Hoping for success, becoming a spiritual subject: Converted returnees in China

Miguel Pérez-Milans, *University College London (UK)*
Guo (Grace) Xiaoyan, *University of International Business and Economics (China)*

Abstract

This article focuses on the entanglement of trajectories of transnational education/work and religious conversion among Chinese overseas students who move to the UK before returning to China. In contrast to the existing literature on returnees where the gaze is only turned on highly prestigious schemes/trajectories of return, we look at those who become involved with Christian evangelical congregations and bible reading groups in response to a general state of disillusion with social beliefs of global competition and success. By drawing on ongoing ethnographic fieldwork in London and Beijing, we engage with literature on lived religion, migration and the care of the self through a sociolinguistic lens. We take pressures for successful return as a technology of hope that shaped our participants' experiences of Christian conversion, and examine religious practices as support-based subject-transformation projects whereby our participants regulate their and others' practices and feelings through daily semiotic activities as they operate within global spaces of higher education and the labour market. In so doing, we detail a complex interplay of self-transformation experiences, collective practices of refusal, and capitalist logics of market expansion.

Keywords: Success; return; hope; Christian conversion; subjectivation; labour; China.

1. Introduction

Literature on so-called "returnees" in China has bloomed over the last couple of decades, with existing work coming from a variety of disciplinary perspectives within the social sciences. Used to designate Chinese nationals who migrate to study and work abroad for a period of time before returning to the Chinese labour market, this category of citizenship has captured the attention of a wide variety of scholars from economics (e.g., Welch & Hao, 2015), management and business studies (e.g., Liu, Lu & Choi, 2014), higher education studies (e.g., Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016), international relations (e.g., Li, 2010), sociology (e.g., Gu, 2015), intercultural studies (e.g., X. Shi, 2017) and applied linguistics (e.g. L. Shi, 2003).

A key trigger of this shared interest is the scale of return migration experienced in China during this period of time, set against the background of China's sustained economic growth and the high degree of economic stagnation, instability and uncertainty faced in Europe and North America. But despite diversity in theories and epistemologies, a closer look at this body of literature soon reveals a rather specific and prevailing focus. The vast majority of these studies draw their attention to the experiences of highly-skilled entrepreneurs making it back to China through prestigious talent-attraction schemes. As a result, readers interested in this topic are likely to be confronted with discussions about the linguistic and cultural factors that may have a more significant impact on the successful re-integration of these specific returnees.

We became interested in this literature as part of an ongoing ethnographic project that began in 2017 and focused on the trajectories of young professionals in the making as they (a) moved from China to enrol in UK higher education (BA/MA degrees), (b) joined the labour market in different sectors, and (c) returned to Beijing.[1] As we initiated a first round of interviews with our research participants, we soon realised that all of them struggled throughout their trajectories, which stood in contrast to the overwhelming body of publications where the gaze is mainly turned on the experiences of those returning through highly-regarded schemes of re-patriation (e.g., The Thousand Talents Plan). All our participants received a higher education in the UK, but none fulfilled the official criteria for applying to such talent-based re-patriation schemes; most indeed claimed that such schemes were out of reach for them. They made their way through internationally prestigious universities which allowed them to distinguish themselves from other graduates in the saturated market of higher education in China. However, their academic profiles weren't outstanding enough to access the very top institutions in the UK and so they couldn't stand out among those coming out of the World's highest-ranked universities (including those in China).

In a higher education system driven by values of profit, British universities have become internationally popular for offering "English-speaking" environments and educational certifications that carry prestige in the global labour market (Gray, O'Regan & Wallace, 2018). This is particularly the case for students from China who, according to governmental reports, have been largely attracted to the UK at a time in which China is the biggest international student-sending country in the world (British Council, 2015). In these reports, Chinese (international fee-paying) students are portrayed as the largest portion among overseas students in the UK, amounting to 35% of all non-EU students in the 2018/19 academic year (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2020). Pressurised to improve their competitiveness by studying abroad, most of these international Chinese students are reportedly drawn by the promise of employability and career development offered by these UK institutions (Wang, Miao & Zheng, 2016). All of this despite overseas students from China reportedly facing growing rates of mental health disorders, suicide, unemployability and/or uncertainty (see, for instance, Zhou, 2014).

During their period of study in the UK, our participants grappled with a complex set of feelings and emotions, mainly a strong sense of isolation and overwhelming stress in coping

with family and societal expectations for them to succeed academically and professionally. They had engaged with protestant evangelical congregations that operate in Britain in the first instance, before later becoming involved with underground house churches and bible reading groups upon their return to China.[2] They reportedly did so in response to a general state of unhappiness and dissatisfaction with their experiences at university and work, which they hoped these congregations and bible reading groups could help overcome. In their view, these platforms offered them a way to cope with the anxiety of fulfilling the societal demands for a successful return by collaboratively building spaces in which competition is overridden by a common, spiritual goal. As one of them put it: "it's about no longer feeling judged and evaluated by others all the time because now I know that I'm only judged in the eyes of God".

In this article, we seek to go beyond discussions of how to make the returnees' journey more efficient and, instead, we focus on the trajectory of return via experiences of Christian conversion that occur amid neoliberal pressures for professional success. By attending to these, we aim to shed light on the practices, experiences, feelings and subjectivities of those who seem to fall behind the official accounts of successful return. We do so in line with our own personal stakes. Xiaoyan is a returnee herself who converted to Christianity during her postgraduate studies away from home, before returning to Mainland China. Like most of our participants, she found in evangelical congregations a way to cope with her struggle as an overseas student. Miguel works for a higher education institution in the UK. He teaches on MA programmes in which the vast majority of students are international students from China with experiences similar to Xiaoyan's. Both of us are equally concerned with the regulatory effect of beliefs of successful return which drive higher education students' desires for a better future as they study and work abroad before making it back to China.

Our shared concern with how emotions and future orientations govern people's actions is triggered by critical feminist Ahmed's (2010) work on the promise of happiness as a technique for living well. Rather than asking what happiness means, Ahmed wonders about what the search for happiness *does* to people at a historical moment in which pressures for everyone to become happy are on the increase. She conceptualises happiness as a "technology of hope" (p. 181), with hope being understood in line with John Locke ([1690] 1997) as a future-oriented emotion "that perceives something that is not yet present as being good, imagining a future enjoyment" (p. 218). She explores how self-regulation may contribute to individuals' self-exclusion from certain spaces/experiences in the pursuit of an imagined and desired (always-before-us-yet-never-reachable) happiness. Similar to Ahmed, we take pressures for successful return as a technology of hope that shaped our participants' experiences of Christian conversion, and examine the ways in which these experiences are semiotically mediated as well as the larger structures of inequality that they (dis)enable. This is anchored in wider critical scholarship interested in the entanglement of daily practices, affects, selfhood and institutional (re)orderings upon which social life gets constituted (Bourdieu, 1977; Foucault, 1988; Williams, 1989; Fraser, 2003).

In what follows, we explore key categories and meanings about return that have been officially produced and circulated in China (Section 2). We do so in order to outline the institutional conditions under which, unlike in other contexts, the figure of the returnee gets historically associated with high societal expectations and social beliefs of professional success. We then propose a sociolinguistic approach that allows *both* of us to make sense of our participants' trajectories of return by tackling Christian conversion through the lens of "lived religion", migration and the care of the self (Section 3). After that, we examine (self)regulation of experiences, social relations and future-oriented affects in the process of becoming a new spiritual subject with reference to the trajectories of return of two of our participants (Section 4). Finally, we conclude by discussing the complex intersections of

unexpected alliances and institutional logics of global capitalism that we see emerging from our analysis (Section 5).

2. Returnees, national desires, and citizenship governance in China

The figure of the returnee has consistently been an object of governmental policies and discourses in the People's Republic of China since the second half of the 19th century. Predominantly framed as a key actor bearing the responsibility of contributing to the Chinese nation's future, this social category has officially been linked to ideas of modernisation, particularly after the first colonial contacts with the European powers in the second half of the 19th century, and the subsequent unequal treaties that resulted from them (Wang, 2007). More specifically, these individuals' entrepreneurial activities have predominantly been presented as closely tied to the discourse of "China's national regeneration" (民族复兴), one that draws on the concept of the State as an institutional embodiment representing the interests (and desires) of the people living within its geographical territory.

In other words, the returnee is often associated with the binomial nation-state, this understood as an organic entity that has to compete with other nation-states over accumulation of economic capital and military strength via technological and scientific knowledge. More recently, this category has also been closely linked to that of "Chinese students overseas", or *liuxuesheng* (留学生), one that is often discussed in public debates in accordance with competing frames that highlight either loss (e.g., "brain drain") or opportunity (e.g., "storing brainpower abroad") for the country. At the centre of his open-doors economic reform for the country's modernisation in 1978, Deng Xiaoping staged this key political economic shift with the departure of 3,000 students who were officially sent to various countries in the industrialised West. They were tasked with the societal expectation of bringing back the knowledge required, on the one hand, to integrate the Chinese market into the global one and on the other hand, to drive reforms in key economic areas such as agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence (Zweig, 2002).

After 1978, the governmental programmes aiming to attract permanent return of *liuxuesheng* have been shaped by various shifts in the design of national plans for modernisation. Throughout these shifts, the governmental initiatives set out to bring back Chinese professionals educated abroad have been aligned with key discourses ranging from the importance of scientific and technological knowledge from the "most advanced nations" during the 1990s (Cao, 2008), to indigenisation proposals at the turn of the 21st century. It is under the latter that global discourses of economic development have, in the last decades, been recontextualised within a Chinese cultural framework of reference materialised in official policy guidelines aiming to build "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" (中国特色社会主义), "Chinese spiritual civilisation" (社会主义精神文明建设) or a "Socialist market economy" (社会主义市场经济). The National Medium- and Long-Term Program for Science and Technology Development (2006-2020), one of the most encompassing frameworks regulating the return of so-called "Chinese talent", signals this shift in its guiding principles section (see Extract 1).

Extract 1. Promoting the country's economic development

During the past two decades or so since we began to pursue the policy of reforms and opening to the outside world, our country has imported a huge amount of technologies and equipment, which played an important role in raising the overall technological level of our industries and promoting the country's economic development. However, one should be clearly aware that importation of technology without emphasizing assimilation, absorption, and re-innovation is bound to weaken the nation's indigenous

research and development capability, which in turn widens the gap with world advanced levels. Facts have proved that, in areas critical to the national economy and security, core technologies cannot be purchased. If our country wants to take the initiative in the fierce international competition, it has to enhance its indigenous innovation capability, master core technologies in some critical areas, own proprietary intellectual property rights, and build a number of internationally competitive enterprises […] Science and Technology talents (S&T) are critical to increasing indigenous innovation capability. The first and foremost task is to create a favourite environment for cultivating and attracting S&T personnel, with high-quality talents in particular, giving full scope to the enthusiasm and creativity of the broad masses of S&T personnel, so that a constant stream of talents is ensured and the best of S&T talents is brought out (State Council, 2006).

At the intersection of the reforms, policy guidelines and forms of knowledge outlined above, the ideal returnee is officially imagined as having "high-quality talent". S/he is associated with priority areas, hi-tech industries and information services, and s/he is conceptualised as instrumental in the country's indigenisation of knowledge, research and innovation, all against the background of a "fierce", competitive international market.

This is particularly the case for major economic hubs such as Beijing or Shanghai which are deemed to concentrate many of the public infrastructures and personnel in the country. Here the returnee is envisioned as a driver in the flexibilisation of local economies via active involvement in brokering service trade and service outsourcing, a key actor that is expected to accelerate the construction of role model cities and special zones of economic development (State Council, 2010). The Thousand Talents Plan,[3] for example, one of the most ambitious in recent years, aims to bring Chinese overseas talent back into these hubs by targeting high-level professional, technical and managerial personnel who meet at least one of four conditions, namely: (1) serving as an expert and scholar equivalent to a professorship in a prestigious foreign university or research institute; (2) holding senior positions in internationally renowned enterprises and financial institutions; (3) acting as entrepreneurial talents who have independent intellectual property rights or master core technologies, have independent overseas entrepreneurial experience, and are familiar with relevant industry fields and international rules; or (4) having other innovative and entrepreneurial talents that the country urgently needs, currently considered to be in short supply.

In addition to these discourses and related forms of knowledge, creating the appropriate conditions for returnees to integrate into China's changing labour market has also entailed the re-structuring of the existing system of citizenship governance. This has been socially engineered by introducing variegated principles of population dispersal under the finetuning of the national and long-standing household registration system. Commonly known as *hukou* (户口) and set up for the first time in 1958 to regulate internal migration towards urban areas, this system has recently been adjusted to facilitate talent-attraction in major cities regardless of returnees' place of birth. It allows now flexible quotas in the provision of local *hukou* across different regions, a strategy that has been said to contribute to the flexibilisation of local markets via increased internal mobility for professionals within the country (Zhang, 2018). Even so, such measures have also been regarded as introducing new hierarchies between cities, regions and returnees, for it ties requirements to apply for local *hukou* to the size and strategic importance of cities in the development of China's key economic industries (see Table 1, for an overview to the *hukou* application requirements for returnees in Beijing where conditions are harder than in other medium or small-sized cities).[4]

Table 1. Application requirements for overseas students (returnees)
The applicant must: • Obtain a master's degree, or above, abroad. • Study abroad for more than one year.

- Submit application materials within two years of graduation.
- Be under the age of 45.
- Have terminated working contracts with his/her former employer before going abroad.
- Establish formal working contracts with units in Beijing.

In sum, the institutional production, circulation and valorisation of these discourses, regulations and categories about professional return foreground a constellation of meanings and social beliefs whereby "talent", "entrepreneurship", "fierce international competition" and "indigenous innovation capability" are emblematically associated with the figure of the returnee. The social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) that comes with this category therefore contrasts with what has been described in relation to other contexts where "return" is not an explicit object of governmental attention and hardly features in public discourses of migration – or if it does, it is rather associated with failure (see for instance De la Garza, 2008, on Mexican migrants in the US). But these considerations do not yet fully account for the practices, relations, feelings and subjectivities that mediated our participants' trajectories of migration. As anticipated above, their return was embedded in experiences of Christian conversion, and so in the next section we consider a suitable sociolinguistic approach to tackle them.

3. "Lived religion", Chinese migration, and the care of the self: A research approach

The research collaboration that underpins this article has inevitably mirrored larger disciplinary conversations on language, religion and migration. This is due to the different stances, histories and political positionings that both of us have had to unravel in the process of data generation and sense-making. We share a concern with the regulatory effects that the pressures for successful return have among young people who move in between China and the UK, and yet we both have different histories of interaction with Christianity. In her own conversion during her postgraduate studies abroad, Xiaoyan found in the protestant church of evangelical Christianity a space in which to build social relations of solidarity with others. Miguel, however, grew up in a working-class catholic environment in Spain and has always had a sceptical attitude towards the political role of the church during and after the Spanish civil war (1936-1939), given the impact that this had for families like his with grandparents who fought on the losing side.

These differences are far from unique to us, and contemporary debates in the social sciences have also revisited the binary between religion and secularism (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2008). The arguments have suggested that, for most of the 20th century, such a binary has helped to normalise ideological hierarchies underpinned by the political and economic framework of modernity, whereby religion is made to fall on the side of backwardness, irrationality, emotion and bias, in contrast to values of rationality, reason and impartiality associated with secularism. Therefore, instead of dismissing religion too prematurely in accordance with secularisation theory, critics of the binary suggest we attend to the possibilities that new spiritual practices and subjectivities offer to individuals and groups in daily life. The claims thus highlight the limitations of secular accounts in which description of daily practices and experiences of social actors is either absent or predominantly backgrounded within grand, totalising narratives of oppressive institutional regimes (Ammerman, 2007). This view is also supported by feminist studies of religion as well as by feminists invested in shaping religious traditions from within, for in their view, religious spaces have the potential to either empower or oppress women (Nyhagen, 2017).

Against this backdrop, "lived religion" has emerged as an alternative approach across disciplines (McGuire, 2008). This lens recognises the value and meaning of religion in the daily lives of individuals and social groups who are seen as having an active role in choosing,

shaping and changing their own religious beliefs and practices. In work on language and religion, for example, this focus has led to a strong emphasis on self-transformation processes in experiences of conversion (see Keane, 1997, 2007; Bielo, 2009), with particular attention to the empowering effects that performative practices and identities of conversion have for those living under conditions of marginalisation (e.g., Badenhorst & Makoni, 2017), including individuals (e.e., Stromberg, 1993), minority groups (e.g. Baquedano-López 2000; Baron, 2004; Poveda *et al*., 2005; Chew, 2014), and diasporic communities (e.g., Omoniyi, 2006; Adogame, 2007; Vàsquez & Knott 2014).

As to research on Christian conversion among Chinese migrants, the growing interest in lived religion has resulted in a surge of analyses of identity re-construction. This body of literature has followed a sharp increase in the number of Chinese migrant converts worldwide since the 1980s and largely accounts for conversion as a convivial choice that facilitates Chinese migrants' integration into their so-called "host societies" (e.g. Yang, 1999; Kalir, 2009). Converts are thus shown as selectively assimilating themselves into the public spheres of workplaces and schools to learn English and access key institutional and socioeconomic networks (Han, 2011). They are said to align strategically with Christianity – which many understand as a core "Western value" – while at the same time investing in a "Chinese identity" through speaking Mandarin Chinese, wearing traditional dress and abiding by Confucian values in their daily lives.

In light of these debates and research contributions, we find in lived religion a useful angle from which to account for the ways in which our participants managed their and others' affective practices throughout the trajectories of return. In doing so, however, we also align with those who have more recently warned about potential misapplications of this lens which may draw an artificial line between institutional religion and everyday life (see Ammerman, 2016). Such epistemological separation, we are warned, may contribute to descriptions in which the larger institutional and political economic conditions enabled by religious practices and structures of feeling go unnoticed (Gao, Yin, Zhu & Chen, 2019). This can be particularly counterproductive if we are to understand the complex ways in which neoliberal logics of wealth accumulation and competition in today's world are interwoven with emerging (religious and non-religious) subjectivities and moralities in everyday life:

> "lived religion is neither a vernacular enactment of religious orthodoxies into a secular agenda nor simply a mechanical response to neoliberalism. Instead, we emphasise the coproduction of religious institutions and neoliberalism that establishes 'structures of feeling' that condition the formation of lived religiosity" (ibid, p.3).

We advocate in this article for a sociolinguistic approach to lived religion that pays close attention to the interlocking of these issues. We do so by taking on board recent calls in the language disciplines that acknowledge the need for further research that addresses the political economy of language, the economic effects of Christianity, and the global spread of Christianity under global neoliberalism (Han & Varghese, 2019). We argue that our participants' engagement with Christian congregations in the UK, as well as the setting up of their own bible reading groups back in China, is (a) enabled by institutional logics of competition and successful return, (b) channelled by affective logics of (self)regulation, and (c) has (un)expected (im)material consequences for the individuals and groups involved. In so doing, our own epistemological dialogue has encountered comfort in social theory that deals with affects and subjectivities.

In particular, we are inspired by Foucault's (1988, 2014) understanding of the constitution of the subject, away from opposition between interiority and exteriority. This, we believe, allows us to consider our participants' experiences of (self)transformation as one in

which power and life are inseparable. Their affective choices and practices cannot be detached from the neoliberal pressures for them to move transnationally and engage in competition to secure a successful return. This is also what takes us to link Ahmed's (2010) notion of "technology of hope" to Foucault's "care of the self" (1988): the future-orientated disposition to successful return that youngsters studying overseas are pushed to engage with requires, even if to resist, techniques of (self)regulation and subjectivation whereby individuals "effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thought, conduct, and way of being" (Foucault, 1988, p.18).

In considering these issues we echo Rampton's (2014) reminder that Foucault advises against approaches that bury participants' lived experiences with grand theoretical narratives and instead suggests "another way to go further towards a new economy of power relations":

> "[this] consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists of using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used […] it consists of analysing power relations through the antagonism of strategies" (Foucault, 1982: 211, cited in Rampton, 2014: 6)

More specifically, we draw on work that has integrated ethnographic, semiotic and political economic perspectives in the study of the intersection of knowledge production, meaning-making practices, social relations and subject-making processes (Urciuoli, 2008; Duchêne & Heller, 2012; Dlaske et al, 2016; Allan & McElhinny, 2017; Lorente, 2017; Martín Rojo & Del Percio, 2019; Codó & Patiño-Santos, 2018; Garrido & Sabaté, 2020). Thus, we approach religious practices as support-based subject-transformation projects whereby our participants regulate their and others' practices and feelings through daily semiotic activities as they operate within global spaces of higher education and the labour market. But before providing any further details it is now necessary for us to turn to our field site.

4. Subjects, templates and projects

Our participants recurrently reported that Christian congregations in the UK helped them undergo what they all referred to as a "worldview transformation" or "being born again". This process was often regarded by pastors, church workers, and bible reading group members as a necessary condition for them to emerge as a "new spiritual subject" in opposition to values of competition and professional success. They considered this new (and alternative) subject as someone who commits to serving others, placing God at the centre of their life, and spreading the Gospel in local communities and countries of origin upon their return.

Communicatively speaking, this commitment demanded the active participation of all our participants in two recurrent activities or "communicative templates" (Lorente, 2017). These were leading bible reading groups, and sharing stories of transformation (see Table 2, for a characterisation of these two distinctive genres, extracted from observations in the UK-based organisations). Active participation in these activities in their congregations became emblematic of being a "good" community member. In the two following sections we explore the entextualisation (Silverstein & Urban, 1996) of each of these templates through the lens of reflexive language (Lucy, 1993). We pay close attention to reflexive arrangement of *participation* (Philips, 1972; Mehan, 1987), accounts of *conduct and life* (Martín Rojo, 2019) and *narrative trajectories* (Flubacher, 2020) in order to describe how leading bible reading groups and narrated stories of transformation are turned into recognisable models of action whereby our participants regulate their and others' practices and feelings as they enact legitimate models of personhood, align with normative forms of knowledge and moral

categories about the social world (i.e. what is "good" or "desirable"), and navigate through transnational webs of institutions, networks and resources with (un)planned consequences.

Table 2. Communicative templates in the enactment of a new spiritual subject

	Leading bible reading groups	Sharing stories of transformation
Structure of action	- Requesting members to read chapter passages in the gospel, in turns. - Asking about actors, actions, and circumstances throughout passages, verse by verse. - Exploring the author's overall intended meanings in the chapter with focus on Jesus. - Drawing parallelisms with contemporary life. - Opening floor for general questions.	- Describing life before conversion, with emphasis on struggles and difficulties. - Accounting for what it meant finding God through the support of a Christian congregation and for how it helped. - Detailing the new collective commitments and future desires that conversion brings with it. - Inviting others to restore relationship with God for when Jesus returns for the final last judgement.
Style	- Direct questions focused on "who", "what" and "why". - Requests to provide answers via paraphrasing or literal reading of verses in the text.	- Informal tone. - Biographical narratives. - References to anecdotes. - Detailed personal feelings and emotions.
Social domains	- Church buildings. - Other private facilities.	- Church buildings. - Other private facilities. - Charities' websites.
Artefacts	- Print copies of bibles. - Blank sheets on which mind maps are drawn during discussions.	- Notes on paper or on phones/iPads at oral speeches.
Length	- 90 min average.	- 5/10 min in oral speeches. - 3-5 A4 pages in written documents.

We examine these issues with reference to two of our participants, Baozhai and Yuenyi, as each of their paths to becoming returnees got intertwined with their journeys to become committed members of an underground congregation. They both shared a bible reading group back in Beijing though each engaged in different forms of affective (self)regulation and subjectivation throughout their trajectories of return. In Baozhai's case, the enacment of the "leading bible reading groups" template become saliently tied to a project of subordinating professional aspirations to spiritual ones. As for Yuenyi, doing "sharing stories of transformation" played a key role in the performance of an institutionally scripted Christian self.

4.1.   Baozhai and the leading of bible reading groups

It's 6.20pm on a regular Friday in July 2019. Xiaoyan arrives to the shopping mall in Beijing where she is to meet the other members of the "Bible Reading Group for Professionals"; they call themselves "职场查经小组". Created by Baozhai a month earlier, the group has been gathering on a weekly basis, with five regular attendees and five others joining occasionally. Xiaoyan and the other group members – or "sisters" as they call each other in the group – have been informed of the new meeting place on the day. They are all aware that the government has stepped up the pressure on coffee shops not to allow Christians to gather and study in them, but this time they are meeting in a popular coffee shop franchise.

When Xiaoyan arrives, she finds Maggie inside. Baozhai has invited her to take the lead for today and she is already preparing for the session. The change is news to Xiaoyan but she is not entirely surprised: Maggie had always come across to her as someone eager to have her own bible reading group, and indeed she had previously told other group members that the reason she came back from the US, right after converting, was precisely to serve and lead. After a few minutes, Baozhai joins them. Four other members, Yuenyi, Anna, Yumei and Xiaoming, had also indicated on their *WeChat* group[5] that they would be attending but they have just texted to say that they are coming late. Baozhai then asks Maggie and Xiaoyan for updates on their lives, a conventional way of warming up the session that has become established over the last four weeks. After they do so, she suggests that it is time to begin with the study of the scripture while the others are on their way, a point at which Maggie circulates four parables that they all had to read for the day and which were included in verses 4:2-4:34 in Mark's gospel (see verses in Appendix).

The discussion then unfolds as follows:[6]

Extract 2. "People of this state"

1	Maggie:	Let's start from the first parable in verses 1-9 and then read verses 13-20 which offer
2		further explanation. The parable implies four types of situations. Let's analyse the
3		tenors and vehicles in them by comparing these two parts. Let's see the first type. What
4		does the 'birds' refer to, Xiaoyan?
5	Xiaoyan:	According to the explanation provided in the following verses, 'birds' refer to Satan.
6	Maggie:	Right. Let's now see the second type of situation. Baozhai, what do you think the 'sun'
7		in this situation refers to?
8	Baozhai:	It refers to persecution and trouble encountered because of the word
9	Maggie:	Right. This type of person accepts the word and Jesus quickly but they give up very
10		easily once they encounter any trouble.
11	Xiaoyan:	We could hardly know whether we are true believers unless we have been tested by
12		troubles. In this sense, trouble or persecution is not necessarily a bad thing since it can
13		help differentiate between true believers and shallow admirers.
14	Baozhai:	Yes, we can see how disciples in the first century stood still after experiencing
15		enormous persecutions from both the Jews and the Roman government
16	Maggie:	What do you think thorns refer to, Xiaoyan?
17	Xiaoyan:	Thorns refer to worries of life in this world, the desire for wealth and many other
18		worldly things that encumbers the growth of the word in our heart.
19	Baozhai:	I think in comparison with the previous two states, people in this state want both the
20		word and the world like wealth and fame. They seem to live a faithful life, but they are
21		not determined to live faithfully due to their desire for worldly things. As a result, they
22		cannot concentrate on their growth in the word and are finally carried off by the world.

As Maggie initiates the activity according to conventional instructional exchanges, whereby she selects one addressee at a time and asks the questions in addition to providing feedback/evaluation to the answers received (lines 1-6, 6-9, 16-18), she attempts to unpack the text by relating each of the four parables to different types of situations and, in turn, different kinds of people. But this angle is soon re-framed by Baozhai who also provides evaluation to contributions by Xiaoyan (lines 11-15, 17-22) and self-selects herself to answer a question initially addressed to Xiaoyan. She does so to introduce the idea of "four states" (lines 19-22) which takes away from the view, proposed by Maggie, of the four parables as linked to four types of situations on a one-to-one basis. This could possibly be seen as bringing about an alternative frame of interpretation that suggests a more dynamic relationship between states of minds on the one hand, and people on the other; one in which individuals are not judged based on rigid mappings. However, establishing this frame takes more effort as the activity continues:

Extract 3. "We should be cautious about judging others"

1	Maggie:	Yes, we can see that the three states are different from each other. It seems that the
2		latter one is a little better than the former one.
3	Baozhai:	Although they seem to be bad in different ways and to different extents, they are the
4		same in essence, that is, they are not good soil. We can also see that the seeds are the
5		same and they are powerful per se. However, the soil is different, and the first three
6		types are bad in many ways, implying that people react differently towards the seed,
7		i.e., the word. This is the de facto reason for the differences of the final result.
8	Maggie:	Right, Baozhai is right. We may see around us cases like these. Some people may have
9		attended the Sunday sermon for a long time but still they do not believe in Jesus, and
10		there are some others who have already converted but they give up very easily, not so
11		thirsty for the word.
12	Baozhai:	We should be cautious about judging others and drawing conclusions because we do
13		not know God's plan. Maybe a person does not believe now, even after hearing the
14		word for long, but it is hard to tell what will happen in the long run. I think we should
15		reflect on our own state of spiritual life against the parable as to whether we can
16		understand fully the word, whether we hold on to it in the face of danger and
17		persecution, whether we are productive in the word. Moreover, we may see in later
18		parts that these four states are transferable. The most important thing is our attitude to
19		the word, whether we are willing to listen, to accept, to keep pursuing, to keep growing
20		and producing, and to keep being humble.
21	Maggie:	Right. Let's continue with the last part of this parable, the good soil. This is the most
22		desirable type, right? We all want to become the good soil. What does 'crop' in this
23		part mean? The most frequently mentioned information about 'crop' is 'the crop of
24		spirit', right? We are all familiar with that.

Maggie's evaluation of the earlier contribution by Baozhai does not seem to ratify the "four states" frame of reference (line 1), and so the discussion continues with exchanges whereby Maggie's positive evaluations of Baozhai's contributions are immediately followed by Baozhai's reformulation of Maggie's points (lines 3-11, 12-24). Indeed, these reformulations seem to also increase the degree of correction, from explanations that draw the attention away from differences between types of people towards the relationship between what she refers to as "the seeds" and "the soil" – i.e., the relationship between the word (Jesus) and humans (lines 3-7) – to more explicit evaluations that highlight the inadequacy of judging people according to Maggie's hierarchical understanding of the different states (lines 12-20). Maggie then confirms Baozhai's contribution and initiates a boundary-making move to signal the last part of the parable that they are discussing (lines 21-24).

At this point Yuenyi, Anna, Yumei and Xiaoming enter the coffee shop and sit at the table, and so Maggie requests them to read the scripture silently in order to identify the "tenors" and "vehicles" in the subsequent verses; they are also asked to share what they think about the scripture and how they would apply these teachings in their own private and professional lives. But after a few minutes the discussion is resumed by Anna who, once again, links the passage with a personal anecdote in which the "types of person" frame of reference is brought back to make sense of the passage (see Extract 4), this opening up yet another sequence of evaluation and re-evaluation by Maggie and Baozhai:

Extract 4. "It might not be proper to judge like this"

1	Anna:	This reminds me of my cousin's husband. I told him and my cousin about my belief.
2		He made positive response and thought that to have faith is good and that people with
3		faith are positive about things. He even came to church several times. What surprised

4		me is that he told my cousin that I was mentally ill behind my back. I think in this case,
5		he is more like the first type of person.
6	Maggie:	He seems not to understand the word, at least at his current stage.
7	Baozhai:	It might not be proper to judge in this way as we do not know what will happen to him
8		in the future and what God's plan for him is. As I said, these parables are like mirrors,
9		it is better to use them to reflect on ourselves rather than judge others. It is possible to
10		move between each of these four states.

After this exchange between Maggie and Baozhai (lines 6-10), Maggie nods and continues with the planned activity by turning everybody's attention to verses 4:10-12, which prompts a one-minute period of silent reading that is interrupted by Baozhai's reminder to everyone: "again, this is a Sandwich structure, with the contents inside." The Sandwich structure was one that Baozhai had repeatedly mentioned over the past weeks in order to emphasise that the key points lie in the middle part of the story with two sided parts supporting it. Maggie then follows and asks another question:

Extract 5. "What is important is still whether we have strong faith in the word"

1	Maggie:	Why does Jesus only explain and reveal the parable to his disciples?
2	Xiaoyan:	I think Jesus differentiates between true believers and those who do not believe in him.
3	Baozhai:	This part talks about the mystery of the Kingdom of God. We should understand this
4		part by linking it to what we read and discussed just now. It is not that Jesus
5		differentiates between people, but people hold different attitudes towards the word. So,
6		to those who are good soil and eager to understand the word, the word will be revealed
7		to them and the Kingdom of God is theirs. But for those who have hearts of stone and
8		refuse to acknowledge their sin, words are parables beyond their understanding and the
9		door of the kingdom shuts to them. So, what is important is still whether we have strong
10		faith in the word.

Maggie's initiation move (line 1) in the form of an open questioning plus Xiaoyan' answer (lines 2-3) provide Baozhai with a platform to evaluate Xiaoyan's response ("it is not that Jesus differentiates between people") and restate her argument on the relevant frame of interpretation. She does so by summing up the entire passage with reference to its wider implications for the conceptualisation of the relationship between the Kingdom of God and individuals' faith (lines 4-11). The activity then continues for another 10 minutes during which Maggie hurries over the last three questions on the list, this time with no further contributions by Baozhai who seems to have conveyed her key point for the day.

The temporary handing over of responsibilities from Baozhai to Maggie reveals the core features that regulated participation (Mehan, 1987) and which were collaboratively made to count as relevant in the enactment of a bible reading group leader as a recognisable model of personhood (Agha, 2007). Baozhai's signalling of the relevant transitions in the activity (e.g., from warm up to actual study of the scripture), Maggie's management of I-R-F instructional exchanges, and Baozhai's participant position as evaluator of entire I-R-F instructional exchanges led by Maggie, signal the importance of focusing the interpretations and use of parallelisms on the relationship with God rather than on what was framed as "worldly things". Baozhai drew on this participation arrangement to signify the action of reading the bible as one that is ultimately concerned with meditating on the spiritual relationship between humans and God, a feature that recurrently emerged as she attempted to build the bible reading group as a collective space where spiritually-based mutual understanding of humans' actions would prevail over the judgmental frames that predominate in social life outside the congregation.

But realigning one's view in order to replace worldly judgements with a spiritual focus on life requires more than a one-off interactional display of the "leading an underground bible

reading group" communicative template. Becoming a bible reading group leader demands a permanent conduct whereby professional aspirations are constantly subordinated to the principle of serving others in the congregation. For Baozhai, this started in the south of England where she first moved to enrol in an MA degree in Human Resources at one of the major universities in the region. Born in the Chinese southern province of Guizhou in the late 1980s, and raised by a nurse and small business owner, she applied to study in the UK with the financial support of her family. It was there where she first encountered Christianity through a local charity that supported her to find accommodation, after which she hoped that becoming a Christian could help her find "home", a spiritual place where pressures for success and professional aspirations could finally be put aside.

Baozhai's interest in this spiritual place soon turned into a desire to return to China to serve in the underground house church. She wanted to help others find a sense of home for which she thought she needed to cultivate "independent thinking", a quality she did not believe could be properly nurtured in China. She saw in Christianity a platform to challenge what she had been taught regarding ideas of a successful life, and Jesus' life and actions became instrumental for her to that end. Since she did not think that Jesus was at the centre of the officially recognised Christian church in the People's Republic of China, she became invested in receiving training from congregations in the UK before setting up her own underground groups in China. Baozhai's orientation to this goal became salient in the narrated stages in, and choices made throughout, her journey from the South of England to Beijing, which are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Recount of return journey and choices

Return stages	Choices to become a reading group leader
1. Staying in the South of England after graduation.	"I worked part-time as teaching assistant at a primary school while volunteering at a Christian organisation to receive training in the leading of bible reading groups".
2. Moving to London as VISA scheme allowing overseas students to work in UK cancelled.	"I joined a 2-year programme run by TESCO. This allowed me to buy time to continue my training at my new congregation in London" [explanatory notes: TESCO is a UK-based transnational corporation. This programme trains Chinese workers overseas in the company's work and management culture to send them as local managers in stores in China].
3. Returning to China at end of TESCO programme.	"I chose Beijing as my closest Christian classmates could make it easier for me to join Christian congregations. You need to be introduced by a network of gatekeepers".
4. Settling in Beijing despite struggles to register her local *hukou* at a local address.	"I could not afford property in Beijing. After considering illegal options I registered the local *hukou* that I obtained through TESCO with a relative in Beijing. This helped me keep developing my new underground network" [notes: local *hukou* in Beijing must be registered with a local address owned by the *hukou* holder].
5. Taking jobs in the private and public sectors.	"I changed job to a small private company but then I moved to the public sector. Although lower salary, this gave me more time for bible reading group leading at my congregation".
6. Receiving job offer to relocate to Shanghai	"I rejected a job offer at my previous private company's headquarters in Shanghai. I had gained more responsibilities as deacon in my congregation" [notes: this required serving at her church congregation on Sundays and leading two bible reading groups on weekdays at night in addition to one for Christian returnees that she volunteered to set up].

Becoming a bible reading group leader for Baozhai is thus tied to accounts of conduct and life (Martín-Rojo, 2019) whereby narrated events and decisions about life matters are oriented to the goals of receiving the necessary spiritual training, building the appropriate Christian networks and serving underground congregations in China. This includes key decisions such as where to live in the UK or China (stages 1, 2, 3 & 6), what professional training programmes are worth undertaking to save time and remain legally in the UK (stage 2), what legal risks can be afforded in China as to maintaining a local *hukou* (stage 4) or what jobs are more suitable in what economic sectors (stages 5 & 6). Together with the actual practices of leading bible reading groups that have been examined further above, these forms of (self)regulation, in Baozhai's case, enabled underground group-building practices driven by spiritual goals. Yet such practices and forms of (self)regulation cannot always be detached from larger institutional networks, and Yuenyi's enactment of the "sharing stories of transformation" communicative template attests to this.

4.2.   Yuenyi and sharing stories of transformation

Yuenyi's encounter with Christianity took place via her involvement with "Live Well" (LW, hereafter), a globally-operating NGO that not only helped her settle during her university studies in the UK but also recruited her to work at its Chinese headquarters in Beijing.

Back in her late teens, Yuenyi had initially planned to take her undergraduate studies at a university in the same province where she was born. However, she was caught cheating at the CET-4, a mandatory college English test for non-English major university students in China. She reports this event in connection with deep feelings of shame experienced by her and her family which prevented her from pursuing university degrees in China. To fulfil her academic expectations, and supported by her parents who agreed to financially support her BA studies in Arts, Yuenyi moved to London to enrol at one of the major universities where she first joined a local church following a classmate's recommendation. Soon after moving to the UK, however, she began to experience anxiety and was eventually diagnosed with depression by her university's mental health services, and so she saw in this church a place to heal and grow spiritually but also an opportunity to socialise with other people and to know more about European culture and art.

Yuenyi heard about LW in the last year of her BA studies, at a job fair at her university. She was interested in the career opportunities offered by this Christian charity which had an opening in the design department and provided her with the possibility of working in Beijing. The charity's evangelist endeavours are described on their website as focused on three main fronts: (1) helping Christian organisations that "are passionate about sharing the Gospel" to "fulfil The Great Commission"; (2) equipping churches across the globe to allow Christians to share the Gospel and connecting them to new believers moving into their surroundings; and (3) providing church workers and bible reading groups with "discipleship", "training tools" and "management resources" for them to expand their "mission strategy".

Though officially based in England, LW is involved an infrastructure covering seven geographical regions of action worldwide. The organisation has management teams in each of these different regions where they offer support to local churches, bible reading groups and individuals believers. In the view of the team director in Europe, who is based in the UK office, his team's mission is anchored in Western cultural heritage and offers opportunities to regenerate a path for the future, two values that appealed Yuenyi back at the job fair at the University of London. The charity's trustees include a 5-member board, all of them linked to a group of companies that operate in various markets within automotive, property and finance sectors.

On its official website, this group claims to be driven by a strong Christian ethos, and to be specialists in developing large business and industrial employment parks in the UK and overseas. Their stated aim is to help their business partners achieve their goals by providing local market knowledge and expertise so that they have a competitive advantage. These markets also include China where, in 2005, they opened a Vehicle Certification Agency and a UK franchise that operates in conjunction with the British government – the group of companies is in charge, among other things, of recruiting and training engineers for this agency and managing the business in Beijing on behalf of the UK government.

For Yuenyi, becoming employed by LW was an opportunity to return to China without undertaking postgraduate studies or working for a period of time in the UK. It was also a chance to live in Beijing, a city that many in the country wish to work in. But the move did not necessarily bring about a clear-cut rupture with her past in London. Quite the opposite: her new job entailed a great deal of investment in the packaging of UK-based stories of transformation involving people who had converted there before returning to China, in alignment with the organisation's guidelines to equip the Church with evangelism and discipleship resources. This was indeed an important area in LW's outreach activities, one to which the organisation devoted multiple scripting resources for the delivery of standard templates so that charity workers and volunteers could successfully engage in the sharing of their own stories (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Scripting narratives of conversion
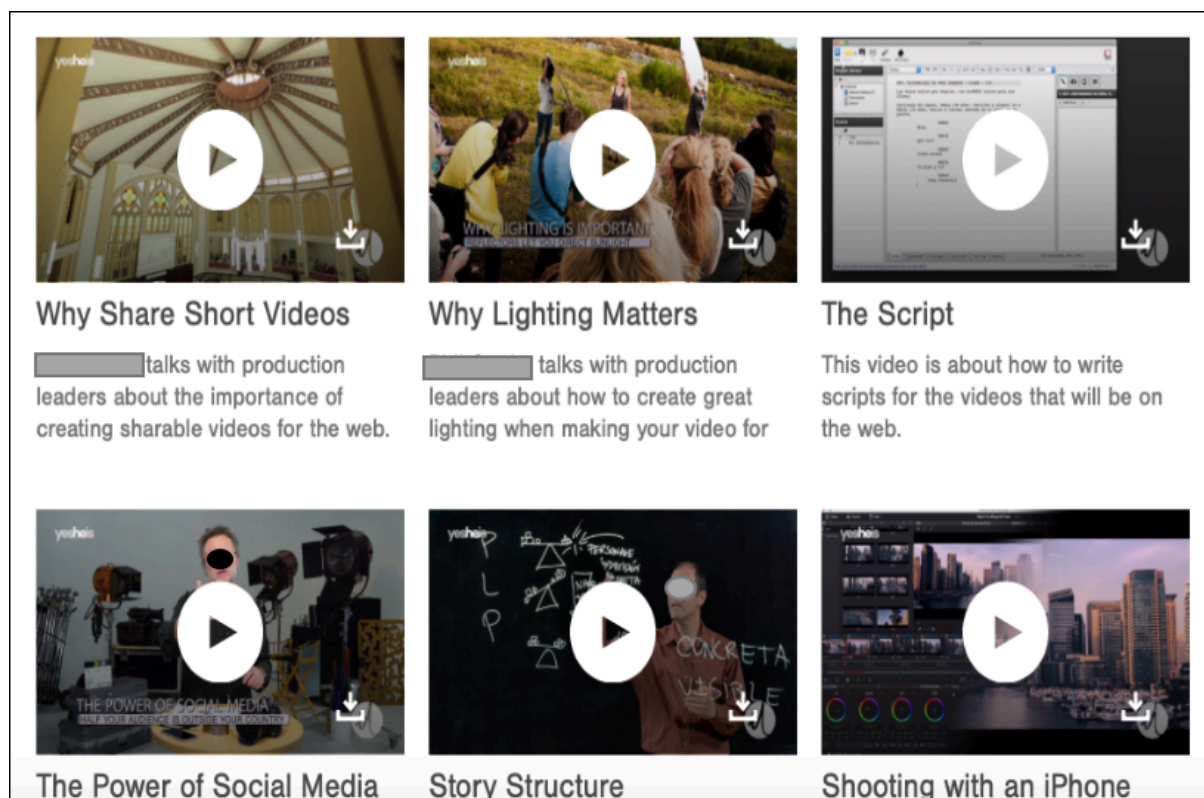
LW's website provides tutorials, story structures and examples for bible reading groups and churches to create and upload their own narratives of transformation through Christian conversion. These include short videos captioned in relation to a variety of topics that range from technical aspects regarding the filming and uploading of the narratives (e.g. "Why share short videos", "Why lighting matters", "shooting with an iPhone") to standardisation of the

narratives (e.g., "The script", "Story structure") to content about the strategic nature of social media in the spreading of information ("The power of social media").

One of the tasks of Yuenyi's department in Beijing was to create Chinese-language related online resources to make all of these materials available to Christians in China, including crafting the narratives of transformation on *WeChat*. Thus, Yuenyi's job demanded intensive communicative labour and (self)regulation in the institutional packaging of *narrative trajectories* (Flubacher, 2020). Indeed, LW's workers in Beijing were also expected to regularly share their own narratives of conversion on a "portraits" section on this platform, a sharing process that involved long hours and days of institutional production. In this process, the featured individuals were interviewed by the charity's workers based in the communication department; they were also walked though lengthy photographic sessions in different shooting locations. As a result, the stories of transformation were highly standardised media products modelled according to formulaic stylised narratives in which the featured individual is presented as managing negative emotions to reconstitute a new self under the guidance of a local Christian church and the brothers and sisters involved in it (see section titled in Chinese as "Portraits of Chinese Christians", in Figure 2).

Figure 2. Portraits and websites

Yuenyi's full portrait published online follows this conventional narrative structure from the standpoint of an overseas student. From her days at university in London to her job as a designer back in China, she narrates her struggles as embedded in the process of becoming a believer. They are recounted as: (a) beginning in China where her act of cheating is linked to embarrassment and shame; (b) continuing in the UK where she was diagnosed depression; (c)

being managed by her after affiliating with a local church in London which helped her land a job as a designer at LW; and (d) using her professional knowledge at the service of her Christian community in Beijing by preaching the gospel. Extract 6 shows a portion of the interview script from Yuenyi's portrait in which she responds to the interviewers' question on what changed for her since choosing Jesus.[7]

Extract 6. "Thank God I am a wholly new self now"

I used to be a person with extremely low self-esteem. A lack of self-esteem is, in essence, a manifestation of self-importance, as you imagine yourself to be outstanding only to find that you are not. I often hold back from speaking up or expressing myself, even thinking that all the girls around me are better looking, more talented and more lovable than I am. Thank God I am a wholly new self now. I began to accept myself after I accepted the Lord's guidance and I love myself so much now (...) One more important thing, God heals my depression. Huge academic pressure, an intense roommate relationship, a broken relationship with my boyfriend, all led to darkness and anxiety inside which burst out. What I still remember clearly now is how much pain I was in each day. I sat on the sofa with dull eyes, staring at the wall from morning to afternoon. My heart was so painful that I couldn't breathe. The gloomy state lasted one week or two […] Later, I heard in my heart a very small voice, one in the darkness, singing: "My spirit sings! Praise the Lord, my God!" The words of praise were like a life-saving branch. I grabbed the voice and sang along: "My spirit sings! Praise the Lord, my God!" I kept repeating the sound, and it got louder and louder, until it finally exploded like thunder. Then I woke up and opened my eyes. After this, the care from my mother and the prayers from my brothers and sisters in the church helped improve my mental condition. It took me almost one year to completely recover from the depression. What I kept doing was talking to God every day and praising him. By doing so, God opened my eyes to the beautiful flowers, the green trees, fresh air and the elegant clouds. Everything became crystal clear. During that time, I also started to exercise. I ran every day, and the scenery along the road also praised God, and hence I felt better and better.

Yuenyi's management of her emotional struggles is narrated in Extract 6 with specific reference to her experience as an overseas student which she associates with feelings of anxiety about meeting expectations, to be "good looking" and "talented" under high academic pressure, in addition to the enduring of broken relationships with those left in China and unpleasant new relationships with roommates in the UK. These are the feelings upon which self-esteem, depression and self-reconstitution are articulated, with self-reconstitution involving the acceptance of God's guidance through the support and care of brothers and sisters at her local church in London. This transformation is also described as leading into a new state of being characterised by happiness, health and clarity of mind. But this narrated new state of mind soon clashed with her lived experiences at LW a few months after returning to Beijing.

Yuenyi found it difficult to cope with what she described to us as "too much corporation-like ethos", which in her view involved stressful working conditions and long working hours at a very low salary. She also began to complain that her everyday work at the charity was constrained by the National Security Department of the People's Republic of China. The charity's activities were closely monitored by the State due to suspicion of ideological infiltration, and so officials were regularly sent to visit LW's office in Beijing. This normally entailed official requests for the charity to change the way they operated locally, particularly in relation to the content publicly displayed by the organisation. Thus, Yuenyi's workload was often affected by such visits, for public display of content was a key area under her responsibility as a member of the design department.

As she found it increasingly difficult to commit to her congregation and attend the bible reading group sessions arranged by Baozhai, Yuenyi eventually considered quitting her job at LW. But the risks for her to become long-term unemployed were high since most jobs in her field of expertise require a master's degree. Not having postgraduate education had also

prevented her from applying for local *hukou* which, in turn, made her highly vulnerable within Beijing's labour market as companies are encouraged to only hire candidates with it. Yuenyi tried to tackle this situation by applying to an internal vacancy in LW's marketing department, in the hope that the workload would be lower which would therefore facilitate her involvement with her underground bible reading group. Although she was successful in making this transfer, her working conditions remained the same. Yuenyi eventually withdrew from LW in the Autumn of 2019 due to extra hours spent at work overlapping with the group bible activities.

5. Hope, affective alliances and global circuits of labour

As we come back to our own research dialogue, we look at the cases of Baozhai and Yuenyi in light of Heller & McElhinny's (2017) invitation to keep an eye on emerging new alliances. These scholars urge us to search "for sources of hope, movements, ideas, and people who use language to challenge capitalist and colonial logics and imagine different futures" (p. 21) while remaining "mindful of the ways in which most efforts have perverse and unintended consequences to which [we must] attend" (p. 258). To us, this is well warranted by the enmeshment of individuals, institutions, social beliefs, practices and feelings throughout the course of Baozhai and Yuenyi's trajectories of return.

This article points to experiences of disenfranchisement that emerge in response to neoliberal logics of competition which push young people in China to self-govern/discipline themselves by investing in transnational forms of education and work with the promise of a successful return. But these logics aren't new, and the category of the "Chinese returnee" constitutes a relevant discursive terrain to reveal historical continuities with roots in colonialism and modern nation-building. Engineered through public policies and forms of citizenship governance that aim to secure China's economic competitiveness in the global market, the imagined returnee in China is institutionally imbued with meanings of modernisation, development, indigenisation of knowledge and technology, and the building of economic hubs. In this regard, the contemporary entanglement of high societal expectations about returnees in China and global circuits of higher education and labour turns social beliefs of successful return into a "technology of hope" (Ahmed, 2010) which constantly drives individuals towards unachievable, imagined futures of joy and reward.

Even so, our sociolinguistic lens shows that the affective responses to such pressures are complex and playout in line with a view of power regimes as emerging from unexpected and ambivalent attachments generated by "affective milieus" (Deleuze, 1988) and the contradictions, paradoxes and surprises that they generate. The pressures for successful return in our fieldwork are confronted with religious projects of self-transformation that are mediated by daily communicative activities in which "being born again" involves a re-alignment of human relations according to a new spiritual framework. These projects require individuals' subjectivation and reflexive regulation of their and others' affects and conduct in daily meaning-making practices. Institutionally channelled by Christian evangelical logics of care of the self, Baozhai and Yuenyi's projects draw on principles of self-government that require them to constantly engage in practices of self-regulation, self-examination and confession. Paradoxically, these practices align with neoliberal rationalities and thus contribute to misrecognise (Bourdieu, 1977) larger structures of inequality, an observation that echoes Foucault's (2004) discussions on *pastoral care* as an ancient Christian technique of government which would later be incorporated into the core of Western liberal rationality in the government of the modern nation-state.

The consequences of this paradoxical alignment are seen in the material effects of Baozhai's personal investment in becoming a leader and Yuenyi's sharing of her story of transformation. In Baozhai's case, her self-discipline to achieve "independent thinking" by

remaining in the UK and receiving the necessary religious training to lead her own bible reading group gets capitalised by a transnational corporation whose market expansion in China is, in turn, enabled by Baozhai's labour. As for Yuenyi, her narrated struggles are institutionally packaged in the form of narrative trajectories at the service of a charity which is linked to a larger infrastructure of British corporate networks that operate in China – i.e. the everyday enactment of the "sharing stories of transformation" communicative template is what indeed enables LW to be socially recognised as a Christian organisation. At the same time, however, the religious projects of self-transformation described in this article also enact and put into circulation values that counter neoliberal logics of competition and success.

In Baozhai's case, her reflexive (self)regulation of participation in bible groups and narrated accounts is also driven by her desire to help others find a "spiritual home". Her scaffolding of leading activities turns the bible reading group into a collective space of solidarity where spiritually-based mutual understanding of humans' actions are front-staged over the judgmental frames that predominate in social life outside the congregation. This alignment is also reinforced by her narrated accounts of conduct whereby important life decisions appear as subordinated to the very goal of becoming a bible reading group leader, even if this is at the expense of achieving professional career aspirations that would normally matter to others (e.g., high salary or prestigious job positions at companies' headquarters). As for Yuenyi, her narrated struggles, though packaged by LW, allow her to reflexively reveal the (im)material consequences that the neoliberal logic pushing her to study in the UK had in and on her body and mind. Through her narrating practices she aligns the experience of being an overseas student in the UK with negative feelings of depression, anxiety and unhealthy social relations that feature as induced by pressures to compete academically and to live far away from the loved ones in China.

All together, these subjectivation projects resonate with anti-capitalist collective actions of "common aid" described elsewhere, also known as "the commons" (Polany, 2001). As liberalisation of markets and privatisation of land intensify, these collective actions are seen as reclaiming communal property rights, land, and natural resources that have been turned into corporation-owned commodities and whose value is thus only understood in terms of financial profit. Instead of relying on capitalist logics of exchange of goods, these actions are described as voluntary contributions that demand self-organisation, peer-governance and ownership of the conditions needed for life and its reproduction. They also argue for non-market *care* as an essential category of value-creation. These acts of common*ing* are thus not just mere instances of "resistance", but rather social systems of self-governance engaged in the making of alternative futures via disrupting the conventionalised systems of meaning and value that are attributed to the material, symbolic and human world in which we live. They involve a re-framing of the relationship between humans and their natural world, and thus invite us to consider politics as ultimately originating in human subjectivity (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019).

But as we continue with our joint research, the extent to which our participants' actions may or may not constitute a form of spiritual commoning in the long term is still unclear. As of this publication's date, Xiaoyan is carrying on the exploration of two bible reading groups in Beijing while Miguel has initiated new fieldwork at a Christian evangelical organisation that engages with international students (mostly from China) in London. We hope that a sustained collaborative dialogue will provide us with new questions and further understanding in the years to come.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. "Becoming a professional in the new global market: Language, mobility and inequality", funded by UCL Global Fund, UCL IOE Seed corn grant, University College London and Beijing University of International Business and Economics.
2. Unlike officially recognised Christian churches in China, underground house churches are not governmentally supported in the country; rather, they are seen by the authorities as following a Western tradition entrenched in histories of colonialism (Yang, 1999). That said, the official position is generally relaxed and members of these groups are often allowed to meet in major cities as long as they do so in small (and monitored) numbers in non-publicly visible spaces, a position that may be explained by the large number of believers that engage with these groups today.
3. http://www.1000plan.org/qrjh/section/2?m=rcrd
4. Extracted from "Measures for the implementation of application procedures for employment and *hukou* settlement in Beijing for overseas returnees who are not from Beijing (trial)" published on the 4th of October 2019 [北京市积分落户管理办法(试行)].
5. *WeChat* is one of the world's most popular social apps for mobile text and voice messaging communication developed by Tencent in China.
6. Dialogues were ethnographically recorded in Mandarin Chinese and translated to English.
7. Only the English translation is provided to avoid the participant being identified online.

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Appendix: Mark's gospel 4:2-4:34

The Parable of the Sower

[2] He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: [3] "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. [4] As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. [5] Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. [6] But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. [7] Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. [8] Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."[9] Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." [10] When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. [11] He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables [12] so that,"'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding;

otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'[a]"¹³ Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satancomes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

A Lamp on a Stand

²¹ He said to them, "Do you bring in a lamp to put it under a bowl or a bed? Instead, don't you put it on its stand? ²² For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open.²³ If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear."
²⁴ "Consider carefully what you hear," he continued. "With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. ²⁵ Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

The Parable of the Growing Seed

²⁶ He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

³⁰ Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade." ³³ With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. ³⁴ He did not say anything to them without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything.