

What is in a Name?

A Comparison of Being Branded a Religious “Cult” in the U.S. and the PRC:

Witness Lee and the Local Churches

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This paper focuses on the conflict surrounding a controversial religious group—known by its members as the “Local Churches,” but called by its critics the “Shouters”—that has been situated in and has moved between China and the United States. The paper examines how the categorization of the Local Churches has been shaped by the different social and political systems found in these two countries. It finds that in China, such categorization has occurred from the top-down, wherein the central government has played a key role in defining which religious groups are aberrant by placing them on a list of “evil religious cults.” In the United States, in contrast, religious group categorization has emanated from the bottom-up, as social groups and lobbyists have worked to shape public opinion, and to influence the way in which courts and legislative bodies regulate religions. In addition, this case study provides insight into the relationship between globalization and religious development, by delineating how a major world religion was contextualized to a local, foreign culture after the religion was introduced through globalization, and by examining the position of the indigenized form of the religion after it was translated back to a culture where the original form of the religion was dominant.

Religious beliefs are important in every society, and can enable social scientists to better understand a society’s norms and structures. Many ongoing social conflicts in the world today include a religious component; such conflicts frequently happen as religions spread to new areas through the process of globalization. Understanding how different political and social systems deal with religious conflict and controversial religious groups, especially in the context of global cultural flows, can provide important insights into the workings of those governments and societies as they cope with globalization. This paper focuses on the conflict surrounding an influential yet controversial religious group that has been situated in and has moved between two very different social and political systems: those in China and those in the United States.

The group under study here is known by its members as the “Local Churches,”¹ but is called by its critics the “Shouters.” Despite its categorization as a “cult” in both the U.S. and China, as of 2011, church leaders reported approximately 4,000 Local Churches throughout the world outside of China, and another 1,200-1,500 congregations within China’s borders.² The Local Churches arose in China following the introduction of Western Protestant Christianity. The Local Churches’ founder—Watchman Nee—localized Western Protestant teachings to match the cultural context of China in the early twentieth century. In the 1960s, the group and its teachings flowed back to the West in its indigenized form, where it challenged mainstream American Protestant groups. In the late 1970s, the Local Churches reappeared in China during the post-Mao Era.

In both China and the U.S., the group has been considered a “cult.” However, the process by which this designation was given, and the consequences of this designation, have been quite different—even though the processes in each country were somewhat intertwined. The differences derive from the distinct social and political systems found in China and the United States. In China, the Local Churches were categorized as a cult via a top-down process, wherein the central government played a key role in defining the group as aberrant by placing it on a list of “evil religious cults.”³ In the United States, in contrast, the categorization of the Local Churches emanated from the bottom-up, as social groups worked to shape public opinion, and to influence the way in which courts and legislative bodies regulated the group’s popular designation as a cult.⁴ Along with shedding light on the way that religious groups have been categorized in the U.S. and China, the case of the Local Churches provides insight into the relationship between globalization and religious development. For, the process by which the

group was categorized as a “cult” in the U.S. and China was inextricably inter-twined in the transnational movement of the group.

Data and Methods

To understand more fully the categorization of the Local Churches as a “cult” in both the United States and China, this paper analyzes a wealth of primary data related to the group. These data are found in U.S. court documents and transcripts, official Chinese documents, and published statements by U.S. leaders of the anti-cult movement—a grassroots movement against new religions that began in the 1970s. The paper also relies on previously unreported interviews, conducted by the authors, with U.S. leaders of the Local Churches’ Living Stream Ministry, and with Gretchen Passantino Coburn, a leader in the U.S. anti-cult movement who has undertaken significant research on the Local Churches. The paper is further informed by the co-author’s experience as a member of various Local Church congregations in the U.S. and Taiwan from 1978-2008, and her work as a translator for Local Church leader Witness Lee in his publication companies in Taipei and Anaheim, California during the 1980s and 1990s, and for church members who sought refuge in the U.S. from persecution in China during the early 2000s. In addition, the paper consults existing scholarly examinations of Lee and the Local Churches.

Contested Definitions of Religious “Cult”

The West/U.S.

The processes by which the Local Churches have been categorized as a “cult” in China and the U.S. have been shaped by scholarly, popular, and governmental debates concerning the definition of a religious “cult.” In the West, as described by James T. Richardson, the term “cult” initially was employed in a non-pejorative, technical manner by sociologists engaged in the study of religion. These scholars defined a “cult” as “a small informal group lacking a definite

authority structure, somewhat spontaneous in its development . . . , somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture.”⁵ Further developing this conceptualization, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge differentiated religious groups into “churches, sects, and cults,” and defined cults as religions that are completely new in a certain society: “Whether domestic or imported, the cult is something *new* vis-à-vis the other religious bodies of the society in question.”⁶ In the 1970s and 1980s, these earlier sociological definitions were displaced in the West by a popularized, pejorative definition of cults as “manipulative and authoritarian groups which allegedly employ mind control and pose a threat to mental health.”⁷ Western scholars found the popular allegations of “brainwashing” and mind control to be problematic.⁸ In an effort to distance scholarship from the pejorative implications that have since imbued the term “cult,” Western academics have eschewed using the term, instead referring to “New Religious Movements (NRMs)” and “minority religions.”⁹

The pejorative popular definition of a religious “cult” arose from the grassroots anti-cult movement in the U.S. In the 1960s and 1970s, the American counter-culture movement ushered in a plethora of new religious movements, including not only the Local Churches, but also the Unification Church (Moonies), Hare Krishna, The Way, The Children of God, Scientology, and The Alamo Foundation (among others). The worried parents of the youths who joined these movements formed self-help groups; thus began the “anti-cult movement.” At first, participants in the anti-cult movement disseminated information to the media and lobbied governments in efforts to restrict the new religions.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter, some American evangelical Bible expositors joined the anti-cult movement and wrote books for lay believers, explaining the beliefs of these new religious groups, contrasting them with the mainstream evangelical theology

prevalent in the U.S.¹¹ As the anti-cult movement developed, notions of brainwashing and mind control became increasingly prominent. When the medical and psychiatric professions became involved in the treatment of cult members, participation in NRMs came to be seen in psychopathological terms, and the “cult” concept was medicalized. This development allowed anti-cult “deprogrammers” to circumvent the civil liberties of NRM members by kidnapping them and subjecting them to rigorous “de-brainwashing” regimens.¹² While the aggressive deprogramming tactics of the 1970s and 1980s have decreased from the 1990s through the present, American media outlets have continued to cast NRMs in a negative light, characterizing them as “cults linked ... to violence, actual or potential.”¹³ Hence, in the U.S. the notion of a religious “cult” continues hold the negative connotations that it acquired in the 1970s and 1980s.

American grassroots activities revolving around “cults” eventually worked their way into the U.S. court system. During the early days of the anti-cult movement in America, NRMs were generally protected in the courts by the First Amendment. In the 1970s and 1980s, most court rulings “were favorable to supporting ‘marginal’ religions.”¹⁴ But as the term “cult” became medicalized, actions taken by anti-cult “deprogrammers” frequently were upheld by the courts, as membership in the NRMs came to be considered involuntary and due to mind control practiced by the groups’ leaders.¹⁵ In 1990, the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Smith v. Employment Division of Oregon* further changed the understanding and application of the free exercise clause of the U.S. Constitution with respect to religion. In the majority opinion of *Smith*, Justice Antonin Scalia asserted that religious beliefs do not excuse an individual from compliance with a valid state law. Wybraniec and Finke note that this means that a state is no longer “required to have a ‘compelling interest’ before denying religious freedoms.”¹⁶ Congress responded to *Smith* with the 1993 Religious Freedoms Restoration Act. However, this act was

overturned by the Supreme Court in 1997. Since that time, case studies by social scientists show that minority religions in the U.S. increasingly have been subject to legislative regulation.¹⁷

Overall, the conceptualization of “cults” in the U.S. has been a bottom-up process. The process began with the development of new social and religious groups, which spawned the growth of opposing groups. These different groups interacted with one another in a variety of ways—directly and personally, through media outlets, and through the judicial and legislative systems. And, various parts of the complicated American government—most significantly, state legislatures, the national Congress, and the Supreme Court—have both reflected these social conflicts and tried to adjudicate and regulate them. It has been a messy and confusing process, but the impetus and pressure for political involvement has emanated from society rather than the government.

China

The Chinese word for cult is *xiejiao* (邪教). It can also be translated as “heterodoxy,” and is a term that was used in the imperial era by the Chinese government to proscribe religions that “[conflicted] with the interests of the state and with what had been regarded as essential, namely, social ethics and certain accompanying rituals.”¹⁸ David A. Palmer describes the term’s use throughout Chinese history, showing how it was part of discourse against heterodox religious sects opposing the state beginning as early as the Eastern Han (25-220 C. E.) after the Yellow Turban Rebellion. Palmer then traces the use of the term up through the Republican era and to the present day. *Xiejiao* was not used during the Mao era, but it was revived in the 1990s when it was used to translate the English word “cult” and to refer to groups “denounced as heretical by the official Christian associations.”¹⁹

Contemporary Chinese anti-cult activities have followed a very different trajectory from those in the U.S. In the U.S., grassroots conflicts between social groups influenced the courts and opened the door for governmental regulation of “cults;” in China, the government has taken a top-down approach emanating from its desire to maintain political and social control. As with all other aspects of governance in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the ultimate authority is the CCP’s top leadership. More detailed policy formation and enforcement responsibility lie with the Party’s United Front Work Department. Simultaneously, within the party-state’s parallel “government” or “state” structure, the State Council’s State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA; formerly the Religious Affairs Bureau, or RAB) is charged with regulatory initiatives and supervision. Both the Party’s United Front Department and the state’s SARA have offices down to the county, municipal, and district levels. In large cities, these offices are well-staffed and bureaucratized, while small cities and rural areas may have only one cadre representing one or both offices. Along with these entities, local Public Security Bureaus (PSBs) have broad responsibility to enforce regulations regarding religion.²⁰

China’s Constitution (last revised in 1982) affirms the citizenry’s freedom of religious belief, but protects only “normal” religious activities. Moreover, whereas the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution expressly states that the U.S. Congress “shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” Article 36 of the 1982 PRC Constitution allows the government to regulate religious activities which “disrupt public order.”²¹ Similarly, the CCP’s Central Committee’s “Document 19” (issued in 1982) grants legal existence to five religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism)—but only under government-affiliated “patriotic” associations. For Protestants, this association is the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (*Zhongguo jidujiao sanzi aiguo yundong weiyuan hui*, or *sanzi*

jiaohui; hereafter, TSPM).²² In order to register with the state, a religious group must submit a preliminary application, a document of approval from the TSPM, records of assets and proof of the right to its meeting place, a membership list, and a constitution.²³ In addition, the group must agree to the “three fixes” (*san ding*): a fixed meeting place, leader, and area of coverage. The group also must pledge to eschew the inclusion of individuals below the age of eighteen.

If a Protestant religious group does not register with TSPM, its legal status is unclear. Some unregistered groups have been branded cults (*xiejiao*) and thus are viewed as illegal. Many other unregistered groups have not been given such a designation, and exist in a sort of limbo, neither clearly legal nor clearly illegal. The cult label is the most severe form of censure for unofficial religious groups, and can entail stiff penalties. Religious groups classified by the government as a cult “may be officially disbanded, and members of the groups may be persecuted if they persist.”²⁴

However, the rationale for inclusion on the list is not clearly defined.²⁵ In 2000, at a Beijing symposium on cults, local authorities were told that they should not examine the beliefs of any religious organization but should instead focus on whether the group is “harmful to society.”²⁶ Further, according to a 1997 interpretation by the People’s Supreme Court, Article 300 of the PRC Criminal Code allows Chinese authorities to “delegitimize any belief system that they deem to be superstitious or a so-called evil religious organization [also translated as an “evil religious cult”].”²⁷

Despite the fundamental difference in Constitutional stipulations and general governmental attitudes toward the regulation of religion in the U.S. and China, there has been some overlap between anti-cult activities in the two countries. For, China’s political leaders have taken many ideas from the American anti-cult movement in their campaigns against

unsanctioned religious groups.²⁸ In 2000, the Chinese government sent representatives to attend an anti-cult conference in Seattle. These representatives selected certain anti-cult ideologies to be used as the basis for Chinese government policies and propaganda with regard to groups designated as religious cults. American popular definitions of cults were written into Chinese criminal code, and lower-level cadres were trained in their implementation.²⁹ Further, Chinese political authorities have called upon American anti-cult scholars and activists to articulate the Chinese government's case for the designation of particular religious groups as cults.

Case Study: The Local Churches

As noted earlier, since the Local Churches have been labeled a "cult" in both the U.S. and China, the group serves as an excellent vehicle for comparing and contrasting the processes by which the political systems of each country interact with controversial religious groups. Further, as indicated above, the Local Churches provide an illuminating illustration of the global transmission and transformation of religion. As shown in more detail below, the global path of the Local Churches moved in a rather convoluted full circle: formed in China in reaction to the Western imposition of Protestant Christianity, the group was indigenized, then repressed domestically, then spread across the Pacific to America, where it was embraced by many young people but was seen as threatening and dangerous by mainstream American religious groups. When the political environment in China changed such that the group could publicly re-appear in China, it then quickly grew in size. Chinese authorities found it threatening to their power, and called upon American anti-cult activists to attest to the group's dangerous nature. These Americans agreed to do so because they had come to see the Local Churches as a cult when the group appeared and gained prominence in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s. Ironically, the words

of these Americans were then used by the Chinese government to stigmatize and repress the Local Churches back in China.

Church History

A closer examination of the history of the Local Churches uncovers the details of these interactions, as well as the different categorization processes that occurred in the U.S. and China. The Local Church movement began in Fuzhou, China in the early 1920s; its primary founder was the indigenous Chinese preacher and Bible expositor, Watchman Nee (Ni Tosheng, 倪柝聲 1903-1972). Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 李常受 AKA 李長壽 1905-1997), a native of Shandong Province, joined Nee's group in Shanghai in the early 1930s. He became Nee's close associate and an editor in Nee's publication ministry.³⁰ Nee and Lee were third-generation Christians in Western mission churches in China. Both spent time as members of Plymouth Brethren Assemblies prior to striking out on their own.³¹ Nee, Lee, and early members of the Local Churches expressed disgust with mission Christianity and sought to find a way to be Christian apart from Western cultural influences.³² The early Local Churches utilized a common strategy generally used by minority sects of a religion: namely, returning to a fundamentalist understanding of the religion's sacred text. The Local Churches further sought to emphasize the elements of scriptural and historical Christianity that would most appeal to their audience of Republican Era (1911-1949) Chinese people.³³

Nee's blueprint for Christian practice called for a loose network of independent congregations each overseen by a council of elders, similar to the organization of the Plymouth Brethren Assemblies.³⁴ Nee further insisted that each city or town have only one church with one eldership; hence, the name Local Churches. There were no formal clergy. A group of extra-local co-workers moved from church to church preaching upon the invitation of a locality's elders.

The co-workers had no control over local groups except through the power of their teaching; there was no central headquarters, and the co-workers did not receive fixed monetary compensation from any particular local church, churches, or central organization. Most of the elders were employed in regular professions and were volunteers in the church service. This mode of organization effectively removed Nee's group from the influence of foreign missions. Thus, it appealed to Chinese of the early twentieth century, who associated such missions with imperialism.³⁵

Since there was no guarantee that a co-worker would be available to preach in any given church on any given date, and since there were no official clergy, all members of the congregation were encouraged to participate in the universal priesthood of believers and to spend much of their free time engaged in church service. Nee drew upon the scriptural teachings and practices of the Pietists and Christian mystics, such as Madame Guyon and Jesse Penn-Lewis, to exhort church members to emphasize Christian prayer and practice in all matters of their daily lives.³⁶ Nee's emphasis on daily practice by all the believers made his version of Christianity attractive to average Chinese people because traditional Chinese religions were not institutionalized but were diffused in daily life and required active participation by believers.³⁷ This emphasis on spirituality in the midst of the believers' mundane life further differentiated the Local Church's practice of Christianity from mainstream Western Christian practices.

Nee's emphasis on all the members serving and on the entire network of Local Churches as the manifestation of the church universal created a strong sense of community, an important factor to people with a traditional Chinese worldview, which emphasizes relationship and community over isolated individuals.³⁸ In this aspect, Nee's fundamentalism differed greatly from American fundamentalism, which places much more emphasis on individual believers,

individual pastors, and individual congregations.³⁹ Nee and Lee also emphasized studying Scripture in a nuanced way with much attention to context and with a view to the writings of major theologians from all of church history.⁴⁰ They did not agree with the systematic, rationalized, reductionist theology, which according to Weber lies at the heart of Western capitalist society.⁴¹ As will be described in detail below, these cultural differences contributed to later misunderstandings with mainstream evangelical American Christians when Witness Lee brought the Local Churches to the United States in the 1960s.

Nee did not change the Christian message; rather, he contextualized Christianity to his time and place.⁴² In so doing, he inspired his followers and created a vibrant, enthusiastic Christian community, which grew quickly and met to worship boisterously and joyously. Indeed, Nee's movement can be considered an example of the "complex interaction between the global and the local"⁴³ that has occurred repeatedly throughout the history of globalization. His Local Churches show similarities to modern indigenous Pentecostal churches in South America as described by David Martin⁴⁴ and to the African Christian congregations in Europe, which in the present day "begin, in number and enthusiasm, to outgrow the indigenous (white European) church-goers."⁴⁵ These forms of Christianity represent a "glocalization" of the Christian religion in social contexts very different from Europe and the United States.⁴⁶ Furthermore, all of these forms of "indigenous" Christianity have come into conflict with mainstream Western Christian groups.⁴⁷

The Local Church movement grew in China under the leadership of both Nee and Lee until the Communist Revolution led to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (under the leadership of Mao Zedong), in 1949. At that time, Lee was sent to Taiwan to continue

the ministry work there. Nee remained in Shanghai, working among Local Church congregations in what was now the PRC.

Watchman Nee and the Local Churches in Mao-era (1949-1976) China first attempted to cooperate with the Communist government, as long as they were free to worship apart from government controls. But in 1951, some church leaders denounced Nee to the government, and in 1952, Nee was arrested. In 1956, Nee was “accused as a counter-revolutionary and charged with a series of crimes against the state. He was sentenced to fifteen years in prison and died in a labor camp in 1972.”⁴⁸ With Nee gone from church leadership, the Chinese government moved to take control of the Local Churches; however, various congregations used a variety of strategies and survived underground through the end of the Mao Era. During this time, some Local Church members and congregations joined the Chinese Communist Party-affiliated Three Self Patriotic Movement and ceased to be part of the Local Church network.⁴⁹

Witness Lee continued as the heir to Nee’s ministry work in Taiwan throughout the 1950s. The basic components of Lee’s Local Church teaching and practice were the same as those under Nee in mainland China (described above), but Lee refined the vision and practice over time.⁵⁰ In 1962, Lee immigrated to the United States and began to speak widely, preaching his and Nee’s version of Christianity in heavily-accented English, which was often difficult for average Americans to understand.⁵¹ Nonetheless, in the late 1960s, the Local Church movement began to take off in the U.S., especially in California.⁵²

The Making of a Cult in the U.S.

In the 1970s, when American evangelical Christians encountered Local Churches under the ministry of Witness Lee, they were put off by the unfamiliar doctrinal terminology used by Lee and by the strong Chinese influence that was evident even in Western congregations.⁵³ As

Local Church members proselytized on American campuses, they came into conflict with mainstream evangelical groups, such as Inter-varsity.⁵⁴ Eventually, these campus conflicts raised questions within the anti-cult movement. During the mid to late 1970s, two research organizations of the anti-cult movement—the Christian Research Institute (CRI) of Charlotte, NC and the Spiritual Counterfeit Project (SCP) of Berkeley, CA—researched and published “highly critical evaluations” of the Local Churches. These reports did not call the Local Churches a cult, but were cited in later publications that did.⁵⁵

Although Witness Lee and CRI founder Walter Martin met in 1977 and felt they had found common ground with which to foster understanding between the two groups, most of the CRI research staff did not trust Lee and felt that Martin had been deceived.⁵⁶ Other members of the Local Churches lacked the forbearance of their leader, and both sides continued arguing and skirmishing.⁵⁷ The conflict between the Local Churches and the anti-cult movement worsened after the publication of two books on cults: *The Mind Benders*, by Jack Sparks and *The God-Men*, by the SCP staff.⁵⁸ Jack Sparks had been associated with the forerunner to the SCP, and his book was based on the same SCP research as *The God-Men*.⁵⁹ *The Mind Benders* was a book on cults, and one of its chapters described the Local Churches as an Eastern cult that brainwashed and abused its members. *The God-Men* was entirely devoted to describing the errors of Witness Lee’s theology and church practices.⁶⁰ In 1981, an updated version of *The Mind-Benders* placed a chapter on Jim Jones and the People’s Temple directly after the chapter on the Local Churches.

Immediately thereafter, The Local Churches took to the courts to clear their name. They filed a lawsuit, which ended with a 1983 settlement agreement. In accordance with the settlement agreement, Thomas Nelson Publishers (the well-known American Christian publisher that put

out *The Mind Benders*) retracted the book and published a retraction in eighteen American newspapers.⁶¹

In 1979, Neil Duddy and the SCP wrote a much-revised German edition of *The God-Men* that in 1981 was published in English by Inter-Varsity Press. The book contained allegations of brainwashing, financial irregularities, “moral pygmyism,” and total control by church leaders over the believers’ lives.⁶² The Local Churches took the matter court. Judge Leon Seyranian of The Superior Court of Alameda County, California, heard testimony from the following expert witnesses: John Gorton Melton, Ph.D. and Director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion; John Albert Saliba, SJ, Ph.D. and Professor of Anthropology of Religion at University of Detroit; Eugene Goetchius, PhD, Th.D. and Professor of Biblical Languages at Episcopal Theological Seminary and Philadelphia Divinity School; Rodney Stark, Ph.D. and Professor of Sociology and Comparative Religion at University of Washington; and H. Newton Malony, Ph.D. and Senior Professor of Psychology in the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary. All testified that the Local Churches were a non-conventional yet orthodox Christian group and that they found no evidence of mind control or detrimental effects of membership to Local Church believers.⁶³ Moreover, the pre-trial depositions of Neil Duddy and other people involved with writing and publishing the second edition of *The God-Men* showed that they had either “willingly and knowingly falsified the truth” or “exhibited a reckless disregard for the truth” when writing the book.⁶⁴ Therefore, Judge Seyranian ruled in favor of Witness Lee and the Local Churches, awarding them a combined total of \$11,900,000 in damages. They were unable to collect in full because SCP had declared bankruptcy the day before the trial in anticipation that it would lose.⁶⁵

This judgment did little to ameliorate the views of the anti-cult movement with respect to the Local Churches. Elliot Miller of CRI reports that the conflict between the Local Churches and the anti-cult movement “remained at a low boil” for many years after the 1985 trial.⁶⁶ John Gordon Melton, one of the experts who had testified at the trial, sent an open letter to the American evangelical community, encouraging them to reevaluate their condemnation of Witness Lee and the Local Churches in light of the libelous nature of the unfair accusations in *The God-Men*.⁶⁷ His exhortations went largely unheeded. Living Stream Ministry leaders estimate that there have been roughly 300 republications of the assessment of the Local Churches found in *The God-Men*.⁶⁸

The Local Churches sued their detractors for a third time in 2001. In 1999, Harvest House published the *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* by John Ankerberg and John Weldon, which included a chapter on the Local Churches, and which again connected the Local Churches by association and inference with brainwashing, mind control, and other nefarious practices.⁶⁹ The Living Stream Ministry and sixty Local Church congregations sued Harvest House in 2001, but the Texas courts ruled in favor of Harvest House in 2006, stating that the courts have “no business ruling on a ‘religious’ dispute.”⁷⁰

Because they had concerns about the quality of research found in Ankerberg and Weldon’s 1999 publication, CRI researchers decided to revisit their investigation on the Local Churches.⁷¹ In 2009, Elliot Miller of the Christian Research Institute and Gretchen Passantino Coburn of Answers in Action, two of the researchers from CRI and SCP who had done the original 1970s research on the Local Churches, published the results of new research in which they retracted their previous conclusion that the Local Churches were an “aberrant” form of Christianity and affirmed their new conclusion that the Churches are orthodox but different.⁷²

Passantino Coburn gave five reasons for their earlier erroneous conclusions: 1) they had automatically assumed that their problems with “problematic [Local Church] teaching ... stemmed from heresy or confusion on their part rather than misunderstanding on our part;” 2) the material studied in the 1970s was deficient in depth and breadth because a) there was little in print in America, b) much was not easily accessible to them, and c) most of what was published in the 1970s was written with a view to being explained as it was read by more experienced church members (here Passantino notes that Lee’s Eastern heritage meant his writings “did not reflect the rational, didactic, Aristotelian exposition familiar to us, causing us to suspect theological error rather than mere cultural difference”⁷³); 3) Nee and Lee’s theological approach was different from the systematic theology of Western evangelical Protestantism; 4) SCP isolated the teachings of the Local Churches from their historical and cultural roots, failing to understand the cultural context of early twentieth-century China where the group began; and 5) both the SCP researchers and Local Church members in the 1970s were “immature, inexperienced, and sometimes insensitive.”⁷⁴ Similarly, Elliott Miller asserts that “the [Local Church’s] distinctively Chinese approach to the universal truths of Christianity has contributed significantly to their being misunderstood and mislabeled as a cult in the West.”⁷⁵ Thus, it appears that the main reason the Local Churches were labeled a cult was because they were too “Chinese” for mainstream evangelical Protestants in 1970s America.

Despite the testimony of religious scholars and the retractions and revised conclusions from the original researchers condemning the group, many American evangelicals have remained unconvinced. Harvest House has not retracted its entry in the *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*, and Apologetics Index has criticized Passantino Coburn and CRI for their retraction of the cult label.⁷⁶ However, other evangelical bodies, such as Christianity Today and Fuller

Seminary, are no longer antagonistic towards the Local Churches.⁷⁷ Living Stream Ministry (LSM) leaders state that earlier publications that disparage the Local Churches as a dangerous cult have influenced public opinion in a way that has been impossible to revise, even with successful lawsuits and public statements by former detractors recanting their prior criticisms of the group. LSM leaders liken the effect of these earlier criticisms as “opening a feather pillow in the wind;” even if one succeeds in mending the tear in the pillow, the feathers can never be retrieved and stuffed back in. These leaders assert that they must go “person by person, campus by campus” to clear their group’s name. And, they claim that whenever they are successful in attracting college students as followers, campus Inter-varsity representatives seek out those students and inform them that the Local Churches are a cult.⁷⁸

Overall, the case of Witness Lee and the Local Churches demonstrates the bottom-up nature of religious categorization in the U.S. The initial designation of the Local Churches as a cult did not involve the government or legal system, but rather occurred at the societal level, as groups that felt threatened by the spread of the Local Churches took action to “protect” themselves and other “vulnerable” individuals from the group’s influence. Along with kidnapping Local Church followers, opponents of the Local Churches published materials that described the group as a pernicious cult. When the Local Churches sued these publishers, the U.S. legal system became involved in the process. In two cases, the Local Churches prevailed, and in one of these cases the group was awarded damages (though the compensation was never paid out). In a third case, the court refused to intervene in the dispute, which effectively meant that the Local Churches lost in their bid to clear their name in Harvest House publications. Meanwhile, some of the members of the anti-cult movement who had earlier written key documents used to categorize the Local Churches as a cult publicly recanted their earlier criticisms, explaining in

detail why they had come to their previous, and in their view erroneous, conclusions about the group. In addition, some evangelical groups that previously considered the Local Churches to be a cult have ceased to hold this view. However, other evangelical groups, publishers, and leaders have maintained their assertion that the group is indeed a dangerous cult. Thus, it is a contradictory and convoluted situation. No legal or governmental entity has officially categorized the group as a cult, and two courts have ruled that it is libelous to publicly call the group a cult. At the societal level, some key individuals and groups have recanted their earlier designation of the group as a cult, while other powerful individuals and groups have continued to describe the group as a cult and to work to prevent its expansion.

The Making of a Cult in the PRC

In contrast to the grassroots origin of the American anti-cult movement, the process by which the Local Churches were categorized as a cult in China was top-down and began in the political system. At the societal level, there has been no “anti-cult movement” in China, although there have been some religious leaders who have denounced the Local Churches and have participated in the government’s efforts to describe the group as a cult. Interestingly, the Chinese government utilized the anti-Local Churches writings of American anti-cult movement leaders in its rationale for categorizing the group as a cult. However, unlike in the U.S., in China, the group’s designation as a cult does not seem to have made regular people believe that the group actually is a dangerous cult. Although the government’s castigation of the group may cause some Chinese citizens to shy away from the group out of fear of political reprisals, the group has in recent years grown and expanded in many areas within the PRC.

As noted above, the Local Churches flourished in the period preceding China’s communist revolution. During the Mao era, the Local Churches were forced to go underground

as they realized that cooperating with TSPM officials would not give them freedom of religion. Joseph Tse-wei Lee reports that the Local Churches expanded at first by forming coalitions with other churches, whose missionary leaders had been forced out of China. The government launched a campaign against the group in the late 1950s, but the members still managed to practice their faith by using various strategies.⁷⁹ According to Xi Lian, the Local Churches had 20,000 active believers during the late 1960s just in the area surrounding the city of Fuzhou in Fujian Province on the southeast coast of China.⁸⁰

In the post-Mao era, the Local Churches publicly re-appeared and expanded, only to be categorized as an “evil religious cult” just a few years later. Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the ascension of pragmatist Deng Xiaoping to the pinnacle of China’s political leadership in 1978, China’s ruling CCP endorsed a remarkable degree of social and political loosening—including greater openness to the West. Taking advantage of this freer political environment, members of Local Church congregations outside China traveled to the mainland to seek out congregations that had gone underground during the Mao Era.⁸¹ According to Xi Lian, “the bagfuls of Bibles and Shouters’ tracts (as well as occasional stacks of cash) that Li Changshou’s (aka Witness Lee’s) messengers brought were limited in amount. However, in the early 1980s, they represented spiritual, and material, fortunes to those underground church leaders who linked up with the overseas brethren.”⁸² In 1979, the Chinese government made an attempt to re-institute TSPM offices, which (along with many other government bodies) had been largely shut down during Mao’s radical Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976. However, the newly re-instated TSPM offices were mainly confined to big coastal cities; they continued to be defunct in inland areas and the countryside. Meanwhile, Local Church membership expanded quickly and dramatically, particularly in inland areas.⁸³

Academics, church leaders, and CCP documents all agree that by 1983, the Chinese government was alarmed at the rapid growth and influence of the Local Churches throughout China. According to LSM leaders, the government's decision to take action against the group was sparked by events in Dongyang county, Zhejiang province, in early 1982. In the account of LSM leaders, around that time, overseas Local Church leaders sent two representatives to Dongyang in order to set up a local congregation there. However, Dongyang's Christians did not welcome their arrival. Shortly thereafter, local TSPM and CCP leaders broke up the newly-established Local Church congregation. Concurrently, a similar chain of events occurred in Dongwu county.

These events brought the Local Churches to the attention of central government leaders. According to LSM leaders, in early 1983, the CCP's United Front Department sent a representative to Shanghai to formulate a plan of action against the group. The United Front representative met with local TSPM leaders, including two former Local Church members who had in 1956 joined the TSPM and opposed Witness Lee. The United Front representative enlisted these two individuals to write a critical account of the Local Churches. The Chinese government also contacted individuals in America and Hong Kong who were friendly to the TSPM, who agreed to help with the project. The finished document drew heavily on the accounts of the Local Churches found in *The God-Men* and *The Mind Benders*. Using this critical report as its justification, the CCP branded the Local Churches/Shouters as a "cult."⁸⁴ Indeed, the Local Churches head the list of "seven cults identified in the documents issued by General Office of the Central Committee of CCP and by the General Office of the State." The CCP document states that the group "infiltrated into China in 1979. Till 1983 this sect has already spread to 360 counties, cities in 20 provinces and autonomous regions, with up to 200,000 deceived

believers.”⁸⁵ It is also in this document that the group is given the appellation “The Shouters.”⁸⁶ LSM leaders add that this was the first time that Witness Lee was associated with the “Shouters.”

Subsequently, in the summer of 1983 the Local Churches was targeted in the first anti-cult campaign of the post-Mao era. Contemporaneous accounts of this crack-down on the Local Churches show its top-down origins and political overtones. The July 21, 1983 edition of the *Fuzhou Evening Newspaper* reports on the crack-down against the group in Fuzhou in an article entitled “Our City Punishes Lawbreakers from ‘Shouters’ Reactionary Organization.” The slogan above the article states: “Fighting against Counter-Revolutionaries under the Cloak of Religion.” The article reports the July 14, 1983 arrest of Local Church leaders who “use religion as their cover and zealously attack the Communist Party and the People’s Government, opposing the socialistic system.”⁸⁷ The anonymous testimony of another church leader in Fuqing City, Fujian Province reports that on July 14, 1983 nineteen people from his Local Church were arrested in this “strike-hard” campaign. He states that after a year in jail, he was tried and convicted of four separate “crimes,” one of which was meeting with an outside Local Church leader from Hong Kong, an action which violated China’s “Three Self” principles for religions. Many people were sentenced to death in this particular campaign; the anonymous author was “only sentenced to ten years in prison.”⁸⁸ After 1983, Chinese Local Churches experienced cycles of tightening and loosening government repression, as did most Protestant house church groups in China, but the cult label meant that they were targeted more often with harsher punishments.⁸⁹

The cult designation has had a different impact in China than it has in the U.S. In the U.S., although the government (or at least parts of the legal system) has essayed to clear the group’s name, and some individuals and groups within American society have recanted their earlier castigation of the group, other societal actors have continued to categorize the group as a cult and

have worked to maintain this perception of the group within the general public. According to LSM leaders, the latter have been quite successful in this regard; most Americans who are familiar with the group view it as a cult.⁹⁰ In China, in contrast, the pinnacle of the political system has persisted in its labeling of the group as a cult, but at lower levels of the political system, officials have had a more mixed attitude, and in some areas have tolerated or even accepted the group's activities. And, particularly in areas where local authorities have a positive attitude toward the group, significant numbers of citizens have joined the group—despite its official designation as a cult.

Indeed, LSM leaders report that since 2005, they have traveled to mainland China (particularly Shanghai) roughly twice a year to meet with local officials in charge of dealing with the “Shouters.”⁹¹ They state that there is great local variation in the government's treatment of the group. In general, they note that in larger coastal cities (such as Shanghai), and also in Beijing, Local Church groups are flourishing, and hold regular meetings with as many as 200 congregants, and on occasion roughly 1000. In inland areas as well, LSM leaders state that Local Church membership is very large. However, in order to avoid the perception that the group is a threat to “social order,” in inland areas gatherings are much smaller, with only a few dozen congregants at most. The difference in local treatment, according to LSM leaders, hinges on the relationships among local political authorities, local TSPM leaders, and local Local Church leaders. LSM leaders also report that official attitudes toward the group tend to shift over time. On their most recent trip to Shanghai (in October 2013), for example, the local official with whom they typically meet told them that he was too busy to meet with them because he was swamped with his work to crack down on another “evil religious cult”—the Almighty God church. Further, since roughly the turn of the new millennium, every five years there has been a

wholesale leadership change across all levels of government, such that Local Church leaders have had to establish relationships with new political officials, who may or may not have the same attitude toward the group as did their predecessors.⁹²

In their efforts to clear the Local Churches name, LSM leaders reported first meeting with leaders of the TSPM, but after discovering that the TSPM has no real power, they began meeting with leaders of the Chinese political system's higher bodies for controlling religions—the United Front Department and the SARA.⁹³ LSM leaders state that most high-placed government officials are aware that the “cult” label has no basis in fact, but the Chinese officials in question do not have the power to remove the group from China's cult list. In 2009, the LSM leaders thought they had things worked out with Chinese officials to remove the group's cult status, but in 2010, there was a change in SARA leadership and they had to begin all over again. At present, church leaders believe that in order to clear the group's name, they will have to find a backer on the Central Committee of the CCP, who might be able to persuade the other Committee members to remove the group from the list. Until such time, in China, the group will be subject to the vicissitudes of CCP policy, and its members will live under constant threat of arrest and imprisonment. However, at the grassroots level, Local Church congregations may be expected to continue to flourish in many areas of China.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the case of Witness Lee and the Local Churches provides a window into the contrasts between the U.S. and the PRC as they deal with NRMs that develop and spread through globalization. The group's experience in the U.S. confirms that, here, grassroots opinion is paramount in the process by which a religious group is labeled a cult. Relatedly, the case of the Local Churches demonstrates the relative impotence of legal judgments and academic research in

influencing grassroots opinions about religious groups. Although Local Church congregations in the U.S. do not face arrest and imprisonment, the label of “cult” frequently “scares off” people from joining the group.⁹⁴ Despite court rulings and public statements by former detractors declaring that the group is benign, and decidedly not worthy of the cult designation, members of the Local Churches are often viewed askance by their non-member friends and relatives.⁹⁵ Moreover, there is really nothing more that the group can do to change grassroots opinion; the cult label appears to be very “sticky” in the minds of the American public. Further, Chinese are still a minority group in contemporary American society, and a Chinese interpretation of Christianity is frequently rejected as a matter of course by members of mainstream Western Christian groups. Nevertheless, the group meets freely and openly, owns a large publishing company, runs a leadership training center, and its members freely practice their faith. The tone of ministry is generally upbeat and recent conferences include talks on “enjoying Christ” and “the growth in life.”⁹⁶

In contrast, the cult classification of the Local Churches in China originates at the highest echelons of the government. The Local Churches top the list of cults named by the Central Committee of the CCP. This classification appears to be mainly political, and it most likely stems from CCP fears that the group is too resistant to government control and has too many connections to congregations and resources outside China. Grassroots Chinese citizens, in contrast, seem to be quite receptive to the Local Churches, as is evidenced by their large number of members in China, even in the face of possible imprisonment and government sanctions. In fact, if the Central Committee of the CCP were to change its ruling on the Local Churches and to remove the group from its cult list, the action would probably meet with approval at the grassroots level, and the residue of the cult label would be almost completely washed away in the

minds of Chinese citizens. To the disappointment of the Local Churches, the CCP is unlikely to change its mind any time soon, and therefore, its members in China will continue live under constant threat of repression for their faith. This threat slightly changes the tenor of the church experience for members of congregations in China. Chinese church leaders tend to write hymns about bearing the cross and suffering for Jesus, which resonate strongly with grassroots members.⁹⁷ Indeed, recent arrivals to the U.S. from China report feeling “less spiritual” in an un-repressive social atmosphere.⁹⁸

For the foreseeable future, the Local Churches will most likely continue to bear the cult label both in China and the U.S. In America, this is due to grassroots efforts on the part of individuals and groups who view the group as a dangerous threat, and who have succeeded in popularizing this conception. In China, in contrast, the Local Churches’ continued castigation results from the CCP’s fear of losing control over society through the expansion of a group that is both popular domestically and has access to foreign resources. These differences in the respective sources of the “cult” designation will continue to produce subtle differences in the attitudes and experiences of Local Church members in each country.

¹ Members actually call it the “local churches” without any capitals, but for purposes of clarity we add capitals to differentiate the group from what most people think of as the local church on the corner, which might be Baptist or Catholic or Mormon.

² Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, Anaheim, CA, August 2011.

³ Wright, Teresa and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu, “Engaging and Evading the Party-State: Unofficial Chinese Protestant Groups in China’s Reform Era,” *China: an International Journal*, 11(1), April 2013: 1-20.

⁴ Richardson, James T. and Mary White Stewart, “Medicalization and Regulation of Deviant Religions: An Application of Conrad and Schneider’s Model,” *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from Around the Globe*, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004: 507-534, pp. 508, 527-528.

⁵ Richardson, James T., “Definitions of Cult: From Sociological-Technical to Popular-Negative,” *Review of Religious Research* 34(4), June 1993: 348-356; p. 349.

⁶ Stark, Rodney and William Bainbridge, “Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 18(2), 1979: 117-133; p. 125.

⁷ Richardson, “Definitions of Cult,” p. 351.

⁸ Robbins, Thomas, “Church, State and Cult,” *Sociological Analysis*, 42 (3), 1981: 209-225, pp. 210-211; Robbins, Thomas and Dick Anthony, “Brainwashing and the Persecution of ‘Cults,’” *Journal of Religion and Health*, 19(1), Spring 1980: 66-69; Barker, Eileen, *The Making of a Moonie*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1984, pp. 250-251.

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- ⁹ Richardson, James T., "Regulating Religion: A Sociological and Historical Introduction," *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from Around the Globe*, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004: 1-22, p. 1.
- ¹⁰ Barker, "The Making of a Moonie," p. 64.
- ¹¹ Interview with Gretchen Passantino Coburn, Costa Mesa, CA, August 2013.
- ¹² Robbins, Thomas and Dick Anthony, "Deprogramming, Brainwashing and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups," *Social Problems*, 29 (3), February 1982: 283-297.
- ¹³ Hill, Harvey, John Hickman and Joel McLendon, "Cults and Sects and Domsday Groups, Oh My: Media Treatment of Religion on the Eve of the Millennium," *Review of Religious Research*, 43(1) September 2001: 24-38; p. 34.
- ¹⁴ Wybraniec, John and Roger Finke, "Religious Regulation and the Courts: The Judiciary's Changing Role in Protecting Minority Religions from Majoritarian Rule," *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from Around the Globe*, ed. James Richardson, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004: 535-553, p. 536.
- ¹⁵ Robbins and Anthony, 1982: 283-297.
- ¹⁶ Wybraniec and Finke, "Religious Regulation and the Courts," pp. 536-537.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 538.
- ¹⁸ Liu, Kwang-Ching and Richard Shek, "Introduction," *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004: 1-15, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ Palmer, David A., "Heretical Doctrines, Reactionary Societies, Evil Cults: Labeling Heterodoxy in Twentieth-century China," *Chinese Religiosities: Afflictions of Modernity and State Formation*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008: 113-134, p. 126.
- ²⁰ Pittman, Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *China Quarterly* 174 2003: p. 319.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- ²² The "three-self" refers to self-propagating, self-supported, and self-governed. The intent is to ensure that religious groups are free of any external (ie., foreign) influences—a concern that derives from the Western missionary role in bringing Christianity to China. While the TSPM oversees relations between the government and Protestant religious groups, the official Chinese Christian Association (*Zhongguo jidujiao xiehui*) is charged with managing relations among Protestant religious groups.
- ²³ People's Republic of China State Council Order No. 250, published by the State Council at the eighth ordinary session, September 25, 1998; Religious Affairs Regulations, article 6. Cited in Lauren B. Homer, "Registration of Chinese House Churches under China's 2005 Regulation on Religious Affairs," *Journal of Church and State* 52(1): p. 57.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ Wright, Teresa and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu, "Engaging and Evading the Party-State: Unofficial Chinese Protestant Groups in China's Reform Era," *China: an International Journal*, 11(1) April 2013: pp.5, 10.
- ²⁶ Richardson and Edelman, "Cult Controversies," 2004, p. 368.
- ²⁷ Richardson, James T. and Bryan Edelman, "Cult Controversies and Legal Developments Concerning New Religions in Japan and China," *Regulating Religion: Case Studies from Around the Globe*, ed. James T. Richardson, New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004: 359-380, p. 368.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Edelman and Richardson, "Imposed Limitations," 2004, p. 258
- ³⁰ Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, August 2011; Lian, Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010: p. 195
- ³¹ Melton, J. Gordon, Transcript of expert testimony in Superior Court of Alameda County, CA, in *The Experts Speak: Concerning Witness Lee and the Local Churches*, Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1995: 19-83, p. 22
- ³² Zimmerman-Liu, Teresa, "The Divine and Mystical Realm: Removing Chinese Christianity from the Fixed Structures of Mission Church and Clergy," *Social Sciences and Missions*, Forthcoming. (Such anti-imperialistic sentiments with respect to mission Christianity were common among indigenous Chinese Christians of the early twentieth century.)
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ The Plymouth Brethren Assemblies were a fundamental Christian movement founded in Dublin in the late 19th Century by John Nelson Darby and his associates. They eschewed national churches and large denominational

churches, instead advocating a network of independent congregations with no formal clergy. The congregations strove to base their teachings and practices on the Bible alone.

³⁵ Zimmerman-Liu, "The Divine and Mystical Realm."

³⁶ Experience of the co-author 1978-2008.

³⁷ Yang, C. K., *Religion in Chinese Society*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967, p. 296.

³⁸ Nisbitt, Richard, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why*, New York: Free Press, 2003, p. 6.

³⁹ Ammerman, Nancy, *Bible Believers: Fundamentalists in the Modern World*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987; Smith, Christian, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, pp. 6-9, 13-15.

⁴⁰ Experience of the co-author 1978-2008.

⁴¹ Weber, Max, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism with Other Writings on the Rise of the West*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009: 59-159.

⁴² Zimmerman-Liu, Forthcoming; c.f. Stump, R. W., 2008, p. 111.

⁴³ Hytrek, Gary and Kristine Zentgraf, *America Transformed: Globalization, Inequality, and Power*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 68.

⁴⁴ Martin, David, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

⁴⁵ Gerloff, Roswith, "Religion, Culture, and Resistance: The Significance of African Christian Communities in Europe," *Exchange* 30(3), July 2001: 276-289, p. 285.

⁴⁶ Bays, Daniel, *A New History of Christianity in China*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 205.

⁴⁷ See Martin, "Tongues of Fire" and Gerloff, "Religion, Culture, and Resistance."

⁴⁸ Lee, Joseph Tse-Hei, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," *Church History*, 74 (1), March 2005: 68-96, p. 87.

⁴⁹ Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, Anaheim, CA, August 2011.

⁵⁰ Ibid., Experience of co-author 1978-2008.

⁵¹ Experience of co-author 1978-2008.

⁵² Ibid.; Lee, "Watchman Nee," p. 93.

⁵³ Miller, Elliot, "Cultic, Aberrant, or (Unconventionally) Orthodox? A Reassessment of the "Local Church" Movement," *Journal of the Christian Research Institute*, 32(6), 2009: 7; Interview with Gretchen Passantino Coburn, Costa Mesa, CA, August 2013.

⁵⁴ Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, Anaheim, CA August 2011.

⁵⁵ Miller, "Reassessment", p. 7.

⁵⁶ Gretchen Passantino Coburn notes that because Lee invited Martin to discuss their differences over a meal, in accordance with Chinese etiquette, Martin's colleagues believed he had been "bought" because they lacked insight into the Chinese culture. Interview with Gretchen Passantino Coburn, Costa Mesa, CA, August 2013.

⁵⁷ Miller, Elliot, "The 'Local Church' as Movement and Source of Controversy," *Journal of the Christian Research Institute*, 32(6), 2009: 8-13; p. 11.

⁵⁸ Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, Anaheim, CA August 2011; Miller, 'Local Church', 2009, p. 12

⁵⁹ Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, August 2011.

⁶⁰ Personal experience of the co-author who received copies of the 1977 versions of both *The Mind Benders* and *The God-Men* from an Inter-Varsity worker at Georgetown University after she joined the Local Church in Washington, D. C. in 1978.

⁶¹ Miller, "The 'Local Church'," p. 12.

⁶² Seyranian, 25 June 1985 Judgment, p. 7-16.

⁶³ Transcript of expert testimony in Superior Court of Alameda County, CA, in *The Experts Speak: Concerning Witness Lee and the Local Churches*, Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1995; Seyranian, 25 June 1985 Judgment.

⁶⁴ Seyranian, 25 June 1985 Judgment.

⁶⁵ Miller, "The 'Local Church'," p. 12.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Melton, J. Gordon, *An Open Letter Concerning the Local Church, Witness Lee and The God-Men Controversy*, Santa Barbara: Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1985.

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- ⁶⁸ Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, Anaheim, CA, October 16, 2013.
- ⁶⁹ Miller, "The 'Local Church'," p. 12; Miller, Elliot, "Addressing the Open Letter's Concerns: On Lawsuits with Evangelical Christians," *Journal of the Christian Research Institute*, 32(6), 2009: 38-47, p. 42-43.
- ⁷⁰ Miller, "The 'Local Church'," p. 12.
- ⁷¹ Interview with Gretchen Passantino Coburn, Costa Mesa, CA, August 2013.
- ⁷² *Journal of Christian Research Institute*, 32(6), 2009.
- ⁷³ Passantino, Gretchen, "No Longer a Heretical Threat; Now Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ: Why, concerning the Local Churches, I No Longer Criticize, but Instead Commend," *Journal of Christian Research Institute*, 32(6), 2009: 48-50, p. 49.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.
- ⁷⁵ Miller, Elliot, "Addressing the Open Letter's Concerns: On the Nature of Humanity," *Journal of Christian Research*, 32(6), 2009: 24-31, p. 31.
- ⁷⁶ "Gretchen Passantino also Supports a Cult of Christianity," <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/376-gretchen-passantino-supports-a-cult-of-christianity>, accessed 27 July 2013.
- ⁷⁷ Hansen, Collin, "Cult Watchers Reconsider" *Christianity Today*, 1/29/2009, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/januaryweb-only/104-11.0.html>, accessed 27 July 2013.
- ⁷⁸ Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, Anaheim, CA, October 16, 2013.
- ⁷⁹ Lee, "Watchman Nee," pp. 88, 92.
- ⁸⁰ Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*, p. 207.
- ⁸¹ Bays, *A New History*, p. 195.
- ⁸² Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*, p. 217.
- ⁸³ Interview with LSM leaders, October 16, 2013.
- ⁸⁴ Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*, p. 218; Interview with LSM leaders, October 16, 2013; Interview with LSM leaders, August 2011.
- ⁸⁵ *Report Analyzing Seven Secret Chinese Government Documents on Religious Freedom*, Washington, DC, Center for Religious Freedom/Hudson Institute, 2002, p. 17.
- ⁸⁶ Bays, *A New History*, p. 191
- ⁸⁷ *Fuzhou Evening Newspaper*, 21 July 1983, translated by Teresa Zimmerman-Liu, Personal archives of co-author
- ⁸⁸ Anonymous, *Shen en hao da* (God's Grace is Great), Taipei: Taiwan Gospel Book Room, 2002, pp. 118-121, translated by Teresa Zimmerman-Liu.
- ⁸⁹ Wright and Zimmerman-Liu, 2013, pp. 6, 10, 16, 21.
- ⁹⁰ Interview with LSM leaders, October 16, 2013.
- ⁹¹ In response to their categorization as a cult in the U.S. and China, the Local Churches have established on their Anaheim, California-based Living Stream Ministry corporate campus a separate organization called the Defense and Confirmation Project (DCP), which consists of a team tasked with clearing the group's name of the cult accusation. The LSM leaders who travel to China to meet with political authorities are part of this team [Interview with LSM leaders, August 2011].
- ⁹² Interview with LSM leaders, October 16, 2013.
- ⁹³ Interview with Living Stream Ministry leaders, August 2011.
- ⁹⁴ Stark, Rodney, Transcript of expert testimony in Superior Court of Alameda County, CA, in *The Experts Speak: Concerning Witness Lee and the Local Churches*, Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1995: 129-145, p. 143.
- ⁹⁵ Experience of the co-author 1978-2008.
- ⁹⁶ Conference Outlines, Living Stream Ministry website, <http://www.lsm.org/outlines.html>, accessed February 22, 2014.
- ⁹⁷ Anonymous, *Shen en hao da* (God's Grace is Great).
- ⁹⁸ Personal knowledge of co-author from translation work for recently immigrated Local Church members, 2001-2008.