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Mobility, Christianity and Belonging: Reflections of an Overseas Chinese Expatriate Wife in Shanghai

Sin Wen Lau

This paper explores what it means to be a Christian on the move in a transnational Asia. It provides an account of the reflections of a Singaporean expatriate wife as she searches for a spiritual home in Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taiwan. It shows how her sense of being Christian is shaped by extra-religious concerns of class, language and nationality. Underscoring the tensions inherent in finding faith in motion, this paper aims to nuance prevalent understandings of religion as havens for people on the move.

Keywords: Belonging; Mobility; Christianity; Chinese Diaspora; Expatriates

Introduction

Pek Hoon's admission that '[she] wasn't really into the church' threw me off. She made this remark at one of our tea sessions in her villa in the outskirts of Shanghai in 2006. A youthful sixty, Pek Hoon converted to Christianity more than three decades ago and thought of herself as having come to the Christian faith because 'God had picked me'. Pek Hoon was a core member of Canaan, a vibrant Christian fellowship for overseas Chinese expatriates in Shanghai. She spends her week leading a worship circle of women, hosting another circle in her villa and participating in various Canaan activities. She took her responsibilities in Canaan so seriously that her husband described her involvement as 'going to work'.

Pek Hoon is one of numerous overseas Chinese who moved to China in search of economic opportunities in the aftermath of the 1979 economic liberalisation. Many of these overseas Chinese were entrepreneurs and executives working for multinational corporations that have invested in China and represent one of the most significant flows of capital and skills into the country (Tan 2007). Others, like Pek

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Hoon, were trailing wives who moved into China with their economically-driven spouses. Predominantly from Hong Kong, Taiwan and southeast Asia, these overseas Chinese were largely concentrated in the cities of Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. In 2006, there were reportedly 680,000 overseas Chinese residing in Shanghai (*Shanghai Daily* 2006), though the number is likely to be much higher.¹ Shanghai's revival as a critical node in global and regional economic systems (Gu and Tang 2002), coupled with the availability of medical care and schools of international standard, has made the city a desirable home for many of these highly skilled overseas Chinese and their families. Movement is a part of life among these overseas Chinese. Studies into Chinese communities emphasise mobility either experienced as a form of emplacement in a world with no fixed point of belonging (Chu 2010) or as a project of maximisation through which familial interests are furthered (Skinner 1977; Yeoh, Huang, and Lam 2005). In this paper, I take on the understanding of movement as disorientating—this was how my informants in Canaan experienced mobility.

The proportion of Christians among the overseas Chinese in Shanghai is unknown, but the intersection of their economic influence and the Christian faith is beginning to attract scholarly attention. In a recent study, Kooi-Chin Tong (2012) examined the ways Christianity shaped business behaviour among overseas Chinese entrepreneurs in Shanghai. Tong's research marks an important step towards understanding the Christian lives of the overseas Chinese in China. However, it largely presents a masculine perspective and leaves unanswered questions such as the ways overseas Chinese women who follow their husbands to Shanghai put Christianity to work.

Through an extended case study of Pek Hoon's life as a trailing wife, this paper adds to this emerging discussion by exploring what it means to belong to a church for overseas Chinese expatriate women. Studies into communities on the move underscore the role religion plays in mediating the destabilising effects of movement (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Vasquez and Marquardt 2003; Warner and Wittner 1998). Mobile peoples are thought to port their faith around with them and draw on religion as a form of support (Glick-Schiller, Caglar, and Guldbrandsen 2006; Min and Kim 2005; Yang 1999), a means to preserve ethnicity (Min & Kim 2005; Yang 1999), consolidate ideas of nationality (Van der Veer 2002), re-territorialise unfamiliar landscapes (Werbner 1996) and essentially re-centre a moving sense of self (Werbner 2003). In emplacing, re-territorialising and lubricating movement, religion is thought to be the unmovable centre from which mobility can be experienced, managed and made sense of. Belonging to a religious faith is to be centred, secure and safe.

I nuance this perspective by asking how religious belonging is engendered in movement. Rather than assume that being a part of a religious faith brings about stability in movement, I take religious belonging to be a negotiated process where individuals deliberate and make choices as they struggle to re-centre themselves in motion. Focusing on the ambivalences Pek Hoon expressed towards her faith, I seek to demonstrate what it takes to be a part of a church in a world of chronic movement. My attention to Pek Hoon's story aims to give voice to some of the tensions

undergirding life as a hyper-mobile elite in a transnational Asia. In doing so, I suggest that for women like Pek Hoon, becoming a part of a church in a life of high mobility is shaped by a sense of distinction.

The data discussed was collected in Shanghai over an eighteen-month period between 2006 and 2007. My conversations with Pek Hoon about life as an overseas Chinese expatriate were largely unstructured though more structured interviews were carried out towards the end of my field research to clarify the dynamics between mobility, family and religion in lives of high mobility. The structured interviews adopted a life history approach and it was in these conversations that the ambivalence Pek Hoon felt towards Christianity in motion emerged. All names of individuals, groups and companies have been changed to protect the privacy of my informants.

Throughout this paper, I use the term 'overseas Chinese'² to refer to ethnic Chinese living in China who travel with non-mainland Chinese documentation. This includes Chinese from Hong Kong and Taiwan as this is how my informants in Canaan understand themselves. I use the term 'indigenous Chinese' to differentiate the overseas Chinese from the mainland Chinese. The term 'expatriate'³ refers to executives posted to Shanghai by the multinational corporations they work for and entrepreneurs as the Canaan congregation is broadly engaged in these forms of business. To provide a context in which I discuss Pek Hoon's religious belonging, I begin with an overview of the Canaan Fellowship before turning to her story.

Canaan: A Christian Community on the Move

Pek Hoon was part of Canaan, a loose network of overseas Chinese Christian expatriates spanning metropolitan Shanghai. Its members referred to the network as a 'fellowship' (*tuangqi*) and saw themselves as a group of Christians who have come together because of their faith. Non-denominational, evangelical and conservative, Canaan was an independent self-help Christian network.

The fellowship was cosmopolitan in composition. Aged in their forties to sixties, Canaan members were well-educated, highly-skilled and financially comfortable. The men were predominantly senior level executives in multinational companies and included some entrepreneurs. Most of the women were trailing wives, though many had worked as teachers, doctors, investment bankers and management consultants before leaving their jobs. They held citizenship and residency rights in countries like America, Canada, Australia, Japan and Singapore, and traced origins to Taiwan, mainland China, Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. Many circulated between Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore for work. Canaan, as a member put it to me, is a congregation for people who 'walk international pathways'.

Christianity, as practised within Canaan, was understood as a non-denominational form of Protestantism. Canaan took an interpretive approach to the Bible that emphasised how to 'live out' (*huochulai*) the Christian faith in everyday life. This approach was applied in worship sessions through a three-step approach: textual

observation, textual interpretation and practical application. Textual observation entailed a consistent reading of the Bible. Members read through the weekly passage they studied during Bible study discussion. They were also encouraged to read the Bible at home. Textual interpretation took place during Bible study discussions when the congregation examined and clarified their thoughts about the passages. They were also encouraged to share personal experiences pertaining to the passage and apply the teachings discussed in an everyday context. Practical application referred to efforts made by Canaan members to move theological discussions into their private lives. Public testimonies were held regularly within the fellowship to provide real-life examples of how the congregation could live out Christianity in their everyday lives.

Evangelism was a key goal within the fellowship and Canaan members felt the burden of evangelising to the indigenous Chinese. However, they were also conscious of their status as foreigners and most have been careful not to violate state regulations by proselytising to the indigenous Chinese. Evangelism was largely focused on the wider overseas Chinese community in Shanghai. Every year, Canaan members were tasked with the responsibility of introducing a new member and reminders to accomplish this task were issued throughout the year. There were no structured training programmes but strategies on how to do one-to-one evangelising, particularly in the workplace, were periodically discussed in worship sessions. Canaan members were prepared to accept someone as 'Christian' as long as he/she believes and declares this religious identity. This orientation was flexibly inclusive as I got to know a practising Catholic within the fellowship. Her Canaan friends accepted her as 'Christian' because they saw her as believing in the same God.

Worship was held within a network of house churches. Services took place seven days a week in private homes with each family hosting worship for a circle of not more than twenty members. Depending on the composition of the circle, worship sessions may take place during the day or in the evenings. These sessions incorporated hymn worship, a Bible study discussion, a sharing session and closed with a meal. In some instances, it also included a discussion of Christian motivational books. Openly critical of charismatic forms of worship like loud music, dancing and talking in tongues, Canaan members were conservative in their approach to worship. The piano and portable keyboard synthesizers were the only forms of music accompaniment used. Raised hands and closed eyes were the limits of spiritual expression I observed in Canaan services.

Unaffiliated to any church, Canaan was not ministered by a clergy. The congregation, however, shared the same spiritual message as the worship circles worked through a common syllabus during Bible study discussion. These spiritual lessons and their attendant messages were developed by a core group of Canaan co-workers who had taken up part-time courses on Christian theology in their leisure time. Members rostered for the responsibility of leading the Bible study discussion for the week attended a pre-Bible study class conducted by a member from within the core group. They learnt about the background and content of the lesson for the week and also discussed strategies to stimulate discussion and, most importantly, to clarify

the spiritual message. The integrity of Canaan as a coherent Christian community was further fostered at monthly services where several circles operating in the same area worshipped together and through annual activities like Christmas concerts and sports events that involved the whole network.

Canaan activities were conducted in a highly regulated religious landscape (Aikman 2003; Bays 2003). The network was independent of the official church as they considered the sermons delivered by state sanctioned clergy as offering a 'dead' Christian message. Based on previous brushes with the local authorities, Canaan was careful to ensure that each worship circle hosted not more than twenty members and periodically reminded the congregation that they were not allowed to proselytise to the indigenous Chinese. However, in 2007, a Canaan member was deported for using her home as a church for indigenous Chinese. In 2010, a core member was interrogated by the Bureau of Public Security and deported with his family for supporting missionising work in the Chinese countryside. I am not suggesting here that Canaan was operating as an underground Christian organisation that was being prosecuted by the Chinese state. Canaan was able to conduct its activities with relative autonomy as long as it kept within state defined parameters. I am, however, underscoring that an awareness of state regulations and the possibility of deportation engendered a climate of fear, an anxiety that shaped the way Canaan imagined itself in Shanghai. The Canaan congregation is divided over whether it should register itself with the authorities. Drawing on what they observed to be the freedom enjoyed by overseas Chinese Christians who worship in the official church, some members argue that they would have greater peace of mind if the fellowship registered itself. Others were convinced that they would lose any control over the content of worship if registration took place. Emerging out of this dissension was an understanding among members that they had to be imaginative in negotiating restrictive state regulations in order to be Christians in China.

Though located in Shanghai, Canaan was a Christian network on the move. Families in the congregation shifted between cities and across national borders once every two to five years. Some have been living in this form of high mobility for the last two decades. Members travelled constantly in and out of Shanghai for business and travel. This incessant movement in the everyday lives of the congregation undergirded the fellowship. Core members estimated the size of the congregation to be several hundred members and explained that the movement of members in and out of the city made it difficult to ascertain the size of the congregation with any certainty. Leadership positions were passed from one Canaan brother to another when members moved out of the city. Narratives about Canaan origins were also vague with most members understanding that a Taiwanese American Christian brother founded the Fellowship in the 1990s. Structurally, it meant that Canaan worship sites and timings shifted according to the schedules of the host family. It was common for several worship circles to collapse into one when families travelled over the summer. The convergence of pathways members tread across the region for work also meant that pockets of Canaan members congregate in cities like Hong Kong and Taiwan. I turn now to Pek

Hoon's pathway into Canaan to illuminate the ways language, nationality and class shaped the choices she made in selecting Canaan as church.

'Changing Places is Tough'

Pek Hoon left Singapore in 1990 when her husband was posted to Taipei for two years by National Semiconductors, the American electronics firm he was working for at the time. She brought her seven-year-old son with her but left her daughter in Singapore. The plan was for Pek Hoon's daughter to join the family later in the year when she completed junior high school. At that time, the couple was less concerned about their young son as he had barely started elementary school and was confident that he would be able to reintegrate into the Singapore education system when they returned. Pek Hoon described the move to Taipei as an 'experiment'. Fluent in Mandarin and proficient in Hokkien, the Fujian dialect spoken by the Taiwanese, the couple were confident that they could adapt to Taiwanese society. The company had also promised that the move would be for just two years, a period the couple felt would not be too difficult for the family to reintegrate themselves into Singapore when they returned. The compensatory package offered by the company was also attractive, notwithstanding the potential career development for her husband.

In spite of these intentions, it was not until 1997 that the family moved back to Singapore. National Semiconductors persuaded the family to relocate to Kuala Lumpur, three years after they moved to Taipei. They moved again in 1995, this time to Hong Kong. The couple requested to return to Singapore in 1997 as they were tired of moving around. They also felt that it was time to reintegrate their son into the Singaporean education system. He was ready to enter junior high school and the couple were concerned that, after having been schooled in international schools, he would find it difficult to get used to Singapore. Their daughter, on the other hand, was pursuing a law degree in Britain by that time. This attempt to move back to Singapore lasted for two months. The family moved to Shanghai when Pek Hoon's husband was headhunted to head the Kodak outfit there. Their son continued his studies in the Shanghai American School. The family lived in China for three years before relocating to Singapore in 2000 when Pek Hoon's husband was offered a position with Hewlett-Packard. As the company was compensating the family for relocating, it meant that their son could transfer to the Singapore American School. The family remained in Singapore for a year before Hewlett-Packard requested that they move to Taipei. In 2004, Analog Devices approached Pek Hoon's husband and the couple moved to Shanghai where they lived until 2010. Pek Hoon and her husband moved back to Singapore as their daughter gave birth to their first grandchild that year.

Pek Hoon was candid: 'changing places is tough' and that the years of following her husband around the region were 'bitter and stifling'. Initially, Pek Hoon found it hard to transform herself from a working mother juggling a teaching career and her family's needs to 'someone with nothing to do'. Her unhappiness was exacerbated by

the fact that Pek Hoon found it intimidating to negotiate unfamiliar environments on her own. She described herself as being abandoned by her husband when she arrived in Taipei in 1990. She saw various properties through real estate agents, identifying them by their car plate numbers, and joked that she could have been kidnapped and impossible to trace as nobody used mobile phones at that time! Her husband's posting to Kuala Lumpur was particularly difficult as she was uncomfortable with living amongst Malays. She was constantly worried about the crime rate in Malaysia and kept mostly to a small circle of Taiwanese expatriates she met there. Though she was comfortable living in Hong Kong, she did not enjoy the experience for she found the people pragmatic and materialistic.

By 2006, Pek Hoon had stoically accepted her life in high mobility. It no longer mattered to her where she was: 'we can live anywhere . . . everywhere is the same'. Pek Hoon was very much alone in Shanghai. Her husband worked a punishing schedule shuttling constantly between Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Korea and America. Pek Hoon tracked his movements in and out of Shanghai through his secretary, planning her activities around his itineraries. Her son was completing his degree in international relations in America while her daughter was married and lived in Singapore. Pek Hoon employs a local lady to help with the household chores and the meals. Though she found it difficult, she felt that it was possible to adjust to a life in constant movement if she had a fellowship she belonged to.

'A Fellowship I Belong To'

As I indicated at the start of this paper, Pek Hoon had not always felt that she was a part of the Christian faith. This ambivalence was due in part to the rejection she encountered in churches in the places she has lived. Pek Hoon was reluctant to worship with the international congregation at the Taiwan American School when she first moved to Taipei in 1990. This was because the services were in English and she wanted to participate in a Taiwanese church. She saw getting involved in a local church as a way in which she could get to know the Taiwanese and engage with what she thought of as a Chinese society. However, the local church her husband was involved in was located some distance from where they lived. Unfamiliar with Taipei, Pek Hoon did not know how to get there when he was away. Pek Hoon therefore tried to enter a Taiwanese church close to where they lived. Though she stood up and introduced herself and her son at a Sunday service, she recalled that 'nobody helped us'. She rationalised that the Taiwanese living in Taiwan were less open to non-Taiwanese than the Taiwanese living outside the country. Conceding it was difficult to break into established circles of friends, Pek Hoon went back to attending services at the church her husband was at. However, as he was travelling frequently for work, she was unable to actively participate in their activities and did not feel that she was part of the congregation. Feeling excluded, Pek Hoon sought out other activities, including taking up self-enrichment classes like flower arrangement, aerobics and

calligraphy. She found friends by striking up conversations with her neighbours, most of whom were Singaporeans.

While Pek Hoon was excluded from the church in Taiwan because she was not Taiwanese, the ambivalence she felt when she moved to Kuala Lumpur was grounded in a sense of class superiority. Pek Hoon obtained a referral from the Chinese Presbyterian church she attended in Singapore when her family moved to Kuala Lumpur. Though they worshipped there once, Pek Hoon claimed that they were unable to find the church again. They eventually started worshipping at a Chinese church close to where they lived and where they met other Taiwanese expatriates. Most worshippers in the church, though, were Malaysians. It was only when the congregation supported Pek Hoon through prayers, gifts of food and acting as translators with the local police when her house was burgled that she began to develop closer ties with them. She put her initial reticence down to the fact that most of the congregation did not have any experience outside the country. As they did not share her experiences of living life in high mobility, she found it difficult to explain her anxieties for her son who was growing up without stable friendships or a sense that he belonged anywhere.

Language emerged as the primary reason for Pek Hoon's alienation from the church when she moved to Hong Kong where they initially worshiped at a church with links to their congregation in Singapore. However, services were in Cantonese. Pek Hoon was unable to participate in hymn worship even though she understood the language. Her son, on the other hand, could not understand the language and mechanically followed the congregation, standing up and sitting down when required. Unable to participate in worship, Pek Hoon felt alienated from the church: 'I was alone again! Yes, I had a church but I did not feel that I belonged'. Pek Hoon and her husband decided to leave.

The rejection and alienation Pek Hoon encountered in the churches in Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as the reticence she displayed in developing ties with the congregation in Malaysia, point to the fact that religion is hardly the sacred antidote with which the faithful resolve challenges of a life in movement. The form Christianity took in Pek Hoon's mobile world was uneven. She was made to feel unwelcome in Taiwanese Christian communities. She felt alienated from her faith when her family was unable to fit into the parameters of the service in Hong Kong. She herself was also selective of the congregation with which she worshipped in Malaysia, choosing to remain on the periphery of the church until she was confident that the congregation was willing to help her family. It was hardly a matter of Pek Hoon latching on to an international pathway of Christianity and tapping into resources within the network. She had to reach out to the Christian communities in the places she moved to. She had to be determined in getting to know local religious communities even in the face of rejection in order to sustain her faith. Pek Hoon therefore had to negotiate her belonging to Christianity in movement. In other words, the sense of belonging religion engenders in high mobility is fractured, uneven

and negotiated. The church Pek Hoon was searching for in her mobile world had to take a specific form, one constituted by concerns of class, nationality and language.

'Canaan Is Not The Same'

Pek Hoon became involved in Canaan when on the streets of Hong Kong by chance she met a Taiwanese lady with whom she was acquainted in Taipei. This was in 1997, at about the time Pek Hoon and her husband decided to leave the Hong Kong church. This Taiwanese lady introduced Pek Hoon to a friend who then passed Pek Hoon's contact details to the owner of a Christian book chain operating in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The owner of this book chain contacted Pek Hoon and invited her to attend worship in her house that Sunday. The congregation she met was international and worldly in their outlook. There were couples from Malaysia, Singapore and Taiwan who had taken up American citizenship, as well as ethnic Chinese from South Korea with Japanese travel documents.

That Sunday, Pek Hoon remembered being 'so happy' as she received an invitation to participate in a worship circle for women like herself during the week. She explained the warmth she felt in Canaan in the following way:

We were all expatriates. It was a lot easier for us to get to know one another . . . The group used Mandarin. The pastors were from Canada . . . Everyone spoke Mandarin. That was why we felt so at home.

Pek Hoon and her husband have remained with the fellowship ever since. When they moved to Shanghai in 1997, it was a Canaan sister Pek Hoon got to know in Hong Kong who introduced her to a Canaan worship circle. As they had worshipped together in Hong Kong, Pek Hoon already knew several of the women in the circle in Shanghai. She was able to reconnect with the fellowship through women she got to know in this period when she moved to Taiwan in 2001. In 2004, when she moved back to Shanghai for the second time, Pek Hoon found a thriving fellowship. China's economic development had drawn many of her Christian brothers and sisters to the city.

There were several reasons why Pek Hoon chose Canaan to be her spiritual home in motion. Membership was constituted by people who shared a worldly sensibility. As expatriates, they shared the same experiences and faced similar challenges in negotiating lives in high mobility. Everyone was from somewhere else, including the pastors! Armed with dual residency or citizenship rights, these were flexible citizens of the world (cf. Ong 1999). Having lived in various countries, Pek Hoon shared the same concerns Canaan families had. There was therefore a shared understanding between her and the Canaan congregation as to the issues they had to face in movement. This worldliness as manifested in individuals possessing multiple nationalities is, in turn, overlapped by ethnicity, an identity manifested through the use of Mandarin. In practical terms, the use of Mandarin as a language of worship meant that Pek Hoon would be able to participate in spiritual activities, finding the meaning she was not able to find at the international congregation in Taipei or in the

Cantonese services in Hong Kong. Class is implicit in this combination of worldliness and ethnicity. Having been sent out by the companies they work for, the families in Canaan are sustained by attractive compensatory packages that included robust salaries, residences in upmarket suburbs and education for their children in the international schools in the cities in which they lived. Pek Hoon, as with other Canaan members she met that day, led similar lifestyles, a way of life out of reach for the average person. Canaan was therefore 'not the same'. It was spiritually attractive because to be a part of Canaan was to belong to an elite class of overseas Chinese.

'As Long As I Have Church'

By the time I got to know her in Shanghai, Pek Hoon was busy with Canaan activities seven days a week. Her primary involvement was as the leader of a worship circle for trailing wives like herself. She was approached to take up the position by the Canaan sister hosting the Circle when she found out that her husband was being posted back to America by his company. When the family left, the women shifted into the home of a Canaan sister from Malaysia that was located in the city and met once during the week for worship. Pek Hoon did not offer her villa as she lived forty minutes from the city and felt that the women would find it difficult to get to her place.

Though Pek Hoon had no theological training and had accumulated her knowledge of the Christian faith over years of participating in Bible study discussions, she took up the role of moral guide within the circle. For example, the women were encouraged to share their experiences of accepting someone they thoroughly disliked when the women discussed Jonah's anger at God in a reading of Jonah 4: 1–11. The underlying aim in this question was for the women to share the different strategies through which they managed their anger and received acceptance. However, the discussion turned vitriolic as the women shared their personal struggles to accept their mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law. Pek Hoon sought to shift the discussion back to the Canaan tenet of living out Christianity by sharing her observations of her daughter's mother-in-law. She noted that her daughter's mother-in-law never reprimanded her and instead made it a point to praise Pek Hoon's daughter even if she had only made rice and it was her son who cooked dinner. Drawing on this observation, Pek Hoon argued that her Christian sisters consider the situation from their daughter-in-law's perspective. Pek Hoon therefore sought to relate the passage to her personal experiences rather than emphasise the theological aspects of the reading. In doing so, she tried to guide her Canaan sisters towards cultivating a good relationship with their daughters-in-law through praise and acceptance.

As leader, Pek Hoon was responsible for the weekly running of the Circle. She developed a roster that allocated the responsibilities of leading hymn worship, Bible study discussion, facilitating the sharing session and allocating the responsibility of preparing lunch to different women. This exercise required Pek Hoon to be familiar with the preferences of her Canaan sisters as some preferred to serve by leading Bible study while others would rather lead hymn worship. She had to have a good sense of

the cliques within the circle and not allocate a responsibility to a sister unpopular with the other women. She also had to be sensitive to the family situations of the women under her leadership, taking care not to make requests that might put her Canaan sisters in a difficult situation. She spent several hours a week choreographing the hymn worship and seeking suggestions from her Canaan friends to ensure that the songs of praise either alluded to the Bible passage to be studied for the week or echoed a particular concern amongst her Canaan sisters. Every week, Pek Hoon would confirm the time and location of worship with the women via text messages. Pek Hoon also presented a report on activities within the circle at an annual meeting with other Canaan leaders as part of her responsibilities.

Pek Hoon was conscious of the fact that her Canaan sisters were without the support of their extended families and friends. She sought to address this problem by organising a care group to assist the women in times of need. When the domestic help of a Canaan sister left her employ, several women in the group took turns to cook and care for her disabled daughter so that she had time to get her household chores done. This care extended beyond Shanghai. When the father-in-law of a Canaan sister passed away, Pek Hoon kept in contact with the family via mobile phone as they made their way back to Malaysia and arranged for a wreath to be sent to the funeral.

Pek Hoon was well-liked by her Canaan sisters. Though she had arranged for a Canaan sister to take over her responsibilities, Pek Hoon proposed relinquishing her position when her mother passed away and she had to shuttle frequently between Shanghai and Singapore. Her Canaan sisters resisted this proposal even when Pek Hoon initiated a group prayer and publicly voiced her desire. They argued that the arrangement between Pek Hoon and the Canaan sister assisting her worked well and that they were prepared to pitch in and help out when necessary.

Pek Hoon also hosted a worship circle in her home for couples. These services took place every weekend and consisted of Canaan members living in the residential compounds in the area. Pek Hoon's husband led the circle, though his need to travel constantly for work meant that the responsibility was shared with a Canaan brother. Pek Hoon assisted her husband by planning the dinner menu, marketing and directing her domestic help in the preparation of food. She was conscious of not doing too much for her husband as there was a push among Canaan wives to encourage their husbands to take on more responsibilities in the fellowship as a part of their Christian duty. Her children were not involved in Canaan and attended service at the Hengshan Community Church, one of the largest Christian congregations of expatriates in Shanghai, whenever they visited.

In addition, Pek Hoon attended pre-Bible study discussions, hymn practices and prayer meetings in the homes of various Canaan members. These religious activities were usually followed by coffee sessions, lunches and shopping with her Canaan sisters. The women spent so much time together that one of them complained that she only had Friday mornings free and this was to run errands for her family: 'What free time do I have? I don't have time at all!' Belonging to an elite Christian group of overseas Chinese therefore gave Pek Hoon something to do as her husband pursued

his career and her children busied themselves with their lives. It gave her the company and support of women who shared her experiences living in high mobility. It also gave meaning to an otherwise empty life. Canaan was a relatively stable community in Pek Hoon's life on the move: 'as long as I have a church I am a part of, I believe that I will not be lonely... as long as a person is not lonely, you can live anywhere'.

Conclusion

This paper counters prevalent understandings of religion as havens for people on the move by highlighting the tensions inherent in finding faith in motion through one particular case. It argues that paying attention to what it takes to latch on to faith in movement engenders a complex view of religious belonging, one where extra-religious deliberations coexist with and shape individual quests to find a religious home in movement. Pek Hoon's estrangement from churches in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur, as well as her reflections over class, nationality and language, underscore the fact that Canaan was not just any church. Canaan offered Pek Hoon a relatively stable circle of overseas Chinese Christians who shared her experiences of living life in high mobility. The fact that her Canaan friends walk the same pathways as she does across the region meant that, if she chooses to, Pek Hoon has a Canaan community to be a part of in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Her considerations of wealth, cultural background and possession of a worldly sensibility demonstrate the ways Christianity intersects with extra-religious concerns in the selection of church for privileged overseas Chinese Christians living lives of high mobility.

This elite form of religious belonging centred on Pek Hoon's role as a trailing wife. The fact is that being actively involved in Canaan gives Pek Hoon something to do in the absence of a busy husband and grown-up children, the emphasis placed on learning how to live out Christianity by being a supportive wife and understanding mother-in-law, as well as the importance Pek Hoon and her Canaan sisters placed on relying on each other for voluntary support in the absence of extended familial networks resonated with patriarchal understandings of Chinese wives as intelligent, competent and resourceful helpers who took care of the family so that their husbands were free to concentrate on their official pursuits (Ebrey 1993; Wolf 1975). This feminised form of Christian belonging goes hand in hand with the emphasis that masculine centred studies into overseas Chinese Christians have placed on the economic consequences of Christianity in constituting religious communities on the move. For Pek Hoon, her Christian faith provides a basis on which exclusive bonds of friendship and mutual support drawing on patriarchal idealisations of what it means to be a wife are engendered and made real in a life of high mobility. To be a part of Canaan was therefore not just about seeking church as a Christian but to be differentiated as a privileged overseas Chinese woman on the move in a transnational Asia.

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Notes

- [1] The number of overseas Chinese residing in the city is likely to be higher than these figures imply. The data reflects only overseas Chinese who are either employed or have registered businesses in the country. It does not include their families or transient residents who reside in the city for less than six months each year. Neither do these figures include ethnic Chinese born outside mainland China and who are not from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore.
- [2] For discussions on the complexities of the term, see Louie 2004, Ong 1999 and Thuno 2001.
- [3] See Fechter 2007 for a discussion on different uses of the term.

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