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Making a Cantonese-Christian Family: Quotidian Habits of Language and Background in a Transnational Hongkonger Church

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ABSTRACT

Studies of the Hong Kong-Vancouver transnational migration network seldom pay close attention to religion in the everyday lives of Hongkonger migrants. Based on 9 months of ethnographic fieldwork at St. Matthew's Church, a Hong Kong church in Metro Vancouver, this paper examines the tacit assumptions and taken-for-granted quotidian practices through which a Hongkonger church is made. I argue that St. Matthew's Church has been constructed as a Hong Kong Cantonese-Christian family space through the everyday use of language and invocations of a common educational background. This argument extends the literature on Hongkonger migration to Metro Vancouver by grounding it in a religious site whose intersections with Hong Kong migration to Vancouver consolidates the church as a religious mission with a specifically Hongkonger migration narrative. This consolidation is problematised as I show that contestations in church life by migrants from the People's Republic of China over language and asymmetrical educational backgrounds both reinforce and challenge the church as a Hongkonger congregation. Through an examination of these everyday interactions at St. Matthew's Church, this paper advances the geography of religion as I demonstrate that specific geographical narratives and networks shape quotidian practices in religious sites. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Keywords: immigrant religion, transnationalism, language, Hong Kong, Chinese, Vancouver

INTRODUCTION

The religious dimensions of transnational Hongkonger migrants' everyday lives are rarely discussed. Hongkongers who migrated abroad in anticipation of the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC) tend to be studied in terms of their neoliberal economic subjectivities (Mitchell and Olds, 2000; Ley, 2003; Mitchell, 2004; Waters, 2006; Ley, 2010) and transnational family networks (Waters, 2002, 2003). This paper calls for closer attention to religious dimensions in the everyday lives of Hong Kong-Vancouver migrants in places where a common migration background enables the construction of church families. While Chinese Christian churches in Metro Vancouver have been rightly seen as ethnic service hubs (Beattie and Ley, 2003; Ley, 2008) and sites for social networking (Waters, 2003), they are seldom studied as religious spaces constructed not by generically *Chinese* Christians but by Cantonese-speaking Hongkonger migrants. Using de Certeau's (1984) work on everyday lives as an heuristic device, this paper examines the usually tacit assumptions and practices through which a Hongkonger church is constructed and reproduced in Metro Vancouver. I argue that St. Matthew's Church, a Chinese

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Christian congregation in the suburb of Richmond, has been constructed as a specifically Hongkonger site through quotidian practices of speaking the Cantonese language and recounting a common educational background. This argument extends the literature on Hongkonger migration to Metro Vancouver by intersecting a religious site with the Hong Kong migration wave to Vancouver since the 1980s. This intersection consolidates the church as a Christian mission that ostensibly serves all Chinese migrants but is actually formed through a specifically Hongkonger narrative of migration.

This triangulation of transnational migration, religion, and everyday lives is explored in four sections. First, I broaden Kong's (2001) call for geographers to study the 'unofficially sacred' to consider the non-sacred, quotidian practices that construct 'officially sacred' spaces. Next, I detail the methodology with which I conducted 9 months of ethnography and 38 semi-structured interviews with 40 people at St. Matthew's Church. I then demonstrate through the interview responses that St. Matthew's Church is perceived as a church family by the parishioners. I subsequently problematise this perception as I explore a Hongkonger narrative of religious education, which excludes members of the congregation who do not share this social background. Finally, I examine how contestations over language and social background reinforce the church as a Hongkonger congregation into which new Chinese migrants from the PRC are expected to assimilate if they wish to join the church. Through an examination of these everyday interactions at St. Matthew's Church, this paper advances the geography of religion by examining the unspoken assumptions that inform the religious practices and quotidian habits used to construct migrant spaces of worship.

GEOGRAPHIES OF RELIGION AND MIGRATION: EVERYDAY HABITS AND RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE

On 11 November 2008, Hongkonger Christians in Vancouver hosted the first annual Wedlock Day. The date was chosen for the significance of '11–11,' from which the 'One Man, One Woman, One Life, One World' slogan was drawn. Held simultaneously with a gathering in Hong Kong, the event was organised around a celebration of traditional marriage and family values. Over 1200 people attended on each side of the Pacific. At the Vancouver gathering, special features included ushers dressed as maids of honour, a flower girl and ring bearer that began the ceremonies, children's choirs singing songs about the goodness of family, and speakers from Hong Kong addressing the congregation in untranslated Cantonese on pre-recorded video, despite the presence of non-Cantonese-speaking migrants from the PRC.

Migrant religious groups in North America have often been construed by geographers and sociologists of religion as communities that enable migrants to integrate in host countries (Yang, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Beattie and Ley, 2003; Chen, 2006; Ley, 2008). Wedlock Day is emblematic of this portrayal as it shows migrants celebrating religious and family values in the host context even as the event simultaneously connects them to their place of origin. Beattie and Ley (2003) and Ley (2008) argue that immigrant churches in Vancouver can be conceptualised as service hubs for new migrants, but Ley (2008: 2063) also found that the social networks provided lent such churches the designation of a 'home away from home' (see also Waters, 2003). Such a contention borrows from Warner and Wittner's (1998) argument that migrant religions in American congregational contexts function as spaces where a migrant community is formed around religious practices. While congregations often serve as vehicles for integration into host societies (Yang, 1998a, 1999; Chen, 2006), Ebaugh and Chafetz's (2000) examination of religious congregations in Houston also suggests that such churches maintain the ethnic distinctiveness of migrant groups through gendered and generational dynamics that emphasise the role of women in maintaining the church and the need for ethnicity and religion to be passed down to the second generation (see also Kwon *et al*., 2001; Min and Kim, 2002; Jeung, 2005; Chen, 2006).

Such formations resembling a family dynamic also recall the work on transnational families in which a sense of familyhood can be maintained across national borders (Ong, 1999; Yeoh *et al*., 2002; Waters, 2002, 2003; Nonini, 2004; Leitner and Ehrkamp, 2006; Ho, 2008). Religious spaces in transnational migration contexts serve as sites where immigrants can find an alternative sense of familyhood, belonging, and home, because as

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Waters (2003) and Waters and Teo (2003) suggest, immigrant churches are religious sites through which immigrants connect to a network of people with similar social backgrounds. Such networks in turn facilitate these migrants' settlement and belonging.

These communities do not exist as givens but must be constructed as nodes in a transnational migration geography. Levitt (2006) has noted that these 'homes away from home' are in fact connected to their home countries through a 'new religious architecture' that functions more as a network of religious sites than as individual congregational spaces (see also Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2002; Olson and Silvey, 2006). As in the case of the videos at Wedlock Day, such religious architectures are enabled through transnational communications technologies (Kong, 2006). These networks in turn maintain such immigrant congregations as transnational sites that welcome migrants to spaces that feel familiar. Such a construction of churches as 'homes away from home' provides its migrant members with a sense of comfort because religious practices are similar to those back home and may even be performed simultaneously with fellow believers in their homelands (as at Wedlock Day) (Ley, 2008: 2063). Indeed, despite these trans-Pacific linkages, the constructions of such religious spaces as transnational families are meant not only to merely maintain connections with home countries but also to establish for migrants a sense of belonging in the host country (Levitt, 1998; Waters, 2003; Olson and Silvey, 2006). What makes these 'religious families' transnational is that they connect migrants to their home countries and use these connections to facilitate settlement in a new place through a church environment that feels like home.

These familial constructions suggest that geographies of religion are not simply sublime spaces and networks, but are relational spaces and networks in which a comfortable sense of the familiar can be formed. Sacred space in the geography of religion has normatively referred to places where religious practices of worship and reverence towards the transcendent are conducted (Sopher, 1967; Tuan, 1974; Ivakhiv, 2006; Stump, 2008). However, as the ethnic congregations literature has demonstrated, sacred spaces are also places in which to recover a sense of familyhood. Noting that geographers of religion have concentrated mostly on the politics and poetics of religion *within* officially sacred sites (such as the church), Kong (2001: 226) thus calls for more attention to 'unofficially sacred spaces' *beyond* the officially sacred. For Kong, the 'unofficially sacred' refers to places where religious practice is not bound by space but instead travels with religious practitioners as they treat their homes, schools and various other everyday spaces as places where religion should be practised as well. In short, religion is not confined to sacred space. Rather, practitioners weave religious practices into their everyday lives (Holloway, 2000, 2003, 2006; Holloway and Valins, 2002; Valins, 2003). While religious practices of worship are indeed concerned with the transcendent, the intersections between religion and quotidian spaces suggest that there is a relational side to geographies of religion as well (see Hopkins, 2006, 2007). A relational geography of religion focuses on how religious communities are formed, for religion is as much about spiritual practice as it is about where one can find a sense of belonging in a community.

Constructing such relational geographies of religion requires the constant everyday consolidation of religious spaces. Much of this activity is tacit and unconscious, recalling de Certeau's (1984) distinction between *strategies* with which everyday citizens consciously plot political resistance and *tactics* with which ordinary people tacitly use unreflexive habits to consolidate their lifeworlds. While migrant religious adherents may want to preserve ethnicity as a common social background in their religious congregations, such self-identification is often formed tacitly through practices based in 'the apparently mundane experiences of a lifeworld,' which resemble de Certeau's *tactics* more than his *strategies* (Jackson and Smith, 1984: 31). These habits are often unconscious because religious intersections with unofficially sacred spaces are part of the everyday lives of these migrants. They do not participate in these intersections for explicitly political reasons; rather, they are looking for a 'home away from home' in a new land (Ley, 2008: 2063). The tactics through which these 'religious families' are formed may be revealed as political tactics but they are not meant to be explicitly political; indeed they are perhaps better described as everyday habits that turn out to be political upon reflection. As Yang (1998b) has

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noted, habits that construct congregations with a particular vision of ethnicity may result in contestation within the congregation when another group's quotidian practices are different.

Although data from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2005) indicate that Vancouver's religious landscape has transformed from one of Christian dominance to a space of religious plurality, Hongkonger Christianity is of interest to studies of transnational religious architecture because of its statistical significance in Vancouver's Chinese population. While the majority (61%) of the Chinese in Vancouver self-identified as non-religious in the 2001 census,[1] an amalgamation of Catholics (8.8%), Protestants (8.1%) and non-categorical Christians (6.7%) within the Chinese population make up 23.6% of Vancouver's Chinese population, higher than the 14.8% Buddhist segment (Statistics Canada, 2003). The census data are inconclusive over whether the Chinese indicated are from Hong Kong, Taiwan or the PRC, but the Vancouver Chinese Evangelical Ministerial Fellowship's (2007) directory suggests that Hongkongers dominate this religious network: 74% of its 106 Chinese congregations conduct their main services in Cantonese, the Chinese *lingua franca* of Hong Kong.[2] Despite some speakers' attempts to translate their Cantonese into Mandarin (albeit with strong Cantonese accents) at Wedlock Day, the dominance of Cantonese as the *lingua franca* of Hong Kong indicates that Wedlock Day is a *Hongkonger* event rather than merely a Chinese one. This suggests that intra-ethnic differentiation among migrants within the ethnic Chinese population in Vancouver takes place along politically-bounded places of origin, a phenomenon not unusual in the Chinese diaspora (Yang, 1998a; see also Li, 1998). The formation of common ground among such migrants often takes place tacitly through everyday practices that may not be themselves reflected upon.

As noted above, geographers tend to portray Hongkonger migrants to Vancouver as primarily economic actors. Their practices of transnational migration globalised Vancouver's property markets (Mitchell and Olds, 2000; Mitchell, 2004; Ley, 2010) and formed family networks across the Pacific through the 'astronaut' phenomenon (men shuttling between Hong Kong for work, Vancouver for family) and international education (Preston *et al*., 2003; Waters, 2002, 2006). As religious subjects, participants at Wedlock Day connected with Hong Kong through a religious architecture that parallels the economic linkages between Hong Kong and Vancouver. Such attention to religion broadens the concept of a Hongkonger subjectivity from the market-driven mentalities in which they have often been portrayed (Ku and Ngai, 2004; Mathews *et al*., 2008) to interrogate instead the non-economic tactics of Hongkonger subject formation in everyday life. The subsequent discussion highlights instead the everyday usage of Cantonese and the invocation of a common Hongkonger background in the context of Christian churches in which they have found a sense of belonging.

METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGY

Research for this paper involved 9 months of ethnographic research at a Chinese Christian congregation (anonymised as St. Matthew's Church) based in Richmond, which is an ethnoburb of Vancouver with a population of 43% Chinese-origin (Statistics Canada, 2007b). My fieldwork included participant observation at the church's three worship services and special events (including, but not limited to, Wedlock Day) as well as 38 semi-structured interviews with 40 people (10% of the 400-person church). Events such as Wedlock Day established St. Matthew's Church as a key node in the network of congregations and organisations that form the larger Hong Kong-Metro Vancouver Christian geography. St. Matthew's Church was formed in December 1996 with a group of 40 people and has grown steadily to 400, a growth trajectory similar to many of the other Chinese churches in Vancouver, many of which are around 10 years old and rapidly growing (Ley, 2008). Rapid church growth has accompanied the substantial immigration of Hongkongers, Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese households since 1980, which in total raised the ethnic Chinese population in Metro Vancouver to close to 400,000 (Ley, 2010).

The 40 interviewees were recruited both through the church directory and through individuals personally volunteering to be interviewed. Each interview lasted one to one-and-a-half hours and was digitally recorded and transcribed. The majority were conducted in a mixture of Cantonese and English. There was an equal balance of 20 male and 20 female

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interviewees, and the ages of the interviewees varied from 20 to 74. Some had been at the church for less than a year, others since its founding. Twenty-five interviewees had come to Canada in the 1980s–2000s period, and 29 acknowledged that they still maintained a Hongkonger self-identification. Thirty-five had migrated from Hong Kong, three were Canadian-born, one was from Singapore and one was a Cantonese-speaker from Guangzhou. None of the interviewees requested an interview in Mandarin, the *lingua franca* of Mainland China.

A PLACE CALLED HOME: ST. MATTHEW'S CHURCH'S 'CHINESE' MISSION

St. Matthew's Church began in December 1996 as a mission in Richmond to Chinese migrants to Metro Vancouver. St. Matthew's Church was originally designed to be what Beattie and Ley (2003) and Ley (2008) term as an immigrant service hub that provides social networks, employment opportunities, and integration strategies for ethnic Chinese immigrants. Such migrant integration strategies are not unique to Christian congregations as Islamic communities may also serve as hubs for Muslim migrants, though Muslims have also had to struggle against their being perceived as *religiously* 'other' in liberal multicultural nation-states (Dwyer, 1999; Naylor and Ryan, 2002; Dunn, 2004; Secor, 2005; Hopkins, 2006; Peach, 2006; Phillips, 2006; Gokariksel, 2009). In contrast to these Islamic contexts, the 'otherness' of Hongkongers in Metro Vancouver tends to be based on ethnic stereotypes about economic performance (Ley, 2003; Mitchell, 2004).

St. Matthew's Church was started by immigrants from Hong Kong who spoke Cantonese. Jamie,[3] who has been a prominent member of the congregation since its inception, explained that the church was founded 'so that people who do not [speak] the English language can worship and be pastored'. The politics of the church revolve not around religious praxis but around the language of religious 'pastoral care.' As Jamie elaborated, 'Because these people come to a new land, they may have a lot of difficulties [and] emotional problems; they may have encountered things that they have never encountered before, and they may have even lost their faith, so they need pastoral care in Chinese.' Ho (2009) suggests that emotional logics underpin the production of loyalties to institutions and cultural constructs; similarly, Jamie invokes Chinese-language 'pastoral care' as a tactic for providing emotional support to new migrants, and through this a church community can also be formed. When I asked Jamie if the Chinese language in question was Cantonese or Mandarin, she said that the dominant language to date has been Cantonese. She attempts to be sensitive to the needs of Mandarin-speakers and bought eight headphones with her own money (without the church's help) for simultaneous Mandarin translation for the Cantonese services. Her assumption, though, is that the church would still be run in Cantonese: Mandarin is only a secondary language. In short, to Jamie, the church is a place where ethnic Chinese migrants would be provided with emotional and spiritual care specifically in the Cantonese language.

Linguistic specificity is important not because new migrants cannot not speak English but because Cantonese is a familiar language to them. For example, Jimmy speaks English fluently enough to work in a Canadian government agency. But when asked if he would attend an English-speaking Christian event, Jimmy declined:

> 'Because when I was young in Hong Kong, all the liturgy is in Chinese: it was so familiar, I like it. Once you change it to English, oh, something's missing, doesn't click, you know, it's cultural. It is the same [reason why] I prefer to read the Chinese Bible, not the English [one]. The major reason is because when I was young, when I read the Chinese Bible, I [know] the name, I know the place. Once you change to English, I have no idea [. . .] what the name is, what the place is . . . So if you have an English event, I probably cannot go . . . but in Cantonese, I can do, *VROM!*'

The key word in Jimmy's statement is 'change': his preferred Christian language is Cantonese, and English-speaking gatherings, English liturgies and English bibles are regarded as events and products translated from Chinese to English (even though this is understood historically to have occurred the other way around). The reason Jimmy attends a Cantonese-speaking church is not because he does not speak English: it is because he feels that religious experiences are

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better mediated to him in Cantonese. As Jimmy puts it, his speed of comprehension ('*vrom!*') is much faster in Cantonese than in English, and he finds it comforting and familiar to hear Cantonese spoken in church.

Scholars of ethnic churches have long argued that Chinese churches provide a sense of social belonging with other ethnic Chinese migrants (Warner and Wittner, 1998; Yang, 1998a, 1998b, 1999; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000; Ley and Beattie, 2003; Waters, 2003; Ley, 2008). Likewise, St. Matthew's Church is perceived as a space of belonging by many of its members. For instance, Robert told me that he regards the church as 'family'. Robert had stopped going to church in Hong Kong when he decided that pursuing dating relationships was more important than attending church regularly. He revised this attitude when he witnessed his sister's positive transformation from what he described as a '*ngok*' (angrily temperamental) person after she started attending St. Matthew's Church. Robert now spends much of his time with church friends; as he puts it, 'It's not like I sacrifice this time at church.' He says that he considers time spent outside of church as wasted because it is time spent away from 'family'. Robert's rhetoric conflates his biological family that is itself Christian with the larger congregational body that he sees as family as well. Jack, a newcomer at St. Matthew's Church who had recently migrated with his wife and small child from Hong Kong, agreed that the church can be considered family because fellow Christians are 'brothers and sisters in Christ'. To him, the church is an 'extended family', and the immigrant church is thus seen as a place in which a sense of familyhood can be found.

Some parishioners also portray the church as a site of comfort in a busy world. Sherman explained to me that being a Christian is not about adhering to a religious or moral system but 'being in a relationship' with God as Father. If this is so, he continued, then going to church is 'like going to your parents' house. You feel comfortable when you go to your parents' house.' The comfort of church justified to him a practice that most other parishioners would not be proud of admitting, namely sleeping during the service:

> 'I used to sleep the minute the church service starts, I go to sleep, and I don't wake up until the service ends . . . That hour of sleep that I would get is the best hour of sleep in my entire week. And I've always felt safe and I've always felt like, yeah, it's like I'm going back to my parents' house for an hour of rest, two hours of rest, I don't have to do a single thing, I don't have to talk to my dad, we can just be there together, and I'll feel safe dozing off and not have to worry about anything happening to me. Don't have to watch my back, don't have to care what's around me. Just let it be, right? That's what church is.'

Sherman associates being able to sleep in church with the physical and emotional safety of the church: church is not only a religious space, but also a safe space in which he can let down his guard and not 'watch his back'. The rhetoric that Sherman used equates the church with home; the religious space is represented as a domestic space of rest in a busy world. The church provides a sense of home and restfulness for migrants who may feel either loneliness or overwork.

However, to take at face value such perceptions of church elides the manner in which the church has to be continually constructed as a family and home. As Duncan and Duncan (2004) argue, cultural landscapes do not exist super-organically but are made through everyday tactics of place-making. Moreover, as the above responses show, conceptions of St. Matthew's Church as family and home differ among the interviewees. Some of them see the church as a site for socialising, others think of it as a space where Cantonese can be freely used without translation; still others regard it a space of comfort after a week of hard work. That these groups all see St. Matthew's Church as family and home indicates that common ground has to be constantly constructed among these parishioners who portray building the congregation as a space of pastoral care among 'brothers and sisters'.

ESTABLISHING A COMMON BACKGROUND: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND THE MAKING OF A HONGKONGER CHRISTIAN CHURCH

A key narrative in the construction of St. Matthew's Church as a Hongkonger church revolves around religious education in Hong Kong. The interviewees asserted that the

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majority of the famous schools in Hong Kong are Christian schools that instill moral values in children, regardless of their families' religious backgrounds. Invoking religious education establishes a common social background among the interviewees; 29 out of the 40 interviewees[4] had been educated in Hong Kong's religious schools and many repeatedly emphasised that religion in Hong Kong forms the basis of an educated class status in Hong Kong. Goh (2003) has written of the elite status of many Christian schools in Singapore, and a similar situation can be observed in Hong Kong: the interviewees explained that Catholic and Anglican schools in Hong Kong are seen as *ming hao* (famous schools). Mathews *et al*. (2008) found that funding by wealthy Christian denominations enable them to attract the best-skilled teachers, something also noted by one interviewee involved in Hong Kong's higher education system.

Respondents emphasised that religious schools brought them into contact with sacred spaces through which they found a serene spirituality. Mei Ling, for instance, had attended a prestigious Catholic elementary school in Hong Kong. She remembered less its prestige and more of her daily morning routine attending mass in the chapel on the top floor of the school. 'I would feel that it's very peaceful', she said, compared to the busy, crowded, dusty streets of Hong Kong. Likewise, Jack recalled that there was a 'seeker group', a small group where a priest taught several boys Christian meditation, at his Catholic school. During the seeker group's meetings, Jack learned to meditate on the Christian Scriptures and to pray in times of stress. These practices enabled him to 'experience God' amidst his busy working life long before his formal baptism at St. Matthew's Church, so much so, he said, that he convinced himself he was a Christian without experiencing a conversion and joining a church. While both of these responses sound apolitically sublime, telling these stories is a way of constructing a common background at St. Matthew's Church. When serenity is contrasted with the busyness of Hong Kong work life, it implies that the people who made Hong Kong so busy are either not spiritually educated or had repudiated it. In contrast, people who attended St. Matthew's Church had received a common spiritual education that can be used to construct a different culture of rest in a busy world.

The spiritual education in religious schools in turn promotes moral discipline. Minnie praised religious schools for their discipline because religion, she argued, raises children with 'conscience'. She contrasted this kind of religious education with the contemporary educational system: 'if you don't have any faith', she said in relation to secular education, 'I guess people will not have that much conscience'. In other words, Minnie is suggesting that a moral society is achieved through religious education. To be morally educated indicates a level of conscience missing from a more secular crowd. In this sense, religious schools are better schools to her because of their elevated moral discipline, which in turn builds a society with conscience.

When interviewees emphasise this trope of moral education in religious schools to me, they are reinforcing their shared background at St. Matthew's Church, which in turn creates lines of inclusion and exclusion. However, this practice of exclusion is buried beneath statements that the church is an inclusive space. For instance, Adam argues that the church is 'where you have fellowship with different brothers and sisters, even if they go to another church'. His reference to other churches indicates the porosity of St. Matthew's Church as a congregation and its deep involvement with congregational networks (such as in Wedlock Day). While such inclusivity can theoretically enable Adam to breach beyond 'small circle' cliques in the church, he cites 'human nature' to explain his desire to find people from the same social background. Indeed, as Adam explained, these exclusive 'small circles' are inevitable:

> 'If you want [people] to talk deeply [from] the heart, or this one is not happy because of some family problem, he will never talk to a guy with a different background or culture . . . Say, if my kids are having a problem at school, for example, I won't talk to a guy who is not even married, not having a kid. He won't understand.'

In other words, the church should not be exclusive but the existence of cliques demonstrates that the church is not as inclusive as he first expressed. These 'small circles' are formed based on needs for emotional support that can only be found in people with the same social 'background'. Adam then told me that background

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refers to someone with the same 'educational level' as him, for a 'background' is a common experience achieved through education. As he expressed it, a person with only a high-school education would not be able to understand what he as a university graduate experienced in his daily life. Adam represents the majority of my interviewees who see educational experience in one's personal history as a basis for mutual identification. To be in a church where most members have a similar *educational* background is to be in a familiar place. Repeating stories of religious education in Hong Kong is not merely meant to convey that parishioners see themselves as educated moral subjects or students from prestigious schools; it is to invoke a common background through which one can tacitly assume that moral and social norms are implicitly shared in this particular Hongkonger church. The invocation of the educational background is a tactic through which a shared identity is established. This mutuality forms the basis for the emotional trust needed to make St. Matthew's Church a 'home away from home' (Ley, 2008). To not have the same educational pedigree is to be tacitly excluded from these 'small circles'.

The simple maintenance of relationships at St. Matthew's Church is not an innocuously status-blind activity: it involves tacit exclusivity based on moral education that is also construed as social background. Although many interviewees agreed that the church is not meant to be exclusive, they conceded that it is easier to relate to people similar to themselves. Attendance at St. Matthew's Church is not merely a pious practice of worship. The construction of the church family is based on the continuous reiteration of a moral discipline administered in religious schools. Although the church offers a comforting sense of the familiar to members of transnational families (Waters, 2003; Ley, 2008), members of the church are particular about who fits in as a member in this home, indicating the specificities of the transnational network constantly invoked at St. Matthew's Church.

CHINESE CONTESTATIONS: MIGRANTS FROM THE PRC AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE AND BACKGROUND

Although St. Matthew's Church has been constructed as a Cantonese-Christian family, this portrayal of church is contested by new migration from Mainland China. The exact population of these new migrants relative to the Hongkonger migrants previously described is difficult to determine. In the 2006 census, 46% of the migrants from East Asia were born in the PRC, as opposed to 26% from Hong Kong (Statistics Canada, 2007a). This estimate admittedly underestimates the Hongkonger population because some individuals who consider themselves Hongkongers were born in China. By primary language, 40% of the Chinese speakers in Vancouver in 2006 listed Cantonese as their first language, as opposed to the 22% who primarily preferred Mandarin (Statistics Canada, 2007b). However, these numbers do not necessarily reflect the number of Hongkongers as some PRC migrants from Guangzhou and Fujian provinces of Mainland China also speak Cantonese. Though the exact numbers are thus inconclusive, Li (2005) argues that the number of migrants from Hong Kong to Canada has decreased since 1997 while the number of migrants from Mainland China has increased. What matters is not the exact population but what Li describes as the rise and fall of different waves of Chinese migration relative to each other.

Similarly, it was difficult to count the distinct groups of Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese members at St. Matthew's Church. This said, all eight of Jamie's simultaneous translation headphones were in use by 2008, suggesting its popularity among Mandarin-speaking church members. Two Mandarin-speaking groups had also been started in the church. The Hongkongers at St. Matthew's Church faced new challenges represented by these Chinese migrants. Hongkongers at St. Matthew's Church noted that a key difference between themselves and migrants from the PRC involved linguistic abilities: Mainlanders usually communicate in Mandarin whereas Hongkongers prefer to use Cantonese. The language difference challenged Hongkonger church members not because they cannot speak Mandarin but because they are unable to speak it *well*. Sarah related the difficulty she has pronouncing Mandarin correctly: '[My daughter] always laughs at me. When she didn't know Mandarin, she thought I was OK. Now her Mandarin is very good, and she thinks my Mandarin is saying Cantonese a little bit crooked. Cantonese people can understand it, but not Mandarin

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people.' Sarah said that an education in Mandarin had not been available to her while she was living in Hong Kong, but she did not feel that her education has been compromised, instead highlighting Cantonese as the dominant dialect at St. Matthew's Church.

The everyday use of Cantonese as the vernacular language in church, both during conversation and in public worship, reinforces the dominance of this dialect. The one migrant from the PRC that I interviewed, Rosie, noted the limitations of translating Cantonese into Mandarin: 'Some words you can say in Cantonese, [but] you may not be able to find a similar word in Mandarin, and you lose the meaning, you lose some of the content.' She gave the Hongkonger example of *buun gun bat leung* (half pound, eight ounces) which comes from a Cantonese pop song and movie in Hong Kong during the 1970s where the protagonist complains that he is not paid sufficiently for a hard day's work; the metaphor is that eight ounces of work does not equate to a half-pound of pay. Rosie regards this as 'Hong Kong slang', because the PRC does not have an equivalent popular culture reference to *buun gun bat leung*. Rosie's frustration highlights the reality that, as with other languages, Cantonese cannot easily be translated into Mandarin. Although both Cantonese and Mandarin are Chinese dialects, their cultural and colloquial differences suggest that they may as well be two different languages. Rosie further suggests that using Hong Kong colloquialisms at St. Matthew's Church defines it as a Hong Kong church rather than a generically Chinese church. To understand the Chinese spoken at St. Matthew's, it would be advantageous to be Hong Kong Chinese.

However, the differences are not only linguistic; migrants from the PRC are often labeled by Hongkongers as less educated workers with a lower level of moral capital. Maxine shared an oft-quoted stereotype about the moral dichotomies of Hong Kong and Mainland people by referring to a scandal that happened in 2008 when PRC companies manufacturing baby powder contaminated with melamine killed several infants in Hong Kong and in the PRC:

> 'We Hong Kong people, we would not come up with poisonous baby formula. But Mainlanders, they really focus their attention on money: they have no *leungsum* [compassion]. For money, they can do anything. But Hong Kong people, although they want money, they will still have some *leungsum* . . . their education is higher, their thinking more open, but Mainland Chinese people are not like that. Like I won't say it's all of them, but mostly like that: very self-centred.'

Leungsum is a Cantonese idiom that refers to moral compassion emanating from the heart. Maxine's narrative suggests that Hongkonger *leungsum* is a product of her moral education in religious schools. As another interviewee, Minnie, put it, the baby powder scandal happened for the same reasons why garments made in China are of poor quality. She also argues that the Blackberry cell phone is renamed 'Black Cherry' in China because the Mainlanders 'like to copy.' To Minnie, the Mainlanders lack moral fibre.

This labeling of PRC migrants is based on perceptions that the Mainlanders lack spiritual awareness due to their atheistic educational backgrounds, unlike the Hongkongers who are perceived as religiously and morally superior. Jack explained that migrants from the PRC had been ideologically educated during the Cultural Revolution not to believe in a spiritual realm:

> 'Even some of those converted and baptized Guangzhou people in our church: they always come up with more suspicious questions than Hong Kong people. So because of the way they're trained, they don't believe in spiritual things. So it's really difficult to really influence those Mainland people to believe in God.'

Jack pointed out that such an ideologically-based education results in a difference of spiritual subjectivities between Hongkongers and Mainlanders. The implication of this educational bifurcation is that Mainlanders will exhaust the church's time and resources by posing religious questions that Hongkongers have already settled during their religious education. For Jack, the difference lay not merely in language but on background premised by educational 'training'. Not only did Hongkongers and Mainlanders speak different languages; their different educational backgrounds made it difficult for them to find common ground.

Rosie, the only Mainlander interviewed, admitted that migrants from the PRC are educated to

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be atheists, but her personal experience leads her to believe that they can be assimilated into St. Matthew's through personal contact with other church members. Like the Hongkongers, Rosie has come to treat the church as family particularly because a small group of (Hongkonger) women supported her emotionally when she divorced her husband who had been unfaithful to her in Hong Kong. Rosie acknowledged that St. Matthew's Church is a Hongkonger church, but her answer to the question, 'Do I fit in?' was a resounding yes because she has personal friendships there. Despite a tacit understanding that St. Matthew's Church is a Hongkonger church, Rosie attempts to be included by building friendships in church so that the church members will not think of her as an 'other'. Rosie's connection to the church indicates that Jamie's 'pastoral care' objective for the church has some success beyond the Hongkonger Chinese population.

However, this welcome to non-Hongkonger Chinese migrants is selective. Rosie may have assimilated into St. Matthew's Church, but this is because she speaks Cantonese and is willing to integrate into the mainstream community. Hongkonger exclusivity may not be apparent on the surface, but it is subtly manifested through mundane practices of speaking Cantonese and excluding migrants from the PRC whom they believe do not share in a spiritually and morally superior religious education from Hong Kong. St. Matthew's Church is not a generically Chinese church in which all ethnic Chinese migrants can find a sense of home; rather, it is a Cantonese-Christian family that is constructed by everyday conversational habits and the constant invocations of shared religious educational backgrounds.

CONCLUSION: A CANTONESE-CHRISTIAN FAMILY

I have argued in this article that St. Matthew's Church is continually constructed as a transnational home through everyday linguistic practices and claims to a common religious educational background. I demonstrate that otherwise mundane practices of speaking the Cantonese language, maintaining friendships with people of similar backgrounds in the church, and perceiving Mainlanders as 'other' are all unconscious tactics of reproducing St. Matthew's Church as a home where only migrants from Hong Kong can form social networks and a sense of familyhood and belonging in English-speaking Canada. This is not consciously meant to be an exclusionary strategy towards non-Hongkongers, but it requires that potential members of the church learn Cantonese, follow religious etiquette, and contribute to the church-family through the maintenance of active relationships. It is in this way that everyday actions and perceptions of the dominant Hongkonger group at St. Matthew's Church reinforce the church as a Hong Kong church despite the influx of PRC migrants to Metro Vancouver and in spite of the church's mandate to provide pastoral care to all Chinese migrants, including those from the PRC. Such a space of familiarity for Christian migrants from Hong Kong can be conceptualised as a Cantonese-Christian family, its members brothers and sisters both in Christ and in common social background.

This ethnographic analysis of St. Matthew's Church establishes the church as a reified Hongkonger home in Metro Vancouver. While the current statistics indicate a rise in PRC migrants and a drop in the population of migrants from Hong Kong (Li, 2005), the Hongkonger churches among the Chinese churches in Metro Vancouver may not be as welcoming as immigrant service hubs (Ley, 2008) and as sites for social networking (Waters, 2003) to all Chinese (or East Asian) migrants. These Hongkonger churches are particularly hospitable to a specific group of transnational migrants who share a common social background and language (Featherstone *et al*., 2007).

This paper's examination of what looks to be an 'officially sacred space' demonstrates that sacred spaces are constantly constructed, contested and consolidated by 'unofficially sacred' quotidian practices. This includes repeatedly invoking a common background, speaking a particular dialect, and cultural stereotyping. These processes implicitly create a religious place that ties churchgoers back to a particular homeland. Such relational geographies of religion suggest that migrant spaces of worship can be constructed through practices that may not be explicitly religious. The quotidian habits that make a Cantonese-Christian family can render even officially sacred sites to be unofficial places for a tacitly exclusive social gathering.

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NOTES

(1) Religion is counted every decade in the Canadian census. The previous count was conducted in 2001, the next in 2011.
(2) I received anonymous help from a member of the Ministerial Fellowship in determining primary languages in the directory.
(3) As with the name of the church, all participants' names have been anonymised.
(4) I spoke with 40 interviewees, but there were 38 interview sessions as two sessions were done with couples.

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