

## Dancing before Christ and Chinese Citizens

### Protestant Calisthenics and Religious Space in Contemporary China

Michel Chambon

■ **ABSTRACT:** This article explores how Protestants have developed Christian calisthenics in contemporary China. Chinese society has demonstrated a renewed interest in calisthenics practiced in public space. Millions of practitioners gather early mornings or evenings to stretch, dance, and exercise outdoors. Female Christians are developing their religious version of these exercises. In tune with loud Christian hymns, they perform together on sidewalks to praise their Lord and cultivate their health. This article argues that Christian dancers use their bodies to renegotiate the spatial, congregational, and political definition of their religion. While religious and public authorities tend to formalize public expressions of Christianity, Christian dancers emphasize the importance of health, the polymorphic nature of their religion, and the ubiquitous presence of their God.

■ **KEYWORDS:** calisthenics, China, Christianity, religious space, Fujian

Evening exercises in public squares are an extremely widespread Chinese phenomenon. This is known as plaza dancing (*guangchangwu* 广场舞) or Chinese calisthenics. Echoing morning exercises centered on the cultivation of health and usually found in greener parks (Palmer 2007), plaza dancing occurs on any open space, such as sidewalks and plazas, to cultivate health, vigor, and social interactions through waltz, calisthenics, or singing (Richaud 2018; Thireau 2019). Flexible and informal by nature, evening calisthenics is open to any passerby and intrinsically areligious.

In Nanping,<sup>1</sup> Fujian province, hundreds of people gather at night to exercise and dance. While public parks are a common space for these gatherings, most occur along the Min River. The cooler breeze of the four-kilometer-long sidewalks creates an ideal environment. Near the historical center, an old pedestrian bridge connects the city to the Jiufeng mountain. Near the entrance, the sidewalk becomes wider and forms one of the most relaxing locations of downtown Nanping, which hundreds of calisthenics practitioners, dancers, and singers occupy every night. Among them, a small group of middle-aged women exercise with loud Christian music. Unless it rains, these dancers gather at the same spot every single night. At 7 p.m., they turn a loudspeaker on to practice aerobics and exercise in time with Christian hymns.

By focusing on plaza dancing performed with Christian hymns, I argue that Chinese female Christians carefully reconfigure the assigned space and power dynamic of Chinese Christianity. This article discusses the role of female believers in negotiating the public display of Protestantism and highlights the importance of the body in tracing the ways that religion, policymaking,



and gender intersect in urban China. On the one hand, calisthenics practitioners exercise for the benefit of their health and for the pleasure of being with fellow Christians. Yet the location of their gatherings challenges the ways that religion is spatially configured in Chinese cities. Protestant women refuse to limit their religious commitment to their private homes and clergy-controlled houses of worship. Rather, they use their bodies as agents of spatial change to reclaim a secularizing public space (Yang 2011: 340). On the other hand, in contrast to institutionalized Protestantism controlled by male and educated clergy members, either within state-approved churches or house churches, Christian plaza dancing unveils the public agency of older and less educated female believers. Their performances promote a Chinese Protestantism in which formal education and masculine authority are less central. Distinct from the ecstatic communion promoted by Pentecostalism (Yang et al. 2017; McLeister 2019), Christian calisthenics place the body at the center of a performance in which a group of dancers, God, and the surrounding audience are integrated.

Elaborating on Robert Weller's argument about resistance (1994), I show that female practitioners are not simply opposing the state, the modern spatialization of religion, and male leadership. Rather, their out-of-place religious practices, incongruous gestures dismissing the eroticization of the female body, and fragmented religious discourses contrasting with the apparent coherence of theological authorities stand as an alternative enactment of Christianity. While practitioners seek to aggregate more dancers and to spread across places, they gradually saturate their milieu to eventually transform the chemistry of Chinese Christianity. In other words, this article goes intentionally beyond the scholarly focus on church–state relations that characterizes most research on Chinese Christianity (Koesel et al. 2020; Yang and White 2021). Without denying the importance of the state, but joining efforts to provide gendered (Chambon 2019) and aesthetics (McLeister 2019) perspectives able to complexify our understanding of Chinese Christian political divides, this article explores the multicentered heteronomy of actors who simultaneously interact and co-shape Chinese Christianity to show how they reconfigure its assigned space and power dynamic.

In terms of methodology, the data discussed in this article was collected between 2014 and 2019 through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and online research. During a year and a half of fieldwork in Nanping, I observed groups of calisthenics performers across the city (Chambon 2020). Since 2016, I have also visited small cities of northern Fujian, Fuzhou—the provincial capital—and Taipei to interview practitioners and leaders. These multiple layers of data allow me to first present plaza dancing in Nanping and broader China. Then, I discuss scholarly analyses of the phenomenon. Finally, I introduce the Christian calisthenics that occurs in Nanping and Fuzhou before discussing its contrasting features and significance.

## **Unfolding Plaza Dancing**

Nanping is a small urban hub of northern Fujian hosting around three hundred thousand inhabitants and spreading along the Min River and its tributary (Chambon 2020). At the junction between inner and coastal China, the city is nestled between green mountains and dotted by numerous public parks and wide riverfronts. Every day at dusk, when tall buildings start to twinkle with thousands of lights, people walk down by the river to relax. From 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. in the summer, and 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. in the winter, groups of calisthenics practitioners gather, and a concert of loudspeakers can be heard along the Min. Some plaza dancing groups are made of 10 people or so, while others gather up to one hundred. They invade the large sidewalks of the riverfront, forcing passersby to slalom among them. Most groups are made up of middle-aged

women who, organized in a few lines, follow the body movements of a leader in time with their music. Yet some groups practice other kinds of exercise. Under one bridge, two dozen couples twirling in large circles practice the waltz. Just a little further down, a group of twenty or so elderly men are packed under a Chinese-style pavilion singing traditional Chinese songs. Twenty meters further, a group of 60 women in their thirties and forties line up around the large, modern statue of the plaza to practice tonic gymnastics. Their pace is steady, their moves synchronized, and their pop music energizing. Not far from them, a condensed crowd of couples is dancing in circles and invades every corner of the plaza. Beyond the old gate of the city, twenty or so teenagers, mostly male, are showing their skills in breakdance. The whole area is filled with the “hot and noisy” (*renao* 热闹) atmosphere so specific to Chinese sociability (Chau 2006). Along the four kilometers of large sidewalks surrounding the Min River, hundreds of groups exercise and entertain themselves. The size and style of those groups vary, but they all allow one to practice physical exercise and to socialize freely, whatever one’s wealth, skill, and education.

The vast spectrum of evening exercises observed in Nanping reflects what occurs in most Chinese cities and townships. Whether in Guangzhou, Kunming (Rochot 2019), Tianjin (Thireau 2019), or Beijing (Richaud 2018), thousands of groups gather in Chinese public squares and on sidewalks to exercise at night. This popular and widespread interest in physical exercise mixed with outdoor and collective entertainment constitutes the contemporary forms of Chinese calisthenics.

Plaza dancing is typically made up of simple body movements that ordinary people can learn. Most of the time, groups of middle-aged women aggregate around a loudspeaker and perform for an hour or two. Their performance is not without artistic efforts, such as synchronization, modeling, formation design, and accessories (flags, fan, etc.). Some performers may even wear specific outfits. These practices aim to entertain and combat health problems like obesity and high cholesterol fostered by urban modern life.

Although some researchers claim that calisthenics has been practiced in Chinese society since the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) (Huang et al. 2011), others insist on the instrumental role of the post-1949 Communist Party in promoting “breath training”—or Qigong exercises and Taiji Quan (Palmer 2007). The People’s Liberation Army infused by the gymnastic culture of the Soviet Union has been instrumental in promoting a wide range of exercises as a way to cultivate the self. Simultaneously, the People’s Republic of China has long promoted calisthenics in primary and high schools, as well as in some universities. From 1957 to 2011, authorities released nine official calisthenics regimens to promote physical exercise at public schools, each combining a new set of visuals with body movements and state-approved music (Cang 2011). In other words, calisthenics has been part of the modern state effort to build a new nationhood. Today, it can be found every night on most sidewalks and public squares, but also within every single school, as well as during the opening ceremonies of sports games. Through its various forms and spaces, it remains an example par excellence of the synchronization of rhythms of the social body (Brownell 1995). Yet it is mostly young students and middle-aged and retired people who practice it.

This national interest in calisthenics does not come without tensions (BBC News 2013). What are entertaining physical exercises to many can appear as a public nuisance to others (Rochot 2019). Groups searching for a large open space, easily accessible by public transportation, do not hesitate to quickly colonize plazas, large sidewalks, and public squares found in wealthier neighborhoods and residential areas. Then, surrounding residents complain about the ‘noise’ that ‘dancing aunties’ generate until late at night. Opponents of plaza dancing also point out the difficulties these exercises generate for those who want to walk or bike. As I observed in Guangzhou, Fuzhou, and Nanping, local police, associations of residents, and urban developers



**Figure 1:** Chinese group fan dance by the Min river, Nanping, 2024. Photo by the author.

elaborate strategies to keep plaza dancers away. Either by closing public parks earlier, adding heavy pots of green plants to wide sidewalks, or instigating curfews for loudspeakers, they try to discourage people from performing plaza dancing.

This rapid overview suggests that no single motivation or practical aspect can capture the moving and polysemic nature of plaza dancing (Thireau 2019: 175). But a few key dynamics need to be underscored. First, groups are competing to use and define public space. While wealthier populations design new neighborhoods with greener and more open spaces allocated to specific types of leisure (walking, biking), calisthenics practitioners, often middle-aged women with modest resources, travel across the city to occupy these spaces with their disruptive tastes. Researchers underline how this reveals that the Chinese production of urban space is not entirely controlled by local administration or wealthier residents. Through strategies of administrative avoidance, fluid leadership, restless accommodation, or repetitive presence, plaza dancers challenge ways to privatize land and assign specific functions to it (Thireau 2020; Rochot 2019). With the popularization of plaza dancing, social leisure and exercises are not limited to suitable fitness centers or dance studios. State officials and other landowners have no choice but to compromise with the invasive presence of plaza dancers. Together, they coproduce ad hoc Chinese urban space.

Beyond the realm of space, tensions also occur in the definition of proper public behavior, collective taste, and shared values. While calisthenic practitioners refuse to worry about performing in public, they repeat new movements that make them appear ‘silly,’ ‘noisy,’ or ‘strange.’ During fieldwork, I often heard younger generations commenting on how exercisers ‘look ridiculous.’ Night after night, groups of plaza dancers offer alternative aesthetic norms and dispute normative judgments through their musical selection, ‘funny’ gestures, and apparent lack of self-consciousness (Thireau 2019).

Amid this contestation of norms and values, gender seems to play a specific role as well. Although certain groups include as many men as women, most plaza dancers are female retirees. And this tendency is even stronger among Christian groups. Scholars have long debated the nature of gendered power dynamics in the Qing Empire as well as in Republican China. Researchers argue that while the new regime of the Maoist era promoted a gender ideology that

“erased gender differences between men and women to maximize the use of female labor,” the Reform era (post-1978) “naturalizes and even essentializes biological differences between men and women to meet the demands of labor reduction for a market economy” (Yang 2011: 335). In this new capitalist China promoting a market economy, women are ideally consuming subjects able to fulfill a commodity-assisted form of domesticity and to embody renewed aesthetic norms through their investment in the cosmetics economy (Young 1989; Rofel 1999; Yang 1999; Hanser 2008). Still, the rapid transformation of the Reform era economy has generated massive layoffs that affected middle-aged women more. For them, it has become particularly hard to fulfill new consumerist ideals. As a result, rather than constructing a functional body devoted to labor and production, or adorning it with the goods, services, and technologies of gendered consumption (Baudrillard 1998), plaza dancing allows retired women to reposition themselves at the center of public life in a way that is not predetermined by state-approved or economically driven gender ideologies.

Yet plaza dancers not only throw their gendered bodies into public squares, they also elaborate new forms of economic and social relationships. The circulation of life that they foster occurs not only at individual levels but also at a collective one. Their everyday free and informal gatherings embody types of relationships that are neither capitalist nor state-approved communism (Thireau 2020). When economic status plays a central role in defining one’s social position, plaza dancing offers forms of social interaction in which money and education matter less. Unlike private fitness centers that attract a growing population of young and resourceful customers, outdoor calisthenics does not require an individual subscription, monthly fees, or expensive equipment. Anyone can join a group, and anyone can lead one.

In this fluid sociability challenging dominant norms, many find forms of friendship and recognition (Richaud 2018). Calisthenics leaders do not require official degrees or economic resources to assert their expertise. Rather, the informal setting of their practices allows retired citizens, unqualified teenagers, and middle-aged housewives to share their passion for dance or fitness exercises. While passersby gather around them, faceless citizens involved in plaza dancing use their evening leisure as an alternative channel to produce social networks and status. Indeed, in a context marked by strict administrative regulations, these fluid gatherings have political significance (Thireau 2020). The People’s Republic of China has repeatedly demonstrated its concerns toward any kind of public gathering and organization not approved by the Chinese Communist Party. Nevertheless, every night, millions of plaza dancers appear in public, hold ground, and evolve beyond administrative approval and bureaucratic paperwork. Thus, their harmless activity eventually questions social order and political authority. Since they do not produce any data or material information such as formal registrations, written records, or financial receipts, their activity is hard to capture by bureaucracy. Plaza dancers are socially fluid—and therefore politically ambivalent.

Acknowledging these dynamics that fuel plaza dancing, it is now time to turn to Protestant groups. What does it add to use Christian features to perform plaza dancing? Who are the practitioners joining groups using Christian hymns? What does it say about Christianity in China?

## Protestant Dancing

Every evening, a small group occupies a corner of the Jiufeng bridge’s plaza and performs calisthenics in time with Christian hymns. Around 7 p.m., a few women put their bags down and set up a loudspeaker hooked up to a CD player. As soon as six or seven of them have arrived, they begin to exercise. For each Christian hymn, they perform a set of aerobic movements. When

a hymn ends, they move to the next one. During the following 30 minutes or so, regular participants continue to arrive. Some may wear a distinct outfit made up of pink pants and a blue T-shirt. But most are dressed casually.

Because of the location, people walking along the river are forced to pass the Christian calisthenics and hear snippets of their religious hymns. Leaders of the group explain that this location has been carefully selected:

Of course, there are larger and quieter spots in town . . . It would be easier to gather there. But they are further away and less visible. Here, it's more central, transportation is easy. . . . Sure, this corner is dark, and there is no way to expand. The noise of the road mixed with the music displayed by nearby groups does not help. But everyone can see us.

At night, the Jiufeng bridge's plaza is one of the most popular outdoor places in Nanping. On the Western side, a large historical city gate narrows access and forces everyone to walk by the corner where the Christian group performs. Although this particular location brings drawbacks like loud noise, limited space, and lack of light, it is an excellent site to be seen.

Still, Christian women claim that they are not performing mere plaza dancing (*guangchangwu* 广场舞). Although they dance in public like everybody else, their performance is first and foremost a prayer, called 'praising exercises' (*zanmeicao* 赞美操). It is an offering to God. Mrs. Chen, a regular practitioner in her mid-sixties, explains that praise exercises do not only help one to be healthy and to spend time with sisters (*jiemei* 姐妹) from church. The goal is to honor God:

The praising exercises are even better than plaza dancing . . . In the past, I joined many groups [of plaza dancing]. I like being outside at night to exercise with other people. But the praising exercises combine everything. It helps you to keep healthy and to praise God. What else could you ask for?

Because of its location, the group remains rather small. Leaders, however, explain that Nanping contains many more Christian dancers. Mrs. Yi, a deacon of the Gospel Church who oversees Christian calisthenics, argues that there were about 150 regular practitioners in 2018. The vast majority of them are women in their fifties and sixties, joined by a few of their husbands and some younger women. Most female practitioners are retired workers and housewives. Some maintain small-scale activities like helping acquaintances with shopkeeping or selling vegetables they grow themselves.

Since only a few of them practice at the Jiufeng bridge plaza, most affiliate with one of the four subgroups in the city. Those subgroups are all connected to the Gospel Church, the largest Protestant denomination of the district. This church is made up of about four thousand Christians who worship at four urban and eleven rural churches (Chambon 2020). In Nanping, numerous meeting points, such as small apartments or individual storerooms, allow urban Christians to gather for non-worship activities like Bible study, tea, choral singing, and calisthenics.

At the Enguang Hall, one of the four urban churches of the Gospel Church, there are about 25 regular members, including one man. Three afternoons a week, those who are available gather inside the sanctuary to practice for one hour. Among them, Mrs. Tang usually comes twice a week. She does not like going to the Jiufeng bridge plaza—a place that she considers "too loud." She prefers the Enguang Hall:

To learn new steps, you need to hear the music and the voice of the leader. . . . You know for us, old pieces of wood, it's not easy to learn all the steps and movements. I need to repeat many times before knowing the choreography.

Like Mrs. Tang, many practitioners prefer to gather where they can better hear and follow the Christian hymns that guide the exercises. Sanctuaries are not only empty and quiet during the week, they are “the house of the Lord.” A practitioner adds: “even if our movements are a little clumsy and insecure, we put all our heart into it because we are with the Lord.” There, learners can more easily hear instructions, and leaders can better see how the learners move their legs and arms. Indeed, their exercises offered to God are not only about physical relaxation and well-being. They are a prayer that needs to exhibit beauty, grace, and serenity. For the performers, God and passersby must enjoy watching them.

Furthermore, sanctuaries attract calisthenic practitioners because they provide room for intimacy and friendship. The interviewees enjoy gathering with fellow Christian dancers in a space where no one will bother them. At church, they do not have to worry about the weather or other groups of exercisers. Thus, the most common and regular places in which praising exercises are practiced in Nanping are Christian sanctuaries. And even practitioners at the Jiufeng bridge plaza use them to learn new choreographies.

Yet leaders like Mrs. Yi tend to push dancers outside of Christian sanctuaries. For them, praising exercises are something to share with a large audience. Like the Christian faith, it is not something to keep for oneself. It is something to offer to other people and to God. Often, leaders encourage practitioners to join the Jiufeng bridge group—or at least to take turns to make sure that enough participants will be there at night. Thus, this evening performance is part of a broader effort to put the praising exercises on public display. It is the tip of a larger iceberg—a network of about 150 exercisers who usually gather within their sanctuaries but also agree to make their performance more public.

This outward motion is not only manifested at the Jiufeng bridge plaza, though. The Nanping praising exercises network regularly joins events organized by the municipality during the Mid-Autumn Festival, the Winter Festival, the Chinese New Year, and other festivals. Under the coordination of the festivals committee, calisthenics clubs and local schools are invited to perform on the main plaza. An elevated platform, powerful loudspeakers, and large decorations are installed by the city, and groups take turns to demonstrate their skills and entertain passersby. In this joyful atmosphere, dressed-up children coming from various kindergartens and performing under the guidance of their educators attract large cheers and applause from the crowd.

For these public events, the Nanping praising exercises network gathers about 80 of its members. On the podium, they form a few straight lines and execute choreographies in time with Christian hymns. The exact set of hymns and dances is determined in advance by leaders, and the subgroups have each practiced in advance. Once the festival arrives, all performers merge into one band and wear the same uniform. Depending on the season, it may be a pair of black pants combined with a red sweatshirt with a small yellow cross printed on it. During warmer seasons, they favor a pair of loose pink pants with a blue T-shirt. As we will see later in this article, this outfit is the specific uniform of Taiwan-based practitioners of praising exercises.

The Nanping praising exercises practitioners also find other opportunities to perform in public. A few times a year, the network takes the initiative to meet at Yuping Park. Usually mid-morning on a Saturday, when many people are out, more than half of the network come together to dance and praise at a highly visible spot. They dress up with their pink and blue uniform, turn on their loudspeaker, and perform a few Christian choreographies. While passersby can observe as they wish, there is no direct solicitation or conversation. Soon enough, many realize that the music is Christian, and that the dancers *xin yesu* (信耶穌) believe in Jesus.

During church festivals like Thanksgiving,<sup>2</sup> Christmas, Chinese New Year, and Easter, adepts of the praising exercises also create smaller groups of fifteen dancers or so. For a few weeks, each group creates and rehearses a sophisticated dance with refined costumes. When their cho-



**Figure 2:** Christian Performance at Yuping Park, Nanping, 2016. Photo by the author.

reography is properly embodied, groups tour churches of the district to perform during their services. Although the exact number of visiting groups may vary from place to place, no congregation is left out. After the sermon by the local pastor, between three and six groups display their choreographies. Faced with this extremely vivid performance, churchgoers do not fail to applaud the dancers, with their colorful outfits and energetic music. Many appreciate the time and effort spent by the exercisers who visit each congregation and contribute to the joyful praying atmosphere of these festivals.

Through these different opportunities and spaces, the Nanping praising exercises network is both publicly visible and socially integrated. Their recurrent performances bring members to collaborate closely and cultivate strong ties. During rehearsals within quiet sanctuaries, members cultivate friendship. During public performances, they cooperate to make their artistic display of religion visible to all. Unlike devoted evangelists, who readily preach about Jesus, argue about salvation, and call for radical choices, female exercisers deploy another kind of Christian presence. They do not spell out their theology—they let Christian hymns and suggestive choreographies do it for them. With Christian vocabulary embedded in the music and dancing movements referring to Christian ways of worshipping, the whole exercise points to God. The salvation they perform does not come through interpersonal speech acts and statements of faith—it is made up of collective exercises cultivating health before the Christian Lord and passersby.

Before exploring praising exercises beyond Nanping, one needs to highlight that the performance at the Jiufeng bridge plaza does more than most Chinese calisthenics groups do. In general, plaza dancing does not aim to generate lasting socialization. In a political system that is deeply afraid of all forms of social mobilization occurring outside of the realm of the party, plaza dancing is a spontaneous and ephemeral phenomenon. However, Christian praising exercisers cultivate a much more diverse, organized, and resilient network. This is an enterprise supported by a fairly large number of Protestant women who regularly meet outside of the Jiufeng bridge plaza and coordinate their actions. Furthermore, their presence in public squares is part of an effort to make Christianity visible and to make their God present in Nanping. It is not only them, their group, and their religion that “appear in the world” (Thireau 2019: 175), it is also their God among them. Together, they bring religious sociability and the Christian deity into the streets of their city.

Nonetheless, interviewees explain that their movement does not come from the Gospel Church per se. Although pastors support their initiative, they do not lead it. It is an enterprise

driven by middle-aged women who seek to combine the appeal of plaza dancing and a Christian commitment. With various denominational backgrounds, they are the promoters of this religiously informed dancing. The songs and hymns they use also reflect the variety and fluidity of their network.<sup>3</sup> As some of the hymns they select are from Taiwan, US-based Chinese groups, and local producers, their exercises are not limited to a denomination, a national territory, or Nanping itself. As the pink and blue uniform suggests, they are interconnected with similar practices occurring throughout the province and beyond. And in fact, it was in Fuzhou, the provincial capital of Fujian, that Nanping practitioners learned for the first time about Christian calisthenics. This is therefore a good time to introduce the history of the movement in this part of China.

In May 2010, Mrs. Tang, one of the two coordinators of Fuzhou praising exercises, went to Hong Kong for a training session by the Alpha Course organized by local Protestant churches. She was an evangelist of her church, the Flower Lane Church (*huaxiangtang* 花巷堂), looking for new ways to evangelize non-Christians. In Hong Kong, a participant gave her a DVD produced by Mrs. Wu Meiyun (吴美云), a Taiwanese retiree branding a new kind of Christian calisthenics named 'praising exercises,' which Hong Kong Christians have been practicing for a few years (Mai 2008).

Back in Fuzhou, Mrs. Tang watched the DVD and did some research. Impressed by the material, she asked for support from her church to invite Mrs. Wu to Fujian. With more than ten thousand churchgoers, the Flower Lane Church is the largest Protestant network in Fuzhou, able to sponsor all sorts of initiatives. In October 2010, the church hosted a two-day workshop to let Mrs. Wu introduce the praising exercises. The workshop gathered around a hundred people, including twelve women from Nanping.

According to my Fujianese informants, Mrs. Wu Meiyun is an elegant and dynamic retiree living in New Taipei City, Taiwan. Born in 1934, she studied at a Taiwanese Presbyterian school but spent most of her life in the US where her husband worked. After his retirement, the couple moved back to Taiwan in 2002. There, Mrs. Wu soon joined the semi-spontaneous groups of outdoor calisthenics practitioners that one can find early in the morning in most public parks of Taipei. During the workshop, she explained that many practitioners would end their morning exercise with a visit to a temple where they would offer some incense sticks. No one was forced to honor deities, but the two things were often linked. The Taiwanese sociability built through outdoor morning exercises usually included a religious dimension that disturbed Mrs. Wu's Presbyterian faith. Soon, she started to look for alternative options allowing her to combine calisthenics with her Christian faith.

Inspired by the American pastor James Kennedy (1930–2007), she wanted to create something in which friendship would be the first step toward Christ. In contrast to straightforward Christian proselytism that explicitly preaches about the importance of choosing Christ, and the urgency of salvation, Kennedy has long advocated for evangelization through real friendship. And Mrs. Wu recycled this principle in her effort to create Christian calisthenics. Of course, concerns about individual health and well-being remain central in her enterprise. But she also wanted to create exercises that would help Christians to truly live with others and eventually share their faith.

In her view, the praising exercises are a collection of Christian hymns that practitioners use to guide their physical exercises. The hymns are not specifically written for calisthenics. Rather, they are well-known church hymns that Mrs. Wu and her followers have selected because of their text and rhythm. For each hymn, they design a set of slow, repetitive motions that help the body cultivate health. To learn these choreographies, they also produce video recordings.

Typically, practitioners of the praising exercises gather on early mornings in urban public parks wearing the same loose pink pants combined with a blue T-shirt with a turquoise collar. Day after day, they not only repeat their exercises but cultivate friendship among themselves. They may start having breakfast together or helping each other. From there, they eventually introduce new members to the Christian faith (Local Believer 2022).

During the 2010 workshop, Mrs. Wu impressed the Fujianese participants. While most of these middle-aged women have belonged to plaza dancing groups for a long time, they never had the chance to practice specifically Christian exercises. In addition to purchasing her DVDs, many also decided to launch similar praising exercise groups at home. Mrs. Tang and other Fuzhou leaders explain, however, that the Taiwanese praising exercises needed some adjustments. Either through choreographies, musical styles, or general rhythms, they had to appear younger and more dynamic. More options in terms of hymns and choreographies were also necessary to better compete with the extremely lively Chinese calisthenics scene.

In 2016, leaders claimed that there were more than 70 meeting points across the greater Fuzhou area, gathering some three thousand practitioners daily. About two hundred coordinators collaborated to oversee groups meeting across sidewalks and public parks of the city. Although the Flower Lane Church has been instrumental in the introduction of the praising exercises to mainland China, no single church or pastor controls it. Rather, it stands as an autonomous Christian network developed by female practitioners. In Fujian, a provincial association helps local leaders to share their experience as well as their new initiatives, hymn choices, and practices. And by early 2018, the praising exercises were practiced across more than ten Chinese provinces, including places like Shanghai, Beijing, Henan, Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Shandong.

In Fuzhou, praising exercisers carefully respect plaza dancing regulations established by the municipality. Gatherings include no more than 30 people. They do not block the traffic and loudspeakers are not turned on before 6 a.m. and after 10 p.m. Yet it is a constant struggle to find suitable spots that are still available and where district police will not harass practitioners. But leaders endorse rules promoted by the authorities and consider them advantageous for the diffusion of the exercises. The size limit encourages successful groups to split into subgroups that look for new places to practice.

Unable to turn into large gatherings, they avoid attracting political attention and remain a wide, loose network of small and friendly groups, with numerous local leaders bringing Christian hymns to an increasing number of neighborhoods. A typical group gathers 25 people on a large sidewalk for one and a half hours of exercise. If the weather allows, they meet every morning or evening. Most practitioners are middle-aged women. Under the guidance of three or four leaders wearing the distinctive uniform of Mrs. Wu's movement, exercisers stand in three or four parallel lines to synchronically move their bodies while following the hymn. All coordinators must be Christian. Unlike what I have observed in Nanping, from a third to half of the practitioners are not churchgoers. They are acquaintances and passersby who regularly join in to cultivate health and socialize. Some non-Christian participants explain that Christian hymns are nice to listen to, the meeting point is close to their home, but more importantly, the group is friendly. At the end of their daily session, practitioners will typically sit down and drink homemade tea while chatting with each other. In the mornings, some may go to eat breakfast at a nearby street restaurant. Twice a month, Fuzhou's coordinators meet and pray together. Mrs. Tang and other leaders help them to share their experiences, discuss difficulties, and coordinate performances and larger events.

In these two urban sites where Protestant calisthenics is performed, Nanping and Fuzhou, practitioners show that, despite appearances, they are not producing a mere Protestant version of plaza dancing nor a homogeneous and mono-dimensional religious activity. Multiple

aspirations intersect in this urban and Protestant phenomenon. Furthermore, the fieldwork reveals that internal dynamics are slightly different between Fuzhou and Nanping. In the provincial capital, praising exercises are mostly an outdoor performance, successfully oriented toward non-Christians. In Nanping, practitioners are already churchgoers who most often meet indoors.

As the significance of praising exercises is constructed in relation to plaza dancing, more attention must be given to their shared continuities and discontinuities. In terms of similarities, praising exercises practitioners, like those involved in plaza dancing, are not only contesting the border between public and private spheres. Rather, their performances renegotiate who gets to define and control the diversity of social spaces—as well as how social actors are identified with, and eventually limited to, specific public spheres. Without using a form of contestation made up of petitions and conceptualized discourses, they display through a daily colonization of public space a multidimensional message to passersby.

Furthermore, while the two phenomena are mostly driven by middle-aged women, praising exercisers are more homogeneous in terms of gender and age. Observations in Fuzhou and Nanping suggest that no youth or male group practices Christian calisthenics. Praising exercises are a phenomenon shaped by a certain generation of Chinese women who are not limiting themselves to the comfort of their household duties or their life of consumption.

In terms of discontinuities, Fuzhou and Nanping praising exercisers are a visible piece of a wider network practicing in different parts of their cities, but also Hong Kong, Taipei, and Shanghai. Unlike Chinese calisthenics, which is an extremely widespread phenomenon of highly localized groups, praising exercisers also gather outside of their public performances and build a network. Protestant plaza dancing is not a punctual epiphany occurring at night to cultivate health only. It seeks to aggregate people more permanently.

Furthermore, in contrast with plaza dancing, which is more often religiously neutral, praising exercises have a strong religious component. Hymns are filled with Christian terms and practitioners usually perceive their performance as an act of worship. Certainly, morning calisthenics groups like those practicing Qigong may promote a religious worldview inspired by Buddhist or Taoist teachings (Palmer 2007). But groups gathering at night for plaza dancing do not share these religious components. They are about well-being and fluid socialization. By contrast, praising exercises assert an explicitly religious component. By doing so, they bring Christianity outside conventional family and ecclesial circles. In urban China, signs and discourses of religious belonging tend to be mostly encountered within private houses and specialized places of worship. In many ways, modernization encourages religion to withdraw into private homes and clergy-controlled temples. By contrast, and without denying the differences between Nanping and Fuzhou, praising exercises bring the Christian faith back into the streets of China without the institutional leadership of families and clergy. Indeed, Protestant calisthenics renegotiates the spatialization of urban Christianity.

This religious performance is, nonetheless, different from what one encounters at church. It is not a conventional service nor a Bible group—two highly formalized practices that usually define a Chinese Christian experience (Elazar 2018; White 2018). Through a set of repetitive steps paced by Christian hymns, praising exercises are a peculiar form of Christian performance—a type of worship that contrasts with more institutionalized Christianity. Although the realm of sound remains important, the mind of the practitioner is less central. It is the whole moving body that is the act of worship. In contrast to what one can find in a church, bodily discipline is no longer a secondary way to properly honor God (Chambon 2020). Disciplining the body gently and graciously is the primary vector of worship.

Furthermore, Christian calisthenics is doubly physical because it not only uses the body as an expression of gratitude and veneration—a vector expressing mental dispositions—but

it also makes the body a target of the performance. Praising exercises do not solely aim at honoring God, they seek to cultivate the physiological health of the practitioners, who are children of God. The body of the worshippers is both an end and the means of the performance. It is through the whole, healthy, and gracious body that unity with God is manifested and reinforced. Again, this is quite different from what most people encounter within sanctuaries and Bible groups. For praising exercisers, Christianity is not only an idea about the lordship of God. It is a physical state of being manifested through moving bodies deploying health and beauty. Their exercising body is a public testimony of the Christian God's power. Thus, praising exercises not only renegotiate the urban spatialization of Christianity—they foster an alternative theology and set of pious practices distinct from mainstream Chinese Protestantism and Pentecostalism. Praising exercises manifest the way that in the Chinese religious landscape, orthopraxy can supplant orthodoxy—an issue long discussed by scholars (Watson and Rawski 1988).

### **Conclusion: Female Bodies and the Transformation of the Chinese Urban Religious Milieu**

In Fuzhou and Nanping, Protestant calisthenics is a heterogeneous phenomenon that echoes plaza dancing and renegotiates the spatial and theological definition of Chinese Protestantism. Middle-aged women play a central role and manifest the way that Christianity is not only made up of discourses and beliefs but also body and health practices. Their enterprise tackles a series of distinctions and structuring borders that define Protestantism in urban China. Silently, dancers challenge the traditional importance given to the Bible, formal services, youth, and home worship. Their ways to embody and share the Gospel differ from mainstream Protestantism and urban religious culture. Through relations to the body, gender, space, and sounds, exercisers advocate for an alternative Christianity.

This invites us to revisit scholarly approaches to Chinese Protestantism. Echoing the heavy-handed religious policy of the administration, research has long focused on church–state relations and highlighted the many forms of resistance that Christian churches deploy (Cao 2011; Vala 2018; Yang 2012; Duléry 2020). By contrast, our inquiry reveals that the way Protestant dancers position themselves in the public sphere is shaped by a multiplicity of concerns. The state is not their only concern.

Responding to literature primarily interested in civil resistance, and which contended that social change primarily occurs through binary oppositions, Weller (1994) argues that the notion of resistance heavily depends on intellectual categories preselected by the researchers. Indeed, anything could count as resistance. Yet this does not explain how and why some actions generate social change. Thus, one needs a broader model to trace the multiplicity of dynamics that play a role in transforming a social milieu. “Under the right conditions saturated solutions, shifting and cloudy, can precipitate into new and tangible compounds” (ibid.: 23).

In the light of the multidirectional efforts deployed by Protestant dancers, I argue that their enterprise is not mere resistance against a single factor—the state, religious patriarchy, the house church movement, or intellectualized faith. Rather, Protestant calisthenics stands as a bodily effort to transform a socioreligious milieu. Rejecting any kind of confrontational approach while promoting an alternative spatial and theological understanding of Christianity, dancers shift the ways to engage surrounding social actors. Dancing without proselytizing, they multiply places of performance to eventually saturate their religious environment and transform the socioreligious chemistry of their cities.

■ **MICHEL CHAMBON** is a cultural anthropologist and French Catholic theologian researching Chinese forms of Christianity. His monograph *Making Christ Present in China, Actor-Network Theory and the Anthropology of Christianity* (Palgrave 2020) provides an ethnography of six Christian networks in Southern China and theorizes the unity and diversity of Christianity. His current research explores the materialization of Catholicism within the Taiwanese domestic sphere. As a Research Fellow at the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore, he coordinates the Initiative for the Study of Asian Catholics (ISAC). Email: chambonmc@yahoo.fr

## ■ NOTES

This article benefitted significantly from the generative efforts and intellectual support of Dr. Indira Arumugam and Dr. Natalie Lang, as well as from the critical review and scholarly insights of two anonymous reviewers. I want to thank these four scholars who generously helped to improve this article.

1. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the city of Nanping went back to using its historical name—Yenping. Several times throughout history, the city has gone back and forth between these two names. In this article, I use the name used during my fieldwork.
2. In the fifth chapter of my book, *Making Christ Present in China* (Chambon 2020), I discuss how, in contemporary China, Thanksgiving is Christianized.
3. As suggested by an anonymous reviewer, it would be extremely informative to present a systematic survey of the songs and hymns used by Christian exercisers, their country of origin, their musical type and theological content, and the ways they are selected. Yet due to the limited length of this article and its focus on space, I am unable to address this dimension of Chinese Christian calisthenics.

## ■ REFERENCES

- Baudrillard, Jean. 1998. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Sage.
- BBC News. 2013. "China Blog: Dancing Grannies Raise a Ruckus." 12 December. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-china-blog-25330651>.
- Brownell, Susan. 1995. *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cang, Wei. 2011. "Country Adopts New Calisthenics." *China Daily*, 9 August. [https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/sports/2011-08/09/content\\_13073846.htm](https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/sports/2011-08/09/content_13073846.htm).
- Cao, Nanlai. 2011. *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Chambon, Michel. 2019. "Chinese Catholic Nuns and the Organization of Religious Life in Contemporary China." *Religions* 10 (7): 447. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10070447>.
- . 2020. *Making Christ Present in China: Actor-Network Theory and the Anthropology of Christianity*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chau, Adam Yuet. 2006. *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Duléry, Juliette. 2020. "La visibilité des organisations protestantes en Chine sous le regard de l'État-parti." *Questions de communication* 37: 143–166. <https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.22501>.
- Elazar, Gideon. 2018. "Out of Space: Christian Deterritorialization and Space Production in Yunnan." *Asian Ethnology* 77 (1/2): 121–144.
- Hanser, Amy. 2008. *Service Encounters: Class, Gender, and the Market for Social Distinction in Urban China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Huang, Kuanrou, et al. 2011. "The Historical Development of Chinese Group Callisthenics." *International Journal of the History of Sport* 28 (7): 1072–1085. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2011.563643>.
- Koesel, Karrie, Valerie Bunce, and Jessica Weiss. 2020. *Citizens and the State in Authoritarian Regimes: Comparing China and Russia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Local Believer. 2022. "Wu Meiyun the Founder of the Praising Exercises." [In Chinese.] <http://www.laijoh.com/archives/pc/Gou/Gou,Bhun/brief/Ang,Khong.htm> (accessed 5 January 2022).
- Mai, Miao Feng. 2008. "The Founder of the Praising Exercises Comes to Hong Kong and Shares." [In Chinese.] *Christian Times*, 16 January. <https://christiantimes.org.hk/Common/Reader/News/ShowNews.jsp?Nid=45107&Pid=5&Version=0&Cid=220&Charset=gb2312>.
- McLeister, Mark. 2019. "Popular Christianity, Sensation, and Ling'en Authority in Contemporary China." *Asian Ethnology* 78 (1): 127–154.
- Palmer, David A. 2007. *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Richaud, Lisa. 2018. "Between 'Face' and 'Faceless' Relationships in China's Public Places: Ludic Encounters and Activity-Oriented Friendships among Middle- and Old-Aged Urbanites in Beijing Public Parks." *Urban Studies* 55 (3): 570–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098016633609>.
- Rochot, Justine. 2019. "Bandes de vieux: Une sociologie des espaces de sociabilité de jeunes retraités en Chine urbaine contemporaine." Doctoral thesis. Paris: EHESS.
- Rofel, Lisa. 1999. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thireau, Isabelle. 2019. "S'accorder sur ce qui est." *Politix* 125 (1): 161–190. <https://doi.org/10.3917/pox.125.0161>.
- . 2020. *Des lieux en commun: Une ethnographie des rassemblements publics en Chine*. Paris: Editions de l'EHESS.
- Vala, Carsten T. 2018. *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God above Party?* New York: Routledge.
- Watson, James L., and Evelyn Sakakida Rawski. 1988. *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Weller, Robert P. 1994. *Resistance, Chaos, and Control in China: Taiping Rebels, Taiwanese Ghosts, and Tiananmen*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- White, Chris. 2018. *Protestantism in Xiamen: Then and Now*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yang, Fenggang. 2012. *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Yang, Fenggang, Joy Tong, and Allan H. Anderson, eds. 2017. *Global Chinese Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*. Boston: Brill.
- Yang, Fenggang, and Chris White, eds. 2021. *Christian Social Activism and Rule of Law in Chinese Societies*. Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press.
- Yang, Jie. 2011. "Nennu and Shunu: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China." *Signs* 36 (2): 333–357. <https://doi.org/10.1086/655913>.
- Yang, Mayfair Meihui. 1999. *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Young, Marilyn. 1989. "Chicken Little in China: Some Reflections on Women." In *Marxism and the Chinese Experience: Issues in Contemporary Chinese Socialism*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Maurice Meisner, 253–268. Armonk, NY: Sharpe.