strategies to challenge governing policies and practices with they oppose. Though oblique, such strategies qualify as varieties of political “claims-making” insofar as they articulate political grievances and demand change. Yet not all resistance possesses this expressive, claims-making character. This paper analyzes unobtrusive resistance connected with the practice of religious charity in contemporary China, drawing on a case study of an evangelical Christian drug treatment program to do so. Although such charity typically embodies regime-friendly attitudes, like patriotism and concern for the public welfare, at times it challenges party-state efforts to control and contain religion. It does so by repurposing the non-religious spaces and activities of faith-based charity into sites and modalities of religion. Repurposing eschews the contentious claims-making typical of protest and dissent, and instead constitutes a kind of “claim-staking” resistance: purpose-driven behaviors that transform the meanings and functions of spaces, organizations, and activities in ways unanticipated by the regime. Through their claim-staking activities, practitioners of faith-based charity enlarge the social space of religion beyond what the party-state formally allows.

The religious revival that began in China in the late 1970s has been accompanied by instances of protest and dissent rooted in religion. High-profile cases, such as those involving Falun Gong adherents and Wenzhou Christians, illustrate how religious beliefs, practices, and organizations can facilitate collective contention directed at China’s governing regime.[[2]](#endnote-2) These cases also underscore the risks of challenging political authorities in overt and unambiguous ways. Given these risks, Chinese religious adherents, like their non-religious compatriots, often employ indirect, unobtrusive strategies to resist the policies and practices of the party-state.

This chapter analyzes such forms of resistance bound up with the practice of religious charity. Faith-based charity may seem an unlikely subject for a volume concerned with dissent and protest. Such charity typically reflects values and attitudes such as compassion, patriotism, and dedication to the common good—not opposition to or disgruntlement with the party-state or its actions. Yet at times religious charity challenges government policies and practices, in particular those aimed at excluding religion from other areas of social, cultural, and economic life. It confounds these through a process this author terms “repurposing,” in which the secular locations and activities of charity are converted into sites and modalities of religion.[[3]](#endnote-3) The sacralizing consequences of repurposing complicate the secular objectives of the Communist party-state.

Repurposing is distinct from other activities typically defined as resistance, such as the contentious politics of protest and dissent. Contentious politics can be understood as a form of political “claims-making.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Through contentious collective action, mobilized groups make claims on and demands of power holders in the hopes of changing how, by whom, and for what ends power is exercised. In contrast, repurposing eschews the direct articulation of political claims to the powers-that-be. Repurposing is not so much a claims-making as a “claim-staking” endeavor. Like a homesteader who takes possession of a plot of land through purposive action that alters the plot’s meaning and function, charity practitioners occupy the secular sites and programs of charity and, through faith-infused practices, repurpose these along religious lines. Repurposing expands the social space of religion beyond what is formally allowed, and in doing so circumvents barriers established to contain religion.

Despite the fact that religious repurposing complicates the regime’s secular agenda, officials and government agencies at times facilitate it. In recent years the government has shown increasing support for faith-based philanthropy and social service, as it has come to recognize the benefits these can offer society and the state. Central party-state organs have called on religious groups to step up their charitable activities. The revised “Regulations on Religious Affairs” issued in 2016 include provisions authorizing faith-based non-profits, provisions that were lacking in previous regulations—an indication that the government increasingly views religious charity as a legitimate social endeavor.[[5]](#endnote-5) At the same time, however, Xi Jinping and other leaders have reiterated their commitment to secularism and to shoring up the boundaries that separate religion from politics and other areas of social life.[[6]](#endnote-6) However by promoting faith-based charity, the government encourages the infusion of the religious into charity’s ostensibly secular spaces, organizations, and projects, including some embedded in the party-state itself.

This chapter analyzes how religious charity serves as an unobtrusive and indirect mode of resistance, even as it furthers certain party-state goals and interests. It focuses specifically on the case of Gospel Rehab, a Christian drug treatment program that uses evangelism and other faith practices to help its clients combat narcotics addiction. Despite its unregistered status and illicit evangelistic methods, the program endured, eventually securing formal approval and funding from the state. Gospel Rehab illustrates how faith-based charity repurposes the sites and endeavors of social service, staking its claim on these through activities that recast them as religious venues and practices. Yet Gospel Rehab also shows that the resistance effected by faith-based charity is not necessarily deliberate or a primary objective of charity practitioners. This case furthermore reveals the role of government officials and agencies in encouraging repurposing and considers the reasons for their support. It suggests that religious repurposing can further the regime’s agenda in some ways, while confounding it in others.

**Repurposing as a variety of resistance**

To understand how repurposing works, it helps to contrast it with activities more typically regarded as resistance and dissent, such as public protest. Protest is a classic example of “contentious politics,” an expressive, communicative activity through which groups articulate political demands. Contentious politics is typically disruptive, a break from “normal” politics, but it is also a form of political “claims-making.” Political contention often aims to do more than make claims: groups also engage in contention to mobilize resources, gauge public support, assert control over heterogeneous movements, and engineer regime change. By and large, however, people protest to express demands in the hopes of influencing the behavior of authorities and institutions. Scholars of social movements have emphasized the claims-making dimension of contentious politics in order to highlight points of convergence between the routinized, “contained” contention of institutional politics and more “transgressive” varieties, such as protest.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In China opportunities for contained contention are few and far between. Though not uncommon, transgressive contention carries with it considerable risk. For this reason much contentious politics is what Kevin O’Brien calls “boundary-spanning,” behavior that “operates near the boundary of authorized channels.”[[8]](#endnote-8) In boundary-spanning contention protesters may employ rhetoric that echoes official discourse, asserts the legality of their claims, and affirms their loyalty to the Chinese people and the party-state. Protesters and other grass-roots political actors may also seek to cultivate influential allies within the regime capable of advocating on their behalf. Alternatively, protesters attempt to “depoliticize” their claims by framing them as matters of public health or environmental protection relevant to the whole society, rather than as reflecting particular group interests.[[9]](#endnote-9) Boundary-spanning contention can also entail innovative approaches to collective action, such as the strolling protests of recent urban environmental activism.[[10]](#endnote-10) These boundary-spanning strategies, argues O’Brien, depend “on a degree of accommodation with the structure of domination, the deft use of prevailing cultural conventions, and an affirmation—sometimes sincere, sometimes strategic—of existing channels of inclusion.”[[11]](#endnote-11) Consequently they do not challenge the regime directly and may even augment its authority. Nonetheless, subtle and oblique strategies can succeed if they induce officials to respond favorably to protesters’ concerns.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Oblique as they are, boundary-spanning approaches to contention are still claims-making activities that communicate demands to authorities. Yet not all resistance is so directly communicative, and not all forms of resistance involve either claims-making or contention. Many unobtrusive forms of resistance eschew the articulation of claims even as they challenge the exercise of power by elites and institutions. Examples include the surreptitious evasions of what James C. Scott terms “everyday resistance” and the strategies of refusal employed by East European dissidents under communism analyzed by Christian Joppke.[[13]](#endnote-13) Resisters may deliberately disregard laws and policies without expressing demands for these to be changed. Alternatively, they may conduct resistance activities in secret, through acts of sabotage and criminality. In contrast to contentious politics, surreptitious strategies involve the muffling and masking of claims. Because they are relatively “uncommunicative” they are often limited in their scope and effectiveness; there is a reason Scott characterizes them as “weapons of the weak.” Nevertheless such resistance can “work.” Unobtrusive resistance may facilitate seizures of power if systemic and sustained enough to undermine a state’s capacity to govern. And although its political objectives are not openly articulated, evasive resistance is not entirely mute. Surreptitious strategies may reveal hidden preferences for opposition within a population, thereby increasing the likelihood that resistance will spread.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Repurposing is similarly characterized by the non-articulation of political claims directly to power holders. In other words, repurposing is not a claims-making endeavor, and it is certainly not contentious politics, boundary-spanning or otherwise. However repurposing diverges from other evasive strategies in important ways. Much surreptitious resistance, including foot-dragging, tax evasion, desertion, and sabotage, involves deliberate acts of refusal and opposition carried out by the disgruntled and marginalized—subalterns denied a voice by the regime. In contrast the repurposing of religious charity occurs through public service activities carried out more or less out in the open, often with the backing and participation of the party-state.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Repurposing is made possible by the fact that, for religious adherents, charity is both an act of public service and a form of religious practice, a manifestation of their faith commitments. For many who engage in it, doing charity *is* doing religion. In feeding the hungry and aiding the sick, charity practitioners follow Biblical injunctions, give glory to Allah, enact the Dao, cultivate Buddhist lovingkindness, earn merit, and so on. Especially when conducted in concert with fellow adherents, charity can strengthen religious identities and communities. It infuses the most mundane activities and places with religious significance. Tending to earthquake victims in a field hospital brings a Catholic volunteer face-to-face with “the living Christ”; distributing porridge to passers-by enables a Buddhist to break through the “small self” and generate good karma.[[16]](#endnote-16) Such charity converts the disaster zone, the nursing home, and even the administrative headquarters of a social service agency into spaces where the sacred is manifest and encountered.

It is for this reason that I describe repurposing as a “claim-staking” rather than “claims-making” form of resistance. In using this metaphor I mean to draw attention to the ways purpose-driven behaviors can transform the significance and function of spaces, organizations, and activities. Consider the claim-staking of homesteaders in the American West. The homesteader who staked a claim on frontier lands did not just occupy a plot of land, she “improved” it by fencing it, plowing it, planting crops, and so on. These activities were the means by which that plot became functionally useful for the homesteader as well as meaningfully her own property; staked claims endured only if the territory involved was successfully “proved up.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Mere occupation was not enough; specific, goal-directed activities were central to the processes by which claimed territory was legitimately appropriated. The metaphor of claim-staking highlights another aspect of religious repurposing: like homesteading in nineteenth century America, a good deal of (though not all) Chinese faith-based charity is a response to imperatives and incentives emanating from the state.[[18]](#endnote-18) That is, in doing charity many adherents are answering the regime’s call for citizens to improve the moral and social territory of Chinese public life.

Admittedly, the homesteader analogy is not a perfect fit for the concept of repurposing. In the case of the United States, homesteading took place within a juridical context that legitimated staked claims. Claims were articulated publicly in and through the legal system; claim-staking thus entailed claims-making through formal institutions. Successfully staked claims were (mostly) exclusive, insofar as they precluded counter-claims by rivals, including the government. In contrast, the repurposing of faith-based charity does not necessarily drive out other meanings, functions, or claims. Instead these can exist alongside charity’s religious meanings and purposes. Despite these limitations, the metaphor of claim-staking captures how groups and individuals occupy the territory and practices of charity and, through spiritually efficacious actions, alter these so that they become part of the “field” of religion.[[19]](#endnote-19) Repurposing exemplifies what William Sewell calls “spatial agency,” through which “spatial constraints are turned to advantage in political and social struggles” and groups “restructure the meanings, uses, and strategic valence of space” as well as actions.[[20]](#endnote-20) The exercise of spatial agency transforms both the significance of spaces and their “strategic uses,” and, Sewell argues, “can have far-reaching political consequences.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

One key difference between the claim-staking of repurposing and the claims-making of contentious politics is that the former depends in large part on failures of communication between adherents and the regime.[[22]](#endnote-22) Communication failures may occur when bureaucrats steeped in the atheism and materialism of communist ideology do not comprehend the religious meanings of charitable endeavors. In other instances, officials are cognizant of these religious implications but practice what Robert Weller calls “blind-eye governance” because of the resources and services charity provides.[[23]](#endnote-23) Still others may encourage repurposing because they themselves are members of religious communities and share their goals.[[24]](#endnote-24) Regardless of motivation, official tolerance for faith-based charity encourages repurposing and its sacralizing consequences. That said, many officials are wary of the religious text and subtext of charity. Top leaders have warned of the “impure” (*bu chun*) motives of some adherents who “wave the banner of religious charity to harm national sovereignty and social order.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

It is important to emphasize that repurposing is not (always) deliberately or inherently “resistant.” What makes it so is the legal-political environment in which it is carried out. Chinese religious policies aim to draw a sharp distinction between the sacred and secular, the religious and (most) everything else. Regulations stipulate that most collective religious activities must be conducted only at “religious sites” (*zongjiao changsuo*) registered with and supervised by the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB). Mosques, temples, and churches must also affiliate with government-backed religious “mass organizations,” such as the Islamic Association or the Protestant “Three-Self Patriotic Movement” (TSPM). Clerics, imams, and other religious personnel must undergo training at official seminaries or similar institutes. Self-designating as a preacher, priest, monk, or imam is not allowed, nor is unapproved collective worship in public spaces.[[26]](#endnote-26) These regulations affect charity in that philanthropic organizations and individual practitioners are prohibited from injecting religious symbolism, ritual, or discussion into their programs. Using charity as a tool to recruit new believers is forbidden. A faith-based NGO that distributed evangelical literature along with disaster aid would be in clear violation of the letter and the spirit of the law. Not surprisingly some of the most successful and well-known religious charity organizations in China, such as the (Protestant) Amity Foundation and the (Catholic) Jinde Charitable Foundation, take pains to excise most religious content and symbolism from their programs, excepting those focused specifically on religious matters.[[27]](#endnote-27) Yet even registered and well-regarded faith-based charities associated with the five approved religions may find themselves forced to operate in what Keping Wu calls “the ‘grey zone’… the ambivalent political space located in-between what is legal and what is illegal, what is sanctioned fully by the state and what is not completely censored.”[[28]](#endnote-28)

However, separating the religious aspects of charity from its mundane, practical dimensions is no easy task and creates its own set of problems. Enforcing this distinction can hinder organizations from mobilizing support from within their religious communities. The case of Hongde Jiayuan, an orphanage established by the Hebei Buddhist Charity Association, is instructive. According to the Venerable Changhui, the monk who directs the orphanage, many Buddhists engage in charity to generate “merit,” a karmic reward that facilitates their own and their loved ones’ salvation. Many also believe that merit is produced only through activities explicitly connected with the practice and promotion of Buddhism. But as an orphanage caring for children under the age of eighteen, Hongde Jiayuan is prohibited from incorporating Buddhist content into its programs or promoting Buddhism in any other manner. Consequently it has had trouble raising funds from what should be its natural constituency, Chinese Buddhists. As Changhui sees it, Buddhists would rather spend money on merit-generating rituals such as releasing captive animals than to help Hongde Jiayuan’s needy orphans.[[29]](#endnote-29)

A key obstacle to maintaining the sacred/secular distinction in charitable practice is that it is not always clear where religion ends and charity begins. In a number of religions, rituals and other faith practices serve as “spiritual technologies,” core elements of the toolkit used to address social ills.[[30]](#endnote-30) The above-mentioned practice of liberating captive animals, called *fangsheng*, is a case in point. Buddhists (and some Daoists) engage in *fangsheng* because the practice is believed to generate merit. The accumulation of merit facilitates adherents’ salvation after death, specifically their attainment of the Pure Land and, eventually, nirvana. Merit produced through *fangsheng* is also thought to produce good karma capable of healing the world as a whole; its beneficial effects can accrue not only to the individual releasing captive birds or fish, but also to their loved ones and even to humanity in general. Many practitioners regard *fangsheng* as a form of charity *par excellence*, since it addresses spiritual deficits responsible for human suffering. Doing *fangsheng* is doing good, a public service in its own right.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The government’s attitude towards *fangsheng* and other spiritual technologies is complicated. *Fangsheng* is problematic for a host of mundane reasons. Large releases of captive aquatic animals have resulted in massive fish kills and contamination when waterways are too warm or polluted. The combination of growing affluence and religiosity has aggravated the black market trade in endangered species, since the release of rare, expensive creatures is believed to be especially efficacious at generating merit.[[32]](#endnote-32) To address these problems the Buddhist Association of China in 2014 promulgated new *fangsheng* guidelines to encourage adherents to conduct the ritual in a “rational,” “scientific” and environmentally conscious fashion.[[33]](#endnote-33) Governments at the provincial and local level have established *fangsheng* associations to oversee and coordinate the practice. A number of these groups include current and retired officials among their directors. Consider, for example, the Guangdong Province *Fangsheng* Association, founded in 2010 to encourage ecologically sound *fangsheng* practices and promote “great compassion” (*da’ai*). The association’s president is a former deputy director of the Standing Committee of the Guangdong Provincial People’s Congress, while its vice-president serves on the provincial Party Committee and heads the CCP’s Discipline Inspection Commission in the city of Yangjiang. One of the group’s two honorary presidents is a retired former deputy party secretary and governor of Guangdong Province. The association itself is an offshoot and creation of the Guangdong Provincial Oceanic and Fishery Administration, which in the past has organized several *fangsheng* festivals.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Officials appear to tolerate the use of spiritual technologies in religious charity when these are directed towards populations that share the faith of the groups trying to help them. A case in point is Home of Buddhist Light, based in Xishuangbanna Prefecture in the southwestern province of Yunnan. Home of Buddhist Light was established by monks and lay Buddhists to tackle drug addiction and HIV/AIDS among the predominantly Buddhist Dai minority inhabitants of Xishuangbanna. The organization enlists monks in its educational outreach and employs Buddhist concepts such as the Four Noble Truths to promote abstinence from injection drug use and prostitution, major trajectories of HIV infection. Since the target population for Home of Buddhist Light’s outreach is already mostly Buddhist and since Buddhism is regarded as intrinsic to the cultural heritage of the Dai minority nationality, this mixing of faith with philanthropy is accepted.[[35]](#endnote-35)

**Proscribing and prescribing faith: The case of Gospel Rehab**

Mixing religion with charity is especially controversial when it involves Christianity, and when the groups involved are unregistered with and unsupervised by state agencies. These issues are evident in the case of Gospel Rehab, a Christian drug treatment program that employs evangelical methods to help its clients overcome narcotics addiction. Independent Christian drug treatment programs first emerged in the PRC in the 1990s in several locations around China, including Fujian and Yunnan Provinces.[[36]](#endnote-36) These programs typically eschew medical interventions and rely instead on prayer, Bible-reading, and other distinctly Christian beliefs and practices to treat their clients. Clients are required to undergo religious instruction, participate in collective worship, and reside in clinic facilities that sequester them from the outside world for anywhere from six to eighteen months. Many of these programs are free, and unlike state-mandated drug treatment, voluntary.

These types of programs have operated for decades in Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan, as well as in the United States and other Western countries. Christian aid groups from Hong Kong and Taiwan have promoted the spread of these programs in the mainland, partly by propagating the very notion that addiction can be defeated through faith. Outside Christian groups have also provided funding and operational guidance to mainland programs, enabling them to survive in a challenging legal and political environment. In recent years some provincial, municipal, and local governments in the PRC have provided support for these clinics’ unorthodox approach.

One of the first programs established in the mainland is Gospel Rehab (*Fuyin Jiedu*), whose first clinic, the Taocheng Drug Rehabilitation Guidance Station (*Taocheng fuyin jiedu fudao zhan*), was founded in 1999 in Yunnan Province. Yunnan is ground zero for China’s narcotics crisis, one of the worst hit in terms of rates of drug addiction and the related scourge of HIV/AIDS. The Taocheng clinic was established by a man named Lin Jueqing, the owner of a small manufacturing firm who possessed no training in medicine or counseling, much less in the treatment of addiction. Lin’s career as a provider of addiction treatment began in a decidedly ad hoc fashion. He was one of six lay Christians, all members of a weekly prayer group he led, moved by compassion to help the heroin-addicted sister and brother-in-law of one of their members. Lin and the other five prayer group participants decided to try to alleviate the couple’s suffering the only way they knew how, through faith and prayer. They took the couple to a quiet resort where they spent several days and nights praying with the couple, discussing the Bible, talking with them about Jesus, and offering comfort as the couple experienced the agonies of withdrawal. After several days and nights, when it seemed as if the worst of withdrawal was over, the group returned to Kunming. Rather than return to the temptations of their old lives, the husband and wife moved in with Lin, the group’s unofficial leader, where they stayed for several months. During that period the couple attended church with Lin and his family, studied the Bible, and remained drug-free. Eventually both husband and wife converted to Christianity.[[37]](#endnote-37)

The story of Yunnan Gospel Rehab might have ended here had acquaintances of the now drug-free couple not heard of their successful rehabilitation and sought help from Lin. As mentioned, Lin lacked any training in the field of addiction treatment. However the steady stream of people seeking his help convinced Lin that God was calling him to alter his life’s path. Eventually he sold his factory and rented a farmhouse in Taocheng, a rural village some distance from Kunming, where he began preaching the Gospel to a small group of addicts and using prayer and informal counseling to help them deal with their affliction. This informal farmhouse clinic eventually became the Taocheng Drug Rehabilitation Guidance Station.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Most of those served by the Taocheng clinic and other Yunnan Gospel Rehab sites are addicted to heroin, ketamine, and “ice,” or methamphetamine, the most commonly abused narcotics in China. The vast majority of clients have previously undergone compulsory drug treatment in the state system, the result of having been detained by public security and registered as drug users. More than a few have been remanded to compulsory treatment numerous times, only to relapse upon release.[[39]](#endnote-39)

According to its proponents, Gospel Rehab works because it addresses the spiritual and psychological problems that fuel addiction. As mentioned, the treatment offered at such clinics does not involve medication such as methadone or buprenorphine. Instead the focus is almost exclusively on belief, spirituality, and fellowship. According to Wang Aiguo, deputy chief of the Religious Affairs Bureau in Yunnan and a supporter of the program:

…this therapy regards the rehabilitation of the soul as the priority. It encourages drug users to base their rehabilitation upon the guidance of the Bible, and rather than rely solely on medicines or themselves to rely on God to rehabilitate the addicted soul and eventually be cured of the addiction, reconcile with their families, return to the society, and rediscover their lost humanity, dignity, and inner self. This therapy aims to reform or educate the drug users by Christian faith and the gospel to become reborn...[[40]](#endnote-40)

Gospel Rehab thus aims to bring about a fundamental transformation in the individual’s worldview and relationship to his or her self and others. Conversion to Christianity—accepting Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior—is a central tool and objective of the program. As Wang states, “Christian rehabilitation therapy draws on the strength of religious belief to help create a ‘reborn’ individual, in a new social environment.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Being “born again” releases the individual from their old life and their old self, which had focused on the satisfaction of base, worldly desires. At the same time, being born again is a sign one has broken free of the grip of addiction.

Gospel Rehab provides other kinds of training that promote treatment objectives. In addition to participating in religious and counseling activities during the yearlong program, participants share in the labor needed to keep clinics operating. Today there are seven sites around the province in both rural and urban areas. At rural sites, participants raise livestock and grow fruits and vegetables for sale and for their own consumption. The urban sites run several businesses including an auto repair facility, a car detailing shop, and an interior design firm. Gospel Rehab also has established a halfway house for graduates of the program, to smooth their re-entry into society. Occupational skills-building, psychological counseling, and Christian fellowship all aim to address the problem of recidivism, common among addicts who upon release from treatment often find themselves without marketable skills or social support.

Supporters of Gospel Rehab and similar programs claim that they get better results than do either state-mandated compulsory treatment or secular, community-based programs. According to Wang Aiguo, between 1999 and 2006 Gospel Rehab clinics in Yunnan treated 258 clients, of whom 178 (68.9%) remained drug-free through 2006. The Taocheng clinic alone assisted eighty-two drug users in that time period, of whom sixty-two (75.6%) were known to be drug free in 2006.[[42]](#endnote-42) Of course, these figures underscore the tiny scope of Gospel Rehab. Whereas 258 people were treated over a seven-year period at multiple Gospel Rehab sites, in 2005 there were over 61,000 people undergoing compulsory drug detention and another 12,600 in compulsory “reform through labor” programs in Yunnan Province alone.[[43]](#endnote-43) There are no randomized, controlled studies of Christian drug therapy in China, nor any comparing this approach to state-mandated compulsory programs or harm-reduction approaches such as methadone maintenance. Methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) was introduced to China only in 2004. Between 2004 and 2012, over seven hundred MMT clinics were established around the country, and during that period MMT clinics treated over 384,000 people for opioid addiction.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Regardless of how effective (or scalable) the program really is, it is certainly perceived and portrayed as such by its supporters. Yet its methods flout regulations concerning religion, charity, and even drug treatment. As stated previously, using charity to proselytize is forbidden by law. Like other religious activities, proselytizing (aka evangelizing) is allowed only within the confines of registered religious sites, which the Taocheng farmhouse and subsequent Gospel Rehab clinics are not. Furthermore an individual may not self-designate as a pastor or evangelist; to serve in this capacity one must be trained at an approved seminary, register with the RAB, and affiliate with the government-sponsored Christian associations, the TSPM and CCC (China Christian Council). Community drug treatment facilities, meanwhile, must register with local bureaus of public health and public security. At least in its early years, Gospel Rehab proceeded without securing the approval of any of these agencies.

Despite these violations of law and policy, Gospel Rehab persisted and expanded. Several years after the Taocheng clinic was founded the program attracted attention from Christian aid groups in Hong Kong. Funding and other assistance from these Hong Kong groups enabled Gospel Rehab to establish additional clinics in Kunming and in Dehong Prefecture, a largely ethnic minority region along the Yunnan-Myanmar border decimated by narcotics addiction and HIV/AIDS. With support from a Hong Kong Christian charity, in 2004 Lin Jueqing worked with a local Christian church and county TSPM to establish the Erkun Gospel Rehab Counseling Station in Yingjiang County, a Dai and Jingpo Autonomous County in Dehong.[[45]](#endnote-45)

Gospel Rehab’s endurance suggests a degree of blind-eye governance on the part of local officials, a decision to ignore much of what Lin and others were doing because of the program’s perceived benefits. This is perhaps not surprising given the relatively relaxed attitude shown by Yunnan officials towards unregistered NGOs and other grassroots groups during the 1990s and 2000s. This period was one of considerable experimentation and innovation in Yunnan’s associational sphere, and Gospel Rehab was one of scores of unregistered non-profit groups that sprang up during this time in response to the twin crises of addiction and HIV/AIDS.[[46]](#endnote-46) Because of a dearth of resources and the scale of the problem, government officials have welcomed the entry of civil society and grassroots actors into the field of addiction treatment. A good deal of drug treatment in China “remains either a fringe enterprise endeavored by a few do-gooders in the community or by the criminal justice system that believes in the simple method of manual labor and deprivation of personal freedom.”[[47]](#endnote-47)

The intractability of the drug and AIDS crises is another reason for Gospel Rehab’s longevity. Yunnan is one of China’s poorest and least developed provinces. It is also a transit corridor for heroin and methamphetamine trafficked overland from Myanmar throughout China and to Hong Kong. As early as 1988 the central government named Dehong Prefecture an “area of concern” for narcotics, and China’s first reported AIDS cases were discovered in Dehong in 1989. Addiction and AIDS have ravaged areas of the province abutting the Yunnan-Myanmar border, the population of which includes a large percentage of ethnic minorities. Although Dehong’s inhabitants comprise just 0.8% of China’s total population, in 2010 its 17,590 reported cases of HIV/AIDs represented 6.4% of all known cases in the country.[[48]](#endnote-48) Other parts of the province are also struggling to contain these twin crises, including the provincial capital of Kunming. Despite “relentless and draconian counter measures,” the drug problem continues unabated.[[49]](#endnote-49) This dire situation has convinced many officials to “put aside the theoretical and ideological disputes” and allow a variety of experimental approaches to go forward.[[50]](#endnote-50)

One way that Gospel Rehab managed to stay afloat over the years was by registering its first couple of sites as commercial ventures, as do many grassroots NGOs stymied by the strict registration requirements for non-profit organizations in China. After about seven years of operating in legal limbo, the provincial Religious Affairs Bureau gave its approval for Gospel Rehab to be re-organized as a program of the Social Work Department of the Yunnan Provincial “Two Associations” (*lianghui*), a hybrid entity made up of the aforementioned TSPM and CCC. Though operating outside the parameters of “official” Christianity, Lin Jueqing had been in contact with the head of Yunnan’s *lianghui*, who introduced Lin to representatives of Hong Kong Christian aid groups that subsequently provided financial support for Gospel Rehab’s expansion. In approving its transformation into an official program of the TSPM and CCC, the provincial RAB also awarded Gospel Rehab a grant of 200,000 *yuan*; the group received a second grant of 200,000 *yuan* from the CEDA Foundation, a Hong Kong Christian aid group.[[51]](#endnote-51) Today Gospel Rehab programs operate in seven sites around the province. Lin Jueqing and a representative from the CEDA Foundation, Mo Wenguang, have also assisted local governments and TSPM officials in the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, and Hainan to establish their own Christian drug treatment programs.

Despite the local and provincial government’s acceptance of Gospel Rehab, many officials remain troubled by the explicit religiosity of its approach and by the fact that some party-state entities have enabled it to succeed and grow. RAB deputy chief Wang acknowledges the dilemmas the program poses. Though its methods appear beneficial, “the therapy is spreading the gospel and advances the Christian religion by means of rehabilitation. It is changing the society in Christian ways while providing social services.”[[52]](#endnote-52) Furthermore, government support for the program seems to violate policies requiring party-state neutrality towards individual religions and religion in general. As Wang explains, “the competent government authorities have been placed in a difficult position: the therapy is a better and more effective method among various forms of rehabilitation to reverse the severe reality [sic], but on some levels, it also helps promote the spread and development of Christian religion.”[[53]](#endnote-53) Officials and state organs are, in other words, facilitating Christian evangelism and conversion—a problem for agents of a party-state committed in theory to the atheism and materialism of Marxism. While Wang expects the controversy over Gospel Rehab to continue, he also believes that “the explorations and experimentations of the therapy will go on unabated.”[[54]](#endnote-54)

**Conclusion**

The case of Gospel Rehab illustrates how religious believers repurpose the activities and spaces of charity into modalities and venues of religion. Gospel Rehab’s use of prayer, evangelism, and other Christian spiritual technologies meant that this grassroots drug treatment clinic functioned as an unregistered Christian religious community and site of Christian practice. Gospel Rehab also reveals the ways repurposing can spur new and enhanced connections within a larger community of believers, as seen in its collaboration with Christian organizations in Hong Kong, other Yunnan localities, and other provinces. This case also underscores the fact that many Chinese people today encounter religion through activities and venues other than those created and approved by the regime for religious purposes.[[55]](#endnote-55) In addition, Gospel Rehab indicates the difficulty of trying to extract the religious from the secular in faith-based charity. If anything it shows that the explicitly “religious” aspects of religion—belief, prayer, ritual, and collective worship—can serve as resources not just for charities and those they serve, but for the regime as well.

In addressing the problem of narcotics addiction through charitable social service, Gospel Rehab was and is clearly advancing a number of regime objectives.[[56]](#endnote-56) At the same time, the program has flouted a slew of regulations designed to limit the scope and influence of religion in society. Lin Jueqing and others involved in the program have resisted and circumvented legal and political obstacles to religion erected by the regime—even though resistance does not appear to have been their aim. Years of blind-eye governance enabled Gospel Rehab to prove its value and utility, and eventually it won acceptance—and even funding—from the Yunnan government. Its seeming success convinced officials elsewhere to approve the creation of Christian drug treatment programs in their localities. Thus, the repurposing and claim-staking activities of Gospel Rehab brought about a change, over time, in how the organization was regarded and treated by the party-state. Gospel Rehab’s founders and supporters did not achieve this transformation by demanding that it be recognized as a legitimate and worthwhile program. In other words, they did not engage in contentious claims-making to extract concessions from the regime.

The contentious politics of protest and dissent attract considerable attention among social scientists. In part this reflects a belief that protest and dissent are particularly effective in bringing about meaningful political change, especially for marginalized groups denied a voice in formal political institutions. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly express this view when they claim that “substantial short-term political and social change more often emerges from transgressive than from contained contention, which tends more often to reproduce existing regimes.”[[57]](#endnote-57) In China, however, transgressive contention is extremely risky and can easily backfire. At the same time, opportunities for “contained” contention are practically non-existent. How then can Chinese people bring about changes in the way power is exercised? What power do they have to push back at the thicket of restrictions on social organization and behavior, including religious practice and expression? How do Chinese people convince officials and party-state organs to accept and accede to their demands?

My findings regarding Gospel Rehab add to a growing body of scholarship on contemporary China showing that indirect and informal strategies may provide a partial answer to these questions. This view is advanced by political scientist Kellee Tsai in her analysis of Chinese entrepreneurs’ efforts to promote their interests in an era when private business was still highly constrained.[[58]](#endnote-58) Tsai argues that members of this formerly vilified group succeeded in altering the rules and norms concerning private business through informal adaptations and personal interactions with party-state officials. Faced with restrictions on their business activities, entrepreneurs neither complied meekly nor engaged in contentious politics aimed at changing government policies. Nor did they pursue interest group politics typical of their counterparts in liberal democracies. Instead, entrepreneurs “evaded, exploited, and appropriated formal institutions through a variety of informal adaptive strategies.”[[59]](#endnote-59) These strategies included subtle non-compliance with official rules, appealing to officials’ individual interests to cultivate allies within the party-state apparatus, and acting as if their capitalist pursuits were already legal and accepted. Over time, entrepreneurs’ individual and un-coordinated “coping strategies” were “routinized as informal adaptive institutions”;[[60]](#endnote-60) this routinization “reflected and foreshadowed far-reaching changes in the formal policy environment governing the private sector since the Chinese Communist Party consolidated its power on the mainland.”[[61]](#endnote-61) Such changes include the 2001 decision to open membership in the Communist Party to capitalists and a 2004 amendment to China’s constitution that protects private property. Tsai makes clear that these developments were not brought about through transgressive or contained contention, that is, by “clamoring for democracy” or vocally challenging restrictions on private business. Instead, the “accumulation of informal interactions between local state and economic actors provided both the impetus and the legitimizing basis for these key reforms.”[[62]](#endnote-62)

In similar fashion, Gospel Rehab shows how non-contentious and indirect modes of resistance like repurposing can enable relatively marginal social actors to alter the behavior and attitudes of government officials and agencies. The contentious politics model holds that the way to bring about change is to demandit—to articulate group claims to authorities and demand (or hope) that they respond favorably. In contrast, claim-staking through repurposing effects change by behaving *as if* the desired state of affairs already exists, and habituating officials to that state of affairs over time.[[63]](#endnote-63) Repurposing and the metaphor of claim-staking help us grasp how citizens can resist and even change government policy and practice without confronting it head on—without opposing it on a systemic level or engaging in contentious politics. The case of Gospel Rehab also highlights the role played by officials in facilitating repurposing and its religious consequences. China’s government encourages faith-based charity because of its mundane, this-worldly benefits, which can be especially helpful for resource-constrained local governments facing intractable crises like AIDS and addiction. But with this encouragement, officials promote the infusion of the sacred into charitable activities and institutions, knowingly or not. In doing so they enhance the legitimacy of religion and expand the arena in which it can be practiced and expressed.

1. This project was supported by a Scholar Grant from the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation and a Research Travel Grant from the Committee on Aid to Faculty Research at Providence College. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. On Falun Gong see James Tong, *Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falungong in China, 1999-2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). For an analysis of the protests in Wenzhou see Nanlai Cao, “Spatial Modernity, Party Building, and Local Governance: Putting the Christian Cross-Removal Campaign in Context,” *The China Review* 17, no. 1 (2017): 29-52, accessed April 6, 2017, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/649717.  [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Susan K. McCarthy, “Serving Society, Repurposing the State: Religious charity and resistance in China,” *The China Journal* 70 (2013): 48-72, accessed April 6, 2017, doi: 10.1086/671330. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, “Political Claims Analysis: Integrating protest event and political discourse approaches,” *Mobilization* 4 (1999): 203-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Article 56 of the revised regulations states that “Religious groups, religious schools, religious activity sites, and religious professionals may lawfully initiate public interest charitable endeavors, and enjoy preferential policies in accordance with national regulations.Public interest charitable activities must not be used to proselytize by any organization or individual.” “Religious Affairs Regulations Draft Revisions (Deliberation Draft),” *China Law Translate*, September 24, 2016, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.chinalawtranslate.com/religious-regulations/?lang=en>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lucy Hornby, “Xi Jinping pledges return to Marxist roots for China’s Communists,” *Financial Times*, July 1, 2016, accessed April 6, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/be1b2528-3f57-11e6-8716-a4a71e8140b0>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Kevin J. O’Brien, “Neither Transgressive nor Contained: Boundary-spanning contention in China,” *Mobilization* 8 (2003): 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Ho, “Greening without Conflict? Environmentalism, NGOs and civil society in

   China,” *Development and Change* 32 (2001): 893–921. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. H. Christoph Steinhardt and Fengshi Wu, “In the Name of the Public: Environmental protest and the changing landscape of popular contention in China,” *The China Journal* 75 (2015): 66-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. O’Brien, 53. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Steinhardt and Wu, 61-82; Xi Chen, *Social Protest and Contentious Authoritarianism in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Christian Joppke, “Revisionism, Dissidence, Nationalism: Opposition in Leninist Regimes,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 4 (1994): 543-61, accessed December 18, 2016. doi: 10.2307/591882. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. McCarthy, “Serving Society,” 52-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*, 60-61, 66-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Sarah Carter, *Montana Women Homesteaders: A Field of One's Own* (Helena, MT: Farcountry Press, 2009), 16-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See Vivienne Shue, "State Power and the Philanthropic Influence in China Today," in *Philanthropy in the World's Traditions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 332-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” *Poetics* 12 (1983): 311-56, accessed April 5, 2017, doi: 10.1016/0304-422X(83)90012-8 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
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21. Sewell, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. On the ways communication failures can facilitate social cooperation among unequally situated groups see Sherry B. Ortner, “Thick Resistance: Death and the Cultural Construction of Agency in Himalayan Mountaineering”, *Representations* 59 (1997), 145–7. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Robert Weller, “Responsive Authoritarianism and Blind-eye Governance in China,” in *Socialism Vanquished, Socialism Challenged*, eds Nina Bandelj and Dorothy Solinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 83-99. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Susan K. McCarthy, “In Between the Divine and the Leviathan: Faith-based Charity, Religious Overspill and the Governance of Religion in China,” *The China Review* 17, no. 2 (2017). For an analysis of the mix of motives informing local officials’ variable treatment of unregistered Christian groups see Teresa Wright and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu, "Engaging and Evading the Party-State: Unofficial Chinese Protestant Groups in China’s Reform Era," *China: An International Journal* 11, no. 1 (2013): 1-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. “Zongjiao cishan chuangxin: guli yu guifan bingxing (Innovations in Religious Charity: Encourage and regulate in parallel),” *State Administration for Religious Affairs*, November 22, 2012, accessed April 5, 2017, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/zjzc/zjcs/17899.htm>. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
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27. On Amity’s efforts to downplay its Christian identity, see Gerda Wielander, *Christian Values in Communist China* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 72-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Keping Wu, “Buddhist and Protestant Philanthropies in Contemporary Southeast China: Negotiating the ‘Grey Zone,’” in *Religion and the Politics of Development: Critical Perspectives on Asia*, eds Philip Fountain, Robin Bush and R. Michael Feener (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 129-30. The five state-approved religions are Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestant Christianity and Catholicism. Wu’s notion of the “grey zone” is distinct from Fenggang Yang’s concept of the “grey market,” which he argues is comprised of Chinese religious organizations and practices whose legal status is murky. Wu’s formulation eschews the theoretical presuppositions of Yang’s market-based approach, and it shows that even government-approved religions at times must engage in legally ambiguous activities in the pursuit of their goals. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
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31. For an historical examination of *fangsheng* in the context of charity see Joanna Handlin Smith, *The Art of Doing Good: Charity in Late Ming China*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
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33. “Zhongguo fojiao xiehui fabu guanyu ‘cibei husheng, heli fangsheng’ changyi shu (China Buddhist Association issues guidelines regarding ‘Compassionately protect life, rationally release animals’),” *Fojiao zai xian (Buddhism on-line)*, July 31, 2014, last accessed April 4, 2017, <http://news.fjnet.com/jjdt/jjdtnr/201407/t20140730_221273.htm>. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
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35. Susan K. McCarthy, *Communist Multiculturalism: Ethnic Revival in Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009), 95-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
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38. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Du Xinzhong, “Kunming Fuyin Jiedu suo Xu Kun, Zhou Tianqi fufu jiedue (Kunming Gospel Rehab’s Xu Kun, Zhou Tianqi kick their drug habit),” *Du Xinzhong jiedu wang (Du Xinzhong’s drug abstention net)*, October 17, 2014, accessed April 7, 2017, <http://jhak.com/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=148&id=11419>. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Wang Aiguo, “Spiritual Therapy for Drug Rehabilitation: The Case of Yunnan,” *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 7 (2009): 57, accessed April 5, 2017, doi: 10.1080/15570274.2009.9523406. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Wang, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Wang, 57-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Wang, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
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49. Zhang and Chin, “A People’s War,” 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Wang Aiguo, “Spiritual Therapy,” 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Mo Wenguang, “Fuyin jiedu.” [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
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53. *Ibid*. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
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56. On the overlap between Christian and party-state objectives, see Wielander, 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention*, p. 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Kellee Tsai, *Capitalism without Democracy: The Private Sector in Contemporary China* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Tsai, 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. *Ibid*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. *Ibid*, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. *Ibid*, 45 [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Christian Joppke portrays the “antipolitics” of dissidence as “living ‘as if’ the repressive conditions no longer existed. It does not so much address the power-holders as speak to itself.” Joppke, “Revisionism,” 552. He argues that in the East European Leninist regimes where it was practiced, antipolitics was fundamentally a political endeavor. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)