A “Double Alienation”  
*The Vernacular Chinese Church in Malaysia*

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**Abstract**

Scholarship on Christianity in Malaysia has been dominated by denominational church history, as well as the study of urban, middle-class and English-speaking church congregations in the post-Independence period. In focusing on the vernacular Chinese Protestant church in Malaysia, and one of its most prominent para-church organisations, called The Bridge, this paper draws attention to the variegated histories of Christian conversion and dissemination in Malaysia, and the various modes and meanings of Christian identity as incorporated into different local communities and cultures. The history of the Chinese Protestant church suggested in the first part of the paper takes as its point of departure the distinction between mission and migrant churches, the latter being the origin of the vernacular Chinese churches in Malaysia. The second part of the paper traces the emergence of a Chinese para-church lay organisation called The Bridge, and the Chinese Christian intellectuals behind it, in their mission to engage the larger Chinese and national public through literary publications and other media outreach activities. In so doing, these Chinese Christian intellectuals also drew on the resources of an East Asian and overseas Chinese Christian network, while searching for their destiny as Chinese Christians in the national context of Malaysia. By pointing to the importance of regional, Chinese-language Christian networks, and the complexity of vernacular Christian subjectivity, the paper hopes to fill a gap in the existing literature on Christianity in Malaysia, as well as make a contribution to on-going debates on issues of localisation, globalisation and authenticity in global Christianity.

**Keywords**

Introduction

In the famously plural society of Malaysia, where religion is seen to be inextricably intertwined with ethnicity, the social location of Christianity is somewhat less self-evident. Indeed, it would appear to be the only major religion in the country without an “intrinsic” ethnic constituency, encompassing in its ranks members of diverse ethnic origins. The sole exception is ethnic Malays, who are Muslims by law. Of the circa 2 million Christians recorded in the 2000 census, accounting for almost 10% of the total population, 64% were to be found in the Bumiputra, 27.3% in the Chinese, 6.6% in the Indian and 1.8% in the Others category (Loh, 2006).

In place of an ethnic constituency, Malaysian Christianity has been closely associated, especially in academic research, with the metropolitan English-speaking urban middle class of Chinese and Indian ethnic origin. This is reflected in the existing sociological literature on Christianity in Malaysia, almost all of which has been based on English-medium churches located in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. True to its missionary and colonial origins (Roxborough, 1990a), the Malaysian Christian community is generally represented by this literature as a multi-ethnic English-speaking urban middle class, deeply exposed to Western values and culture, and driven in recent years to ecumenical unity across traditional denominational and theological divides by the Islamisation policies of the national government (Ackerman and Lee, 1988; DeBernadi, 2001; Nagata, 1997; Riddell, 2002).

The above account of Christianity in Malaysia as the religion of the English-speaking urban middle class does capture a certain reality, especially with regard to the Christian population in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. That reality however, is far from representative. Christians constitute a mere 5.6% and 3.6% of the population in Kuala Lumpur and Penang respectively; they constitute 40% of the population in Sarawak, where Iban, Bahasa Malaysia and Chinese are the main church languages, and 27.8% in Sabah, where the vernacular also prevails (Loh, 2006). Even in these two urban centres, and especially

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1 For one of the many statements to this effect, see Ackerman and Lee (1988).
2 Smaller faiths such as the Bahai are also multi-ethnic in their membership.
3 The term bumiputra, or son of the soil, is generally equated with the majority Malay-Muslim in Malaysia. The Christian component enumerated here are non-Malay indigenous peoples from the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak.
4 This is a significant contrast to the 1980 census data, according to which Chinese constituted 50% of the Christian population. Of the Chinese population, only 3% were Christians (Dorall, cited in Nagata, 2001: 154).
outside of them, much of Christian life finds expression in diverse vernacular forms of religious culture and identity.

Although occasionally alluding to this diversity, academic studies of Christianity in Malaysia have generally proceeded to provide an undifferentiated account of a homogenous Christian community, based almost entirely on observations of the practices, activities and concerns of English-speaking Christians (DeBernadi, 2001; Nagata, 1997; Nagata, 2005).5 Similarly, notwithstanding the comment by Roxborogh, arguably the leading historian of Christianity in Malaysia, that “in any case much of the core of modern Christianity in the end derives as much from migrant Chinese communities as from the work of missionaries in Malaya”, the available historiography, including Roxborogh’s own invaluable work, have been almost exclusively devoted to the missions-derived English churches (Roxborogh, 1990b). Where academic notice has been taken of the vernacular churches, it has been largely in terms of the identification of the vernacular with the parochial, and the characterisation of Chinese churches as largely parochial dialect churches that are less socially engaged and networked is still to be found in the literature (Nagata, 1997; Roxborogh, 1995).

The point of departure for this paper is the distinction between the Malaysian Chinese Christianity derived from “migrant Chinese communities” and that of “the work of missionaries in Malaya”, as noted in the above comment by Roxborogh. In post-colonial Malaysia, this difference in origin between the two types of churches developed further into one between the metropolitan English-speaking churches, with their roots in Straits Settlements mission history, many of which consist almost entirely of an ethnic Chinese congregation (henceforth English churches) and Chinese-speaking churches, with their roots in Chinese-speaking small-town environments in Malaysia (henceforth Chinese churches). The Chinese Christian world in Malaysia, we argue, is not a socially and culturally homogenous entity. A representation of its past and present as constituted by a metropolitan English-speaking middle class alone would fail to take into account the variegated histories of Christian conver-

5 It should be noted that especially for Chinese Christianity in Malaysia, there has been a fair number of church publications on its history and development; it is in the academic literature that the vernacular forms of Christianity are wanting. See for example, Shiwu Fuzhou kenchang lishi buyi 诗巫福州垦场历史补遗 (Wong, 1966), The contribution of the churches during the Malayan Emergency (Huang J.S., 2009), yinwei you ni: zai xun sitiawan huaren jidutu kenhuang zuji 因为有你： 再寻实兆远华人基督徒垦荒足迹 (Liao, 2009) and God blesses this harvest land: A collection of papers on the history of Malaysia Chinese churches in the 19th and 20th centuries (Quah, 2005).
sion and dissemination in the country, and the various modes and meanings of Christian identity as incorporated into different local communities and cultures. History, language and locality are key variants in this respect, determining to a large extent the relationship formed between the new Christian community and its broader cultural world.

On the other hand, the characterisation of vernacular Chinese congregations as dialect-based, parochial and socially-unengaged would have been applicable to the Chinese migrant churches of the pre-war and early post-war period, but misrepresents a large and growing segment of today’s urban Malaysian Chinese-speaking Christians. As migrant—and mission—churches began the painful but liberating adjustment to a new post-colonial national context, their social location and positions were also subject to change and evolution. Notwithstanding a shared theological (largely evangelical) and denominational heritage, they have differed substantially in religious culture, history and concerns, differences that also made themselves felt in their respective responses to the challenges posed by the evolving national socio-political environment, especially that of the New Economic Policy in the 1970s to 1990s.

As a new, shared history is forged within the existential constraints of the nation-state, notable signs of convergence are currently discernible. To understand contemporary Christianity in Malaysia, however, including the present ecumenical thrusts between the English and Chinese-speaking churches, a deeper understanding of vernacular Chinese Christianity, and the changes which have taken place within it, is important. A caveat should be noted here, namely, that the Roman Catholic Church has been left out of this account. This is an important absence, as the Catholic Church is the largest denomination in the country, and has a far longer history of mission and indigenisation in the region than the Protestant missions (Roxborogh, 1990b).

This paper on Chinese Protestant Christianity in Malaysia is divided into two parts. In the first, we attempt an outline of a history of Chinese Christianity in Malaysia, based on an analytical distinction between migrant and mission churches. This reading of church history is based on secondary literature, especially, though not exclusively, in the English language. The focus on a Straits Settlements-centred mission’s history6 and the resultant English churches has paid too little attention, we argue, to vernacular Chinese agency and Chinese networks in the process of Christian conversion and the consolidation of a

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6 As noted by Roxborogh (2006), in mission reports, upon which the early history of Christianity in the region was based, “the mission and the expatriate were at the centre of the reporting exercise.”
China.7 Closer attention to the role of “migrant Christian communities” (Roxborough, 1990b) as against mission churches planted amongst immigrants would also suggest that, at least in the history of Christianity in the Nanyang, religion travels as much via migrants as it does via missionaries.

The second part of the paper, based on field work and interview data, then focuses on the history and work of The Bridge, a highly successful interdenominational Chinese language magazine and later, para-church lay organisation. Founded in the late 1970s it managed to establish an unprecedented public presence for Christian literature and discourse in the Chinese mass media and reading public in the mid-1980s and 1990s. It is still in operation today, although its activities are far more diversified, and its literary influence has diminished. In examining its origins, its leadership and its activities during those “breakthrough” years, we suggest that the young Chinese Christian converts behind The Bridge, who grew up in a non-metropolitan, non-Christian, sinophone culture and society, could not be expected to share the same subjective experiences and dilemmas as English-speaking Western-oriented Chinese Christians, especially in regard to identification with a religion long considered to be of foreign origin and non-Chinese in its values and practices. As Chinese Christians in this Chinese-speaking world, they spoke with an “alien voice” (yi yin异音) (Chan, 2005: 360), and felt a “double alienation”—alienation from the larger nation as members of a Chinese minority, as well as alienation from Chinese society, as members of a Christian minority. The name given to the magazine they founded was wenqiao文桥or literary bridge. To overcome this alienation, the challenge was to enter Chinese society, to acquire a (non-alien) voice and presence in the Chinese reading public, to provide a bridge to Chinese society and to mainstream, as it were, Christianity into the Chinese public consciousness—hence the moniker, bridge. It is no coincidence that this happened in the wake of the implementation of the state’s New Economic Policy, at a time of great challenge and insecurity for Chinese society in Malaysia, when the sense of alienation from the state was at its greatest.

The emergence of The Bridge at this critical juncture of the country’s history as a voice of Chinese Christianity to Christian and non-Christian Chinese society grew out of and was sustained by deeply-rooted national and dias-

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7 See the work of Lutz (2001), Lee (2009) and Wiest (2001) in emphasising the importance of Chinese agency and networks for Chinese Christianity in China. See also Steenbrink’s (1993) excellent review of a similar attempt to “rehabilitate the indigenous” in the historiography of Christianity in Indonesia.
poric networks different to those of the English churches. By pointing to the multiplicity of these networks and the complexity of non-Western Christian subjectivity, the paper hopes to make a contribution to on-going debates on issues of localisation, globalisation and public religion in global Christianity today.

Chinese Christianity in Malaysia—An Outline of a History

_Migrant vs. Mission Churches: Chinese Migration and Christian Conversion_

The standard narrative of Chinese migration and Christian conversion in Malaysia usually begins with Western missionaries making Christian converts of Chinese immigrants to the Malay Peninsula then under British colonial rule. With the establishment of mission schools run by Western missionaries, more converts were made among second generation immigrant children. The churches thus established were English-speaking churches, as this was the language of the missionaries, as well as the colonial administration. They remained largely under missionary leadership and control until the 1960s, when the immigrants had become citizens and were ready to take over the leadership and control of what were to become national, rather than mission, churches\(^8\) (Hunt et al., 1992).

Recent literature in the history of Chinese Christianity has provided a more nuanced picture of the dynamics of Chinese migration and conversion in the region. Between 1724, when Christianity was declared a heterodox religion, and 1846, when the ban on Christianity was rescinded, Western missionaries had no access to the Chinese mainland. However, there were already large numbers of Chinese migrants seeking their fortunes in the Nanyang. Lee (2009) and Wiest (2001) have shown how Teochew and Hakka migrants converted to the Baptist and the Catholic faith in Siam by Chinese-speaking Western missionaries played a key role in spreading the Christian religion upon their return to China.\(^9\)

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8 See the comment by Bishop Hwa Yong, “It has already been noted that the church was almost entirely subservient to the Mission, which in turn was run almost privately by the Finance Committee ... No local leader served on this committee until late in the 1930s, and none were nominated or invited” (Hwa Yung and Hunt, 1992).

9 As Lutz (2001) has pointed out in her work, Chinese evangelists rooted in their own culture were generally far more effective than foreign missionaries in spreading the Word.
In the Malay Peninsula, Liang Fa, the most influential of the early Chinese converts and the first Chinese evangelist with the London Missionary Society, was baptised in Malacca in 1816. Before returning to Canton in 1819, he spent seven years in Malacca assisting William Milne and Robert Morrison with the translation of the Chinese Bible, as well as the publication of the first Christian magazine in the modern sense of the word, the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* (察世俗每月統記傳).\(^{10}\) When faced with increasing persecution in the 1830s, he again fled from China to Malacca, while his son moved to Singapore (Spence, 1996: 31).

Southeast Asia or the Nanyang, with its multitudes of Chinese migrants and settlers, would thus appear to have featured strongly in early Chinese conversion to Christianity. From a missionary perspective, it may have been seen as no more than the preliminary staging post to the “real” mission field in China (Harrison, 1979); from a Chinese perspective of a world then very much in motion, the south-eastern Chinese seaboard and the archipelagic world of Southeast Asia was more likely perceived as a shared and unified mission site. This maritime highway of Chinese Christian networks (Lee, 2009) in which Christian conversion and Chinese migration was moved by Chinese evangelists along pathways of kinship and guilds—the traditional units of Chinese social organisation—was conducted entirely in the Chinese language. It remained in operation long after China was opened to overt Western missionary activity in 1846.

Especially in the aftermath of the Taiping Rebellion and the Boxer Uprising, many Chinese Christian migrants continued to seek safety in the “Christian” colonies of the Nanyang.\(^{11}\) Unlike the general Chinese labour migration of this period, these Christian migrations in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries were often collectively organised (by a church, or simply by extended family or lineage) and territorially localised. “Population transplants” (Shih, 2004: v) or colonies of Teochew Catholics, Baptists or Presbyterians to

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\(^{10}\) Entry under Liang Fa, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, http://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/l/liang-fa.php. See also Tan (2010) on the Malacca period and the contribution of Liang and other early Chinese evangelists. It is noteworthy that in Roxborough's account of this period, no mention is made of Liang Fa's obviously important collaboration with William Milne and Robert Morrison in the translation and publications output (some 140,000 items were printed in Chinese) of this early mission in Malacca (Roxborough, 1990b). In the Chinese literature on this period, however, the role of Liang Fa is widely acknowledged (Li, 1997).

\(^{11}\) This sometimes occurred with the explicit encouragement of the colonial administration (Shih, 2004).
Singapore and Johore, Hakka Catholics and Lutherans to Sabah (Zhang D., 2002), Foochow Methodists to Sitiawan (Shih, 2004) and Sibu, re-constituted new Christian settlements, centred around sub-ethnic dialect churches, all retaining strong ties to the “mother” church and community in China, in an organisational form similar to that of non-Christian Chinese migrant settlements. As Zhang (2002:45) notes, the Basel Missionary Society in Sabah was “in essence, a de facto Hakka dialect organisation”. Western missionaries sometimes played key roles in the establishment of these settlements, but following on their heels (and sometimes even preceding them) came, in far greater numbers than could Western missionaries, Chinese pastors and church workers, including innumerable Bible women. They catered to the migrant Christian flock and evangelised among non-Christian Chinese migrants in the languages that they had brought with them from China. Famous itinerant Chinese evangelists, such as John Sung, who made epic mission journeys to Southeast Asia in the 1930s, preaching in the vernacular, did not fail to plough this overseas Chinese field (Liao, 2009).

By the time World War II and the 1949 Chinese revolution put an end to this maritime highway, the size of the Chinese Christian population in the Peninsula and Sabah and Sarawak far exceeded the numbers found in the English missionary churches. In describing the situation which led to the formation of a separate Methodist Chinese Annual Conference in the 1930s, the difference to the English churches was noted in the following terms: “It was not just that they had the largest number of churches. They also had sufficient pastors, the majority of whom had been trained in China. Moreover most of the Chinese churches were already self-supporting” (Hwa Yung and Hunt, 1992). The relative size can be gauged from the picture that still obtains today in the Methodist Church, the largest Protestant denomination in the country. Of a total membership of 97,599 in 2006, 46,000 were to be found in Chinese congregations on the Peninsula and in Sarawak, as against 13,494 in English congregations. 251 pastors served in 110 Chinese Methodist churches compared to 37 pastors in 38 English churches.

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12 See Tan (2010) for an account of these Christian settlements.
13 The earliest Foochow missionary to work in Malaysia, Rev. Ling Chi Mei, came in 1897, and was instrumental, together with Dr. Heinrich Luering, a German missionary, in the establishment of the Foochow colony in Sitiawan in 1903 (Shih, 2004).
14 The American Methodist Mission was the most successful Protestant mission in Malaya, largely through the schools it founded (Roxborough, 1995).
From Migrant to National Churches: Post-War Transformations and the Emergence of Transnational Chinese Christian Networks

Chinese churches had been founded in colonial Malaya as sub-ethnic migrant churches, closely connected by a narrow corridor to their respective church and community of origin. Functioning in their respective dialects, they remained largely separate from and unconnected to each other in the territory of settlement. Like the mission churches however, the Chinese migrant churches were profoundly impacted by changes in the post-colonial national and international environment. Above all, the 1949 closure of the Chinese border meant that the all-important umbilical tie to the mother churches in the respective communities of origin in the Chinese mainland could no longer be maintained. The following section traces the post-war transformation and growth of the Chinese churches.

The Emergency and the “New Village” Mission

The communist takeover of mainland China in 1949 and the consequent expulsion of several thousand Western missionaries coincided with the outbreak of a communist insurgency in Malaya, and the subsequent massive displacement and resettlement of over half a million of the Chinese rural poor into 474 barbed “New Villages” (Sandhu, 1973). The British administration decided to encourage the re-deployment of the displaced missionaries from China to the newly-displaced Chinese new villagers. Malaya became, for a few brief years, the centre of world Christian missionary activity (Roxborogh, 1992: 95). In the Malayan context, in which Western missionary activity had been focussed on the Straits Settlements and its affluent urban population, it was perhaps as significant that this massive foreign missionary activity was, for the first time, directed toward the Chinese-speaking rural poor.

In view of the huge resources deployed, the harvest was somewhat meagre. In 1985, the Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore (LCMS), which developed...
oped out of the Chinese New Village work of the 1950s, and was its most notable success, had only 2,300 members (Chang, 1992: 251), drawn largely from children and women converted through the Sunday schools and clinics run by the missionaries. Gideon Chang, Bishop Emeritus of LCMS, was converted as a 13 year-old child in the Sunday school of a new village in Pahang and later served as an assistant pastor to a missionary in another new village in Selangor. In an interview conducted with one of the authors, he noted the low literacy rate of the New Village populace, their deep attachment to Chinese folk religion and the intense suspicion they harboured vis-à-vis the foreign missionaries and their local assistants, who were regarded as spies (jian xi奸细) or “running dogs” (zou gou走狗) of the Western powers. The charity work undertaken in order to overcome the suspicion often backfired, such as when diarrhoea occurred upon consumption of the freely-distributed milk powder. With the failure of the adult and youth ministries, it was the Sunday schools that were to yield the most converts (Chang, 2008).

The Malayan Christian Council, an ecumenical body formed in 1948 by the expatriate leadership of the mission churches, few of whom spoke any of the local languages, was the coordinating body for this massive missionary enterprise (Harvey, 2009; Roxborogh, 1990a). The outcome might have been different if the established Chinese migrant churches in the country, which had kept their distance from the MCC, had been incorporated into this missionary effort, which they were not (Harvey, 2009: 260). In fact, outside of the MCC framework, the missionary outflow from China did feed new urban Chinese ministries in the country. AOG missionaries who were initially sent to Singapore and Malaya started a Cantonese ministry in major urban centres, such as Penang, Ipoh and Singapore. A noteworthy success was the independent church known today as the Xuan En Tang (宣恩堂), which has since set up more than five independent churches in and around Kuala Lumpur. Chinese CIM missionaries from Taiwan, Singapore and Hong Kong played a major supporting role in its establishment, reflected in the name of the church adopted in 1966 (Huang J.S., 2009).

Notwithstanding the disappointing results, this period of missionary activity did result in Christian converts from new strata of Chinese society, many of whom were bilingual and were to play an important evangelistic and leadership

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18 Each character resembles the name of the missionaries and churches that had provided valuable assistance to the Xuan En Tang. Xuan (宣) represents the Xuan Dao Hui (宣道会) of Hong Kong, En (恩) for the Huai En Tang of Singapore (新加坡怀恩堂) and Tang (堂) for the Taipei Nanjing Dong Lu Li Bai Tang (台北南京东路礼拜堂).
role in the newly-emerging post-colonial Christian society of Malaysia. In general, however, the post-1949 influx of expelled missionaries from China to colonial Malaya had little immediate impact on the local Chinese Christian congregations that had just been so abruptly cut off from their corridor to their “mother churches” in China by the communist takeover. For these Chinese migrant churches, it was the outflow of Western missionaries and Chinese evangelists from the Chinese mainland to Hong Kong and Taiwan that was to be of far greater existential import to their survival and transformation (Huang J.S., 2009; Zhang, 2005; Zheng, 2009).

Hong Kong and Taiwan as Centres of Chinese Christianity
The post-1949 expulsion and flight of foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians from the Mainland led to the rapid growth of Christianity in the two Chinese-speaking centres of Hong Kong and Taiwan in the 1950s and 1960s, both in terms of numbers, as well as infrastructure, such as seminaries and printing presses. As the pre-war foreign leadership of the mission churches and para-church organisations soon gave way there to local control (Rubenstein 1991), Hong Kong and Taiwan became the centres of diasporic Chinese Christian networks that were based on the circulation of publications and personnel in the Chinese language. It was from these new centres that the Chinese churches in Malaysia, both the original migrant churches, as well as the newly-planted churches of the 1950s, drew their spiritual and intellectual sustenance. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, Chinese churches in Malaysia received Christian publications, evangelists and church workers from these two cen-

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19 An outstanding example is Gideon Chang (2008) himself. Chang was born in Quanzhou, China in 1937, and fled to Singapore in 1947 with his mother and siblings. They moved to Mentakab, Pahang and were compelled to live in a Chinese New Village in 1948. He was converted to Christianity in the Sunday school of the New Village in 1953 and baptised in the same year. He recalled that only three students, he and his two cousins, attended the Sunday School, but all three became pastors. He went to Bible School in 1958.

20 There were more than ten Christian publishers active in Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s.

21 These included Bibles and hymnals translated into Chinese and distributed through the Chinese diasporic networks. Malaysian Chinese churches were among the main importers. Some publishers worked with international Christian organisations in translating Western theological classics into Chinese. One of our interviewees, Yang Bai He (2010), the founder of The Bridge magazine, was an avid reader as well as contributor to some of the publications.

22 The Presbyterian Church, for example, had initiated a so-called “Five year movement” (extended for another 5 years, 1960–1971), which had evidently spurred the growth of the
tres (and Singapore) and sent their future leadership to seminaries there for training (Zhang, 2005).

In the 1970s, this increasingly networked Chinese Christian world, which now included vibrant new immigrant churches in the U.S. and Canada, experienced what has been termed an “awakening” (Ling, n. d.). Closely linked to the temper of the times and the U.S.-inspired world-wide rise of evangelical Christianity, from which tradition the Chinese churches themselves had originated and to which they had remained true, one significant outcome was the formation in 1976 of CCCOWE—the Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism (known in Chinese as shijie huaren fuyin dahui 世界华人福音大会 or 华福). Arising out of the 1974 International Congress of World Evangelism in Lausanne, CCCOWE was founded to evangelise as “Chinese churches in one accord.”

Conceived in the diaspora as a global ethnic church, CCCOWE, with its territorial structure of district (national) committees, regional conferences, global congresses (every 5 years) as well as publications, research and other service activities, has played a major role in facilitating collaboration among individuals, para-church organisations and churches in the Chinese Christian world. This had an immediate impact on the Malaysian church. It was at the 1976 founding meeting of CCCOWE in Hong Kong that the decision was taken to establish a Chinese-language non-denominational seminary in Malaysia for the training of local pastors by a group of Malaysian Chinese church leaders. As recounted by Gideon Chang, a founding director of the Malaysia Bible Seminary (MBS):

We prayed for this for two years. At the same time, the founding member of CCCOWE came to Malaysia to encourage Chinese churches to cooperate

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23 In 1952, the Singapore Theological Seminary was established by a Chinese missionary under the auspices of a Hong Kong-based missionary organisation. Besides the Singapore Theological Seminary and the Trinity Theological Seminary of Singapore, seminaries in Hong Kong and Taiwan also recruited a lot of Malaysian Chinese (Pu, 2005: 95).

24 The Western missionaries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that had brought Protestant Christianity to China were products of the “Great Awakening”. The China Inland Mission, which supplied the bulk of the missionaries to China, and later to Malaysia, in the 20th century, subscribed to a conservative evangelical theology.

on mission work. Many churches had felt the need to build a local seminary school. In 1976, the first meeting of CCCOWE was held in Hong Kong. Pastors and lay leaders of Chinese churches from all over the world attended the meeting. The Malaysian representatives agreed upon the establishment of a seminary college and Rev. Lukas Tjandra\(^{26}\) was selected as the head of the project.

*Chang, 2003; authors' translation*

The founding of the non-denominational, Chinese-medium Malaysia Bible Seminary by the local churches, with the assistance of the transnational ethnolinguistic network, testifies to an increasing sense of community and solidarity, and a coming of age among the Chinese church leadership in the country.

Rural-Urban Migration and Christian Conversion
At the same time, socio-economic changes within Malaysian Chinese society were contributing to an invigoration of the Chinese church that was now beginning to witness a third wave of Christian conversion. The first wave, which had occurred in China, had been behind the founding of the migrant churches in the colonial era; the second had occurred in the course of the New Village mission in post-war Malaya. The third wave was to be among the increasing numbers of Chinese-educated high school students who were leaving the New Villages and small towns of the country to seek higher education and employment in the big cities, a rural-urban migration that had begun in the mid-1960s, would gain momentum in the 1970s and continue for the next few decades.

These young men and women were no longer immigrants. They belonged to a new generation of Malaysian Chinese educated within the national school system and thus able to communicate in Malay (the national language) and English, albeit speaking their own dialect at home, and Mandarin in school and at work. With their keen experience of geographical, educational and social mobility, they were more open to new forms of organised religiosity, including Christianity, than their New Village parents had been (Lim, 2007). Unlike the English-educated urban converts, however, these new Christians remained anchored in a Chinese-speaking society and cultural world. It was a Chinese-speaking world moreover, in which Mandarin had replaced dialect as the language of education and literary culture for a growing Chinese-educated middle

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\(^{26}\) He is a Chinese Indonesian who speaks fluent Mandarin and has close ties with Malaysian Chinese churches.
class. This was the world out of which The Bridge, a non-denominational Chinese language para-church organisation, which was to have an enormous impact on Malaysian Chinese society’s perception of Christianity, was to emerge.

The Bridge: Christian Engagement in the Malaysian Chinese Public

The Formation of The Bridge—National Crisis and Transnational Networks

In recollecting the circumstances out of which The Bridge was born, on the occasion of its 25th anniversary (The Bridge, 2003), Huang Zi (the pseudonym of Ng Hok Kea), its CEO and one of the founding members, wrote:

At the time when the National Economic Policy and the National Cultural Policy was being forcefully implemented, Chinese language and culture found itself in an acute crisis of marginalisation and decline. It was in those bleak times that God sent some senior literary missionaries from Hong Kong and Taiwan with funds and skills to make a gift to the people of this land, where Morrison, Milne, Liang Fa and the other sages had established the first Chinese newspaper in the world, the Chinese Monthly Magazine. They held writing workshops for Christians from Malaysia and Singapore to impart the vision of literary mission.

Authors’ translation

The 1970s were deeply troubling times for Chinese society in Malaysia. The New Economic Policy (NEP) launched in 1971 severely restricted access to state-sponsored education and employment. The National Cultural Policy (NCP) launched in the same year threatened the preservation of Chinese education

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27 This was to be reflected in the life of the Chinese churches. Based on missionary field reports, dialects were still widely-spoken in these churches during the 1960s and even 1970s. Mandarin started to take over in the early 1980s and would be the language used in most Chinese churches today. In Kajang, our fieldwork site, we found that the Kajang Chinese Methodist Church switched from dialect to Mandarin in the mid-1980s. The Chinese ministry (in Mandarin) of the Kajang Assembly of God (AOG) also started to grow in the 1980s. AOG reopened its Chinese department in its Bible College in 1980. One contributory factor would have been the establishment of local theological seminaries with instruction in Mandarin that started producing local Chinese-speaking workers in the third quarter of the 1970s.
and culture, already being undermined by increased exposure to Western culture and modernity (Carsten, 2005). The NEP and NCP followed upon the 1960s incorporation of Chinese secondary schools into the national educational system (leaving only 60 so-called independent schools outside of the state education system) and the consequent erosion of Chinese literacy. In this climate of extreme socio-economic and cultural challenge, an initial phase of cultural desertification was countered by the emergence of a vibrant literary public sphere in the late 1970s, in which national issues affecting Chinese society were widely discussed and debated.

The unprecedented growth of Chinese literary production in the 1970s (Li, 1984: 397) found a ready platform in the weekly literary supplements of the widely-circulated Chinese newspapers, as well as in locally published Chinese literary magazines. It was fuelled by the active support of key Chinese community institutions and associations, which organised essay contests, literary prizes and awards, and sponsored publications (Ma Lun, 2004). In addition to these sponsored activities, the writers themselves, many of them young people in their 20s, were active in organising literary meetings and camps, setting up literary awards and forming writers’ associations. A Malaysian Writers’ (Chinese) Association was formed in 1978 and held its first national conference with the theme “Develop culture through literature” in the national capital of Kuala Lumpur. The Bridge, a Chinese Christian literary movement-cum-parachurch lay organisation devoted to the development of Christian literary (not devotional) writing and publishing, emerged out of this period of national challenge and literary ferment.

The catalyst was a Christian Writers’ Workshop held at the Lutheran House in Petaling Jaya in 1977. Parallel to the secular Chinese intellectual literary tradition referred to above, there was the Protestant missionary tradition of literary mission, begun in Malacca some two centuries previously with the publication

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28 There were then 50 Chinese magazines and newspapers in Malaysia, with a larger circulation and readership than in any other language medium in the country.

29 One such magazine was jiao feng (蕉风), which started publication in Singapore in 1955, but moved to Kuala Lumpur in 1959. It was widely circulated among local writers, and served as a platform for them to publish their essays, novels and poems and, at the same time, as a channel for introducing literary ideas and production from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Malaysia. It was an important platform for the growth of mahua literature.

30 Meetings and associations such as wen you hui (文友会) among writers or wen you (文友) were very popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Out of these meetings, local writers’ associations would emerge. One of the well-known poetry associations, Sirius Poetry Society, originally based in Perak and founded in 1974 was actually a combination of ten poetry associations.
tion of the first Chinese magazine there by the intrepid team of Morrison, Milne, Dyer and Liang Fa, the spirit of which had been inherited by the Hong Kong-based Chinese Christian Literature Council (CCLC), known in Chinese as xianggan jidujiao wenyi chubanshe (香港基督教文艺出版社). Malaysia was selected as the venue of this anniversary celebration as a gesture toward the role played by Malacca as the site of Chinese Christianity’s first publication.

Several foreign speakers from the Chinese diaspora were present at the meeting, including Lin Zhi Ping from Taiwan. In 1973, Lin Zhi Ping had set up a Christian para-church organisation in Taiwan that published a well-known magazine called Cosmic Light and he introduced the idea of pre-evangelism and the work of Cosmic Light at the workshop. The idea of a “literary mission” and the publication of a similar Christian magazine in Malaysia caught on. Out of this meeting came the Christian Writers Fellowship (officially registered as the Persatuan Penulis-penulis Kristian Malaysia), which, in 1978, published the first issue of the inter-denominational Christian literary magazine, The Bridge, known in Chinese as wen qiao (文橋) or “literary bridge”.

Subsequent writers’ workshop organised and funded locally by The Bridge continued to call on the services of Lin Zhi Ping and Zhang Xiao Feng, as well as other foreign speakers from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and the U.S., attesting to the strong transnational ties of this Malaysian Christian venture. From its inception, however, The Bridge has been deeply rooted in local Chinese Christian society. It is widely distributed to the Chinese Christian churches in the entire country and supported financially by donations from them.

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31 CCLC’s predecessor, the Christian Literature Society, was established in Shanghai in 1887 and was the largest publishing house there. With the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, most of the foreign missionaries and the foreign staff of CLS left for Hong Kong. Subsequently, the Council on Christian Literature for Overseas Chinese was established in 1951 with the goal of providing religious and reference books to serve Chinese Christians overseas. In 1965, the name was changed to Chinese Christian Literature Council (CCLC): http://www.cclc.org.hk/about_hist.php.

32 The foreign guest speakers from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the U.S. included Moses Hsu, Dr. Van Home, Wayne Siao, Yin Yin (a well-known Taiwan publisher) and Xu Chun Xin (writer and editor).

33 At its inception, the magazine was published as a quarterly. It only changed to a bi-monthly publication after obtaining a publication permit from the Home Ministry (Kementerian Dalam Negeri) several years later.

34 One of the authors’ churches in Sarawak was a regular subscriber and donor, as was the church she attended while pursuing her university studies in the national capital in the 1990s, and the local church where she then worked in Kajang several years later.
The “Breakthrough” to Chinese Society

The idea of publishing a *wen yi* (literary) oriented magazine instead of a devotional one was to increase the Christian voice in a Chinese society in which Christianity was marginalised as superstition and had no means of being published in the mainstream media.35

Why the emphasis on the literary? This is because in those days, no-one could publish anything related to Christianity in the newspapers. If so, they would definitely be ridiculed as backward, superstitious, etc. You never saw anything positive on Christianity in the newspapers. Thus, The Bridge was established to open a space for discussion for Christians. In doing so, we also hoped to nurture some "pen soldiers" (*bi bing* 笔兵) who could write in the supplements of the newspapers, in order to open up and wrest as the “right of speech” (*fa yan quan* 发言权) for Christians.

The Bridge, 2003

In the same 25th anniversary publication, Wen Cai (文采, the pseudonym of Lam Sok Fun, the former Chief Editor of The Bridge magazine), in reflecting on the extraordinary success of this mission, identified three key moments in its development. The first was the above-mentioned 1977 writing workshop, of which the literary magazine, The Bridge, was the outcome. In 1985, it was incorporated as a publishing company, with Huang Zi as its Executive Secretary.

The second key event, according to Wen Cai, occurred in April 1986, when two leading national Chinese newspapers, *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and *Nanyang Siang Pau*, agreed to devote a section to religion (Christianity and Buddhism) in their weekly supplement as a result of a deal brokered by Wen Cai.36 With this “Easter miracle”, the breakthrough to the overwhelmingly non-Christian national reading public was achieved. Today, 15 Chinese newspapers, with a total readership of some three million, provide similar sec-

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35 This was the consensus held by the founding editors Yang Bai He, Huang Zi and Tan Wei Qiang (Yang, 2010).

36 This followed the publication of an offensive opinion piece in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* in December 1985 deriding the Christian festival of Christmas. The deal was brokered following protests by the editors of The Bridge (Wen Cai, 2008) The column was called *fu yin ban* (福音版) or the Gospel Edition. *Sheng ming shu* (生命树) or The Tree of Life was the specific name given to the column.
tions.\textsuperscript{37} The “literary mission” continued with the publication of a popular new youth magazine in 1991 and since then, The Bridge has also become a major supplier of youth literature for the Chinese schools in the country. As Huang Zi notes, thanks to the work of The Bridge, Malaysia has become a leading site for Christian publications in the Chinese language (The Bridge, 2003).

The third key moment in the history of The Bridge occurred in 1993, when it was invited to host a radio programme on a national Chinese radio station on counselling. Since the end of the colonial period, no Christian broadcast had been possible. This unprecedented access to the broadcast media (as with earlier to the print media), albeit in the form of general counselling, was thus a godsend. From a weekly slot, this increased to five times a week and developed eventually into the provision of low-cost counselling services by The Bridge on an individual basis to those who sought them.

Bridging the gap between the Christian church and Chinese society remained the key mission. Huang Zi’s decision to incorporate The Bridge as a company in 1985, as a separate entity from the Christian Writers’ Fellowship, which continued to exist, allowed the group to hold other activities, such as seminars and tours, which addressed Chinese society through its powerful, non-Christian institutions. One such “breakthrough” event was a seminar tour in mid-1986 on “Christianity and Chinese Culture”, with a leading local Chinese intellectual Huang Yun Yo (黄润岳) as speaker.

That was an important event. Our seminar tour went to Johor Baru, Kluang, Batu Pahat, Rengit, Segamat, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh and Penang. This was the first time a Christian event was held at the Chinese assembly halls. We went to the Penang Chinese Assembly Hall, Pei Feng Independent School of Malacca, and other schools and assembly halls. This was the first time we, the Chinese Church, went out. Before this we only had evangelical events.

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\textsc{huang z., 2010; authors’ translation}
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Another was the organisation of its first national conference on the newly-minted national “Vision 2020” in 1992. A Chinese-educated pastor who converted to charismatic Christianity in his youth described the influence of The Bridge on his 19 year-old self in the following terms:

\textsuperscript{37} Information related to the activities mentioned can be obtained from the website of The Bridge: http://www.bridge.org.my.
The biggest transformation in my religious life was the 2020 Vision conference held by The Bridge. I remember one day I was in the office of Huang Zi helping him to do newspaper cuttings. Philip Chia, Chin Ken Pa, Shi De Qing ... were talking about Malaysian current affairs. Shi De Qing was holding a lot of books and said he was going to write an essay. I laughed at him and asked if it was necessary to read so many books for one article. He was ten years older than me. I envied their lives. Though I didn’t understand everything at the conference, I felt passion in my heart. The conference gave me a new sense of direction ... I suddenly realised that the world of my belief was much broader.

CHAN, 2008; authors’ translation

The circulation of The Bridge rose from 1,000 for its first issue in 1977 to 16,000 in 1995. Through its publications, conferences and other activities, The Bridge emerged in the 1990s as a household name in the Chinese reading public, Christian as well as non-Christian, and the leading intellectual voice for a new generation of young Malaysian Chinese Christians in search of their place in Chinese society, in the nation and in the world.

Who were these young Malaysian Christians? In the following section, we shall examine in greater detail the circumstances of, and the personnel behind, this remarkable work of Chinese Christian activism.

**Who’s Who in The Bridge—A Profile of Local Chinese Christianity**

The establishment of The Bridge exemplifies the collaboration between three groups of Chinese Christians in the diaspora. The foreign input of highly qualified Chinese professionals from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the U.S. has already been mentioned. They constitute one group. A second consisted of young local lay Christians like Yeoh Hong Yee (known under his pseudonym Yang Bai He 杨百合), Ng Hok Kea (known under his pseudonym Huang Zi 黄子) and Lam Sok Fun (her pseudonym is Wen Cai 文采), who were the actual founders and driving force behind The Bridge. Given their youth, however (Huang Zi was still in his teens at the time of the 1977 meeting), they had little organisational experience and limited access to international Christian associations. For this, a third group of older church professionals, both in the churches and para-church organisations, played an important role as board members and advisors to the young activists. These transnational coordinators and heads of estab-

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38 They were prominent commentators in the national press and activists with the Bridge in the early 1990s.
lished institutions included Ng Yoot Ching, David Hock Tey, Wayne Siao Wei Yuan and Peter Foong Siew Kong. These two groups constitute two different generations of Chinese Christians in the country, and we examine their respective backgrounds in greater detail below.

Young Local Lay Activists

Yang Bai He, Huang Zi and Wen Cai, the three leading lay activists behind The Bridge, came from very similar backgrounds. They were all born in Malaysia in typical Chinese small towns, went to local Chinese schools and did not receive a formal university education in their youth. They were formed by the spirit of the national literary movement of the 1970s and were well-known essay contributors to the national issues that were of concern to the movement.

Yang, the founding chief editor of The Bridge, grew up in Kampar, a small town in the tin-mining state of Perak. He converted to Christianity in 1963 while training to be a teacher at the Sultan Idris Training College in Teluk Intan. Even before his conversion, he had been fond of poetry and had sent in his work to the local media. After his conversion, he became an avid reader of the major Christian magazines of the time and for a while submitted his literary work exclusively to them. Encouraged by debates on the nature of Christian literature in the 1960s in Taiwan, Yang resumed sending his work to the secular media in 1971 and became a keen participant in the literary movement of the 1970s. During the 1977 meeting, he agreed to help in the publication of a Christian magazine (that was to become The Bridge) and became its founding chief editor.

Huang Zi and Wen Cai both obtained postgraduate degrees in their middle age. In 1977, Yang won a modern poetry award in a national writing contest held by the Sirius Poetical Society. Huang Zi was also a prize winner of this competition. Another founder member, Tan Wei Qiang, was also a prize winner of a national literary contest.

As the first Christian in his family, he often shared the Gospel with his family members and faced little resistance from them. According to him, this was partly because his parents did not observe the traditions rigidly and also because he paid his filial respect to his parents by sending one third of his monthly stipend to them while he was under training. His parents converted to Christianity in 1965.

The magazines available then were *chen guang bao* (晨光报) and *sheng jing bao* (圣经报) from Hong Kong, *kan na* (看哪) from Singapore, *The Christian Tribune* (基督教论坛报) from Taiwan and *bei ma chen guang* (北马晨光), a local publication published by a Christian living in Alor Star.

For instance, the Christian scholar Moses Hsu offered a Christian Literature course in Tunghai University in Taiwan and Yang Bai He said he was inspired by Zhang Xiao Feng's article on writing Christian literature published in *The Christian Tribune*. 
Huang Zi helped to edit The Bridge after Yang’s departure as its chief editor and later became its first Executive Secretary in 1988, when it was incorporated as a company. He was born in 1956 in a Chinese New Village in the southern state of Johore where his family ran a small laundry business and attended local Chinese schools in the nearby town of Segamat. Unable to gain university admission on account of his poor command of Malay, he joined the construction industry in the neighbouring town of Simpang Renggang but had to move to Kuala Lumpur in 1985 when the construction industry was affected by a sharp recession. Prior to joining The Bridge as a fulltime staff member, he worked as a marketing manager of a local firm.

Huang Zi converted to Christianity in secondary school44 and joined the Methodist Church in Segamat. With the encouragement of a former schoolteacher who was also a church member, he sent his essays to the local newspapers, to local and foreign Chinese literary magazines,45 as well as to the three Methodist district magazines active in the 1970s. Through the denominational, as well as the local Chinese literary networks, he met the older Yang, who invited him to the 1977 meeting. When he moved to Simpang Renggang, he joined the Presbyterian Church and met Christian student intellectuals such as Chin Ken Pa.

Figures such as Yang Bai He and Huang Zi belong to the younger generation of Chinese Christian youth formed by the nation-state. They were fully integrated into the life of local Chinese society as lay professionals—Yang Bai He was a teacher, Huang Zi was in business and Wen Cai was an accountant. As such, they had few ties then to overseas church professionals. The seminal literary camp of 1977 was characterised by Huang Zi, in retrospect, as “a gift from God who sent his servants from Hong Kong and Taiwan to Malaysia” (Huang Z., 2010). These ties to Hong Kong and Taiwan were made available by the first generation of Chinese Christian leaders in the country, to whom we now turn.

**Church Professionals with Transnational Networks**

There were several persons who played an important role in networking the local young writers and linking the local Chinese Christians to the overseas Chinese Christian networks. Among these were David Hock Tey (郑国治),

44 As Huang Zi’s mother had been converted by a Christian missionary in the New Village in the 1950s, but continued practicing Chinese religion, Huang Zi’s later conversion met with no resistance from the family. His father died in his childhood.

45 His work was published in the local literary magazine jiao feng (蕉风), as well as the Hong Kong literary magazine for contemporary arts and literature, dang dai wen yi (当代文艺), which was a well-known magazine circulated in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia.
Wayne Siao (萧维元) and Peter Foong Siew Kong (冯彼得), all of whom were members of the executive committee of The Bridge during its inception. They belonged to an older generation of Chinese Christians, many of whom were born in Mainland China and were full-time church professionals.

Wayne Siao was born in China. Siao received his higher education in Hong Kong and became the first local principal of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Penang. Peter Foong was born into a Christian family in Ipoh and was the first local bishop of LCMS (1977–1985), after obtaining theological training at the Lutheran Bible Institute in Petaling Jaya and a Masters at Trinity College in Singapore. David Hock Tey was born in 1939 in Malaysia but graduated from Zhong Xin University in Taiwan. He then went to the U.S. for his M.A. and Ph.D. He was the founder-president of the Malaysian Campus Crusade for Christ from 1968 to 1986, and is actively involved in various international Chinese Christian ministries.

Another key actor was Ng Yoot Ching (黄一琴), who was born in China and received his theological education there. He had left for Malaya after 1949, taking up a position as principal of a Chinese High School in Terengganu. He subsequently served as a pastor in a Presbyterian church of Penang before joining CCCOWE in 1975. When the CCLC planned to hold its 90th anniversary meeting in Malaysia, he helped in setting up the workshop, passing on the organisational implementation of the camp to Huang Zi (The Bridge, 2003).

Other names worth mentioning are Li Qian Jun (李前军) and Gideon Chang (张景洲), both of whom were closely associated with the CCCOWE and the founding of the Malaysian Bible Seminary in Klang. Chang was the bishop of LCMS; Li a Methodist pastor who once held the chief editor post of The Southern Bell (南钟报), a magazine published by the (Methodist) Chinese Annual Conference (CAC) in Peninsular Malaysia.

This first generation of Chinese Christians leaders who replaced the foreign missionaries were recruited throughout East Asia, and trained in the seminary schools set up by the missionary denominational institutions throughout the region. Groomed within denominational church structures, this generation could also avail itself of the opportunities made available by the global reach of such Western denominations and their post-war ecumenical agenda, including that of funding and travel. Establishing close interpersonal relations within the nation and the region, this first post-war generation of Chinese Christian leaders, though still caught within the denominational divide, were united by

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46 The head of Asian branch of China Gospel Working Committee (中國大陸福音工作委員會的亞洲主任)
the shared culture and a passionate evangelical concern not shared by the ecumenical movement. What was urgent to them was not the orthodoxy of theology or ritual, but the closing of the door in China toward the Christian gospel, and the “souls of the overseas Chinese” (Chang, 2010). In pursuit of this concern, they constructed the global Chinese Christian network covering diasporic Chinese Christians in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and the U.S., and intertwined it with local churches and projects in their own countries. The trans-denominational character of The Bridge was then more easily realised by a younger generation of lay Christian activists who were members of different church congregations of different denominations and were not bound to the denominational divides by professional loyalty.

**Conclusion**

Recent work on global Christianity has drawn attention to the momentous shift of the Christian faith from its centuries-old heartland in the Western hemisphere to societies in the global South (Jenkins, 2002). Much of the current literature on contemporary Christianity, however, has focused on the dramatic growth of Pentecostal Charismatic churches (PCC), often of the megachurch prosperity gospel variant in Africa, Latin America and Asia (Meyer, 2004; Martin, 2002; Robbins, 2004). The literature on contemporary Christianity in Malaysia has been no exception (Ackerman, 1984; Ackerman and Lee, 1988; Goh, 2010). This literature frames Christianity in the global South, in its high-profile manifestation as Pentecostalism, as a “preeminently global religion” (Meyer, 1998) oriented toward global Christian networks, or “transnational circuits, in particular to American tele-evangelists” (Meyer, 2004).

In recounting the history of the Chinese vernacular migrant (mainline) church in Malaysia, and tracing the national concerns and transnational connections of The Bridge, a platform through which public intellectuals of the Chinese church were able to engage with the larger Chinese and national society, this paper calls into question an account of Malaysian Christianity based exclusively on the missions-derived English-speaking churches and their contemporary transnational, U.S.-centred networks. Similarly, it calls into question the narrative of a “southern” Christianity constituted solely by recently emergent “globally networked” PCC churches (operating largely in Western languages).

The recent work on Chinese Christianity has highlighted its close links to local Chinese society—its spread by Chinese evangelists, especially through family and lineage networks, its territorial localisation, and its retention of a
strong Chinese cultural identity (Lutz, 2001; Lee, 2009; Dunch, 2001; Constable, 1994). Chinese Christians in the postcolonial state of Malaysia continued to be anchored within the wider Chinese cultural and social world. This social location within a larger Chinese society holds in particular for new individual converts, such as the local Christians associated with The Bridge. Yang Bai He and Huang Zi converted in their youth. Unlike the urban, middle-class and English-speaking members of the established English churches, they came from Chinese working-class families that still practiced Chinese folk religion and worshipped ancestors. Their everyday lives were deeply rooted in Chinese society, as they went to Chinese schools, celebrated major Chinese festivals at home, and worked and socialised in a Chinese-speaking milieu. This was true too for the earlier generation of Malaysian Chinese Christian leadership, many of whom were born in China.

Given the long history of anti-Christian sentiment in China (Cohen, 1961), conversion to a religion decried as foreign and inimical to Chinese culture and society generated a deep sense of displacement and anxiety over being rejected by the local Chinese society in which they remained socially, economically and culturally embedded. This had a profound impact on their sense of personal identity and mission. The observation made by Ackerman and Lee (1988: 62–66) that the key concern of the Malaysian church has been that of losing Christian prestige with the passing of the colonial era and the accelerated Islamisation in the post-independence era, would certainly not hold for these Chinese Christians. Steeped in the Chinese language, they continued to see themselves as Christian, but also as Chinese, intellectuals. A concern with personal authenticity, and societal engagement with the wider Chinese society, has always been the main concern of these Chinese intellectuals. Religion had to go public—to the Chinese public—to gain recognition for the cultural legitimacy of the faith they practiced. The Christian culture they helped to form, through the institutions they established such as The Bridge, has thus attempted to articulate a public Christian presence in local society and to articulate Christianity primarily in relation to local concerns.

This did not mean an encapsulation in the local. From the very beginning, migrant churches had been linked to their “mother” church and community by trans-local “corridor” (Kuhn, 2008) ties. When the corridor was closed in 1949, it was replaced by a much more broadly-based, territorially dispersed, multi-sited network delimited by the language of the cultural products circulated, namely Chinese. It was from this transnational Chinese Christian network that local Christians tapped the cultural capital and resources with which they articulated their local concerns. At the same time, the active engagement in, and circulation of personnel within, this transnational network contributed to a
flow of ideas and cultural products from the larger Chinese world to what began as, and have often remained, highly parochial local churches.

Global flows, it would appear, do not travel seamlessly through a homogeneous space of non-resistance, ending invariably where they begin, at a metropolitan centre. They are path-dependent, generating diverse forms and multiple circuits of more or less intersecting transnational networks, defining overlapping zones of transnational spaces. It is within such zones of historically and culturally constituted affinities that the circulation of people and of cultural products tends to be at their most dense. The story of The Bridge and the history of vernacular Chinese Christianity in Malaysia recounted here points to the importance of paying closer attention to such path dependencies in the way religion travels.

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