

Carsen T. Vala

Book review

<https://doi.org/10.54561/prj1701183r>

Date received: December 4, 2022

Date accepted: March 31, 2023

“THE POLITICS OF PROTESTANT CHURCHES AND THE PARTY-STATE IN CHINA: GOD ABOVE PARTY?”

Routledge, New York, 2018

ISBN: 978-1-1380-3690-1, 214 pp.

Carsen T. Vala's book *The Politics of Protestant Churches and the Party-State in China: God Above Party?* is one of the few books that successfully illustrate the ambivalent nature between the Party-State and Protestant Christianity in China. It provides the reader with a nuanced depiction of the, at times, tense relationship between the Chinese Communist Party (referred to in the book, as the 'Party-state') and domestic unregistered, as well as registered, Christian Protestant congregations. Vala moves beyond a simplistic dichotomy of state domination versus a congregational resistance of said domination, to illustrate a somewhat flexible relationship between the party state and the church. Compared with many other scholars who clinch on a confrontational evaluation of such relation, Vala rightly notice that high-profile conflicts between the Party-state and its Christian Protestant populace are remarkably uncommon. This fact is easily accessible within a historical survey but was dismissed by the vast majority of self-proclaimed experts in the field and even to a large body of the academic literature on Christianity in contemporary China. For Vala, the primary relation is rather on the middle path of negotiation, especially with a shared recognition of the value of Guanxi, social connections in the everyday operation of the churches. To his help in exploring this middle-path approach, Vala makes recurrent use of social movement theory, especially Scott's (1985; 1990) concept of *public transcript* in his monumental work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. The notion of public transcript signals the open dialogue, of which not only the dominating party is in control, but also in which the dominated participates.

The choice of theoretical framework is appropriate, as Vala correctly asserts that we have to include not only legal, but also illegal (see unregistered) religious groups, when we explore how religious movements behave and act under authoritarian rule. This is to say, the struggle of discourse and power is extensive, which not only exists between the state approved congregations and the Party-state, but also prevails between the unregistered congregations and the Party-state. The illegal churches' narrative should not be ignored but be included, as it plays an important role in steering the whole discourse. With this theoretic background, Vala endeavours to narrow down his approach further and poses three main questions

to understand not only the ambivalent relationship between Party-state and the growing Christian population, but also the *selective* repression process of Christian congregations in contemporary China. The main questions can be stated as follows: (1) given that the Party-state authorizes official churches, what role do they play in the governments approach to Protestant Christianity? (2) In contrast to the expectations of conflict between religion and authoritarianism, how have so many large, illegal groups grown in the face of authoritarian power? and (3) Under what conditions do authoritarian regimes repress illegal religious groups in society?

Vala's first chapter sets the stage and presents a plan for what is to follow. The second chapter provides the reader with an outline of the domination versus negotiation perspective, and their respective feasibility in the light of China's history from Mao Zedong's creation of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to contemporary society. It details the declined capability of the state to monitor and maintain its interests throughout the nation: "The Mao-era authoritarian-religious relationship of domination and resistance has given way to a domination and negotiation relationship [...] (45). This is to say, the antagonistic relationship has transformed, with time, to one of negotiation, and even to one of friendship at some local levels, due to, at least in part, outnumbered, uneducated and unmotivated party cadres. This creates a discrepancy between the official Party-state discourse and the *de facto* public transcript.

Vala (2018) moves on to delineate the role of the Party-state's official agenda and its official associations, with an emphasis on the Religious Affairs Bureau¹ and the Protestant churches within the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), in the next four chapters. Additionally, we are provided with a context in establishing a public transcript between congregations and the Party-state that is complex and pliable. We are also informed that even the illegal (in other words, unregistered with the TSPM) and legal Protestant groups shared grassroots values which serve as foundation for the spread of Protestantism, they however, were treated contrastingly and operated separately. In order to not open up to party leverage, these two separate modes of congregations united in the face of pressure. Vala uses two case studies to exemplify such peculiar situation, that of the Shanghai Wanbang Church and the Beijing Shouwang Church. He presented the empirical data in the last two chapters preceding the conclusion, from a total of fifteen months' fieldwork between the years 2002 to 2014. The congregation members and former members in his study have provided rich accounts that can illustrate the highly complex relationship between the Party-state and Protestant churches, especially the unregistered congregations. The reason why Vala has chosen these two churches as representation of this volatile relationship is clear, as they are perfect examples of the newly-rising urban Churches (城市新型教会), which struggle to alter the public transcript in diametrical different approaches. This type of urban churches can be seen as a hy-

¹ Devoured, and merged, with the United Front Work Department in 2018, a central committee within the Party.

brid model of illegal and legal groups within Protestant Chinese, as they are neither official nor unregistered in status. Church leaders have often graduated from official seminaries, or even worked in official (legal) churches before departing to these kinds of urban churches. The new urban churches are attractive to many church leaders, as in churches as such, the leaders can take part in societal discourse and affect public discourse, while avoiding a confrontational stance. With that said, they tend to ignore official restrictions, even sending out missionaries against Party's regulations. Vala points out that, what these churches actively work with, is to blur the lines between sanctioned and illegal congregations by the help of advocating to commonly held values. In the progress of discussions of the case studies, mainly in the fourth and fifth chapter, Vala has indirectly answered the first main question that he proposed earlier in the book. He claims that, the official Protestant congregations work to mitigate the tension between the Party-state and unregistered churches through enabling negotiation between the Party and illegal Protestant groups.

Vala continues to present that, the illegal and legal Protestant congregations both seek to show that they share interests with the Party-state officials to improve society and the state in concrete ways, such as providing education, food programs and so forth. This is exemplified eloquently with the cases of how urban and rural churches alike participating in charity and disaster relief works. The Party-state gladly encourages these altruistic activities, as they are able to capitalize on the good work, while congregations are content being able to carry out their doctrine practically and thereby promoting their faith. However, it is also in this wider discussion, primarily in Vala's last three chapters, where we see the second and third main questions answered. The case studies provide the reader with a detailed analysis of how one church broke several red lines of the configured public transcript. These breaches of regulations are, first of all, a large congregation comparing to what the party wants to see, second, a negative critique of the party in the public space, and third, attracting international interest for their cause that goes against what the party tolerates. These three breaches of regulations resulted in the repression and ultimate demise of the church. However, the case study on the other church illustrates how a gray zone between authorities and the congregation can be upheld, mainly due to not breaking informal and formal boundaries of the state-religious relationship in such an apparent manner. Furthermore, the leadership in the secondary church had connections to several officials and knowledge of how the Party-state may answer in case of provocation. A vast social network, also called *guanxi* (关系) in Mainland China, with officials and party cadres ensured that suppression was mild.

Ultimately, the empirical work presented by Vala illustrates how religious life can continue without interruption, by not projecting power in the public discourse, but rather emphasise commonality to a shared goal, with officialdom. The Party-state applies an erratic, uneven, and synthetic approach to the Protestant congregations, which combines both domination and negotiation. This in turn makes it difficult

for congregations to ascertain what the future holds. Facing these difficulties, Vala believes that utilizing Scott's theoretical concept of the public transcript, may help us understand how unregistered Protestant groups can continue their service under the state. To draw up certain lines in public discourse that are not to be crossed can give the church a space where they are not to threaten the status quo in the projection of power to the society, as the acceptable public discourse is largely set by the dominating entity. The theory successfully highlights the contemporary fluid management of such a discourse in contemporary China and among its Protestant populace.

It is not clear though, at least from my perspective, if the partial use of Scott's concept of public transcript is warranted. The concept of public transcript in Scott is composed of two parts, one of which is the hidden transcript, and the other is the public transcript. Vala only discusses the public part of the concept, and dismisses the value of exploring the hidden transcript and its formation off-stage. The hidden transcript can be seen as the discourse of the ideologically insubordinate, in this context, the illegal Protestant congregations. Examining the relation through the lens of the hidden transcript can yield different interpretations. Vala's focus is only at the alteration, and the flexible nature of the public transcript, in other words, what is considered permissible by the Party-state to include in the public discourse yet he ignores the subjective narratives that can be categorised within hidden transcript. Certainly, it is difficult to discover such discourse as a perfect stranger, even if Vala has spent an impressive amount of time conducting fieldwork in China. In order to reach answers to the three main questions posted, which he engage with heavy use of the theoretical concept of *public transcript*, it is better to supplement the discussion with the subject narrative, which is the hidden transcript. We do not land in a public transcript without first acknowledging that it is a result of a tug-of-war between the sovereign narrative (the Party-state) and the subject narrative (unregistered Protestant congregations). To picture the struggle is perhaps less important than to capture the formation and alteration of the public transcript in its interaction with the hidden transcript.

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