Eugenio Menegon

Local Religion in the Early Modern Period

Chinese Christianity as a Case Study

1.   Introduction

The notion of "local religion" as an academic concept in English applied to the early modern period found one of its earliest and most articulate expressions in William Christian's 1981 book *Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain*, a notion later condensed and systematized in Christian's 1987 entry on "Folk Religion" in Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Despite this terminological variation, the entry could well have been entitled "Local Religion."[1] In his study on early modern Spain, Christian drew on his own sociological and anthropological research in the Iberian countryside (Cantabria) during the late 1960s and early 1970s, but his thinking was also nourished by contemporary anthropological and historical scholarship.[2] He found that it was often in the countryside that traditional religious ideas and practices from the medieval and early modern periods survived the longest. As he wrote in *Local Religion*'s introductory chapter:

> In the villages, towns, and cities of Central Spain (and, I suspect, in most other nuclear settlements of Catholic Europe) there were two levels of Catholicism—that of the Church Universal, based on the sacraments, the Roman liturgy, and the Roman calendar; and a local one based on particular sacred places, images, and relics, locally chosen patron saints, idiosyncratic ceremonies, and a unique calendar built up from the settlement's own sacred history.[3]

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1   Christian, *Local Religion*; Christian, "Folk Religion", p. 371–373; and reprinted with minor changes in Jones, Eliade, Adams, Kitagawa, Marty, McBrien, Needleman, Schimmel, Seltzer, and Turner, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 3150–3153. Cf. Green, "Local Religion", p. 713–715.

2   See William Christian's first book detailing his anthropological fieldwork in 1968–1969, *Person and God in a Spanish Valley*. A reflection on p. 91 illustrates the debt he owed as a historian in later years to his early anthropological experience: "My subsequent work elsewhere in Spain took me back in history to understand a similar level of religiosity from documents. My knowledge of the present in this valley provided questions for the past in other places. I can still feel the thrill of recognition I had when I first read the *relaciones topograficas* of Philip II. It seems to me that the work of historians is unnecessarily impoverished when they are unaware that their living contemporaries still do things similar to what they describe in past societies."

3   Christian, *Local Religion*, p. 3.

This view does not apply to Catholicism alone. As Christian wrote in his 1987 encyclopedia overview, "folk" religion is in fact nothing but "local" rural religion, a form of "peasant religiosity" within Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Daoism or other religions across the globe, a religiosity that provided and often continues to provide people with "ways to deal with the local natural and social world, as well as the wider social, economic, and political network of which they are part."[4] As he pointedly observed, the *local context* of this "peasant" religious practice is crucial to understanding its full significance, which could otherwise seem universal. Moreover, the concept is socially and spatially supple (especially in reference to premodern times): local religious practices and ideas were shared by peasants and city dwellers and by all classes, and could even extend to broad intersocietal or international exchange systems, while remaining locally rooted.[5]

The criteria that helped define local religion, as proposed by Christian, were thrashed out in debates among historians, anthropologists, and religious studies specialists in the 1970s and 1980s. This was, in part, a facet of the discussions on the nature of popular culture in early modern and modern times. The French *Annales* school and the generation of mostly British Marxist scholars who began publishing in the early 1960s made the study of European popular culture a new tool for historical understanding, contributing to the explosion of cultural history. These scholars saw the history made by the nobility, the church, and the bourgeoisie as a stunted, one-sided story. Reconstructing the mentality of the "subaltern classes" (E.P. Thompson's so-called "History from Below") became a priority: peasants, artisans, itinerant merchants, healers, vagabonds, bards, actors, occult specialists, and other wanderers left traces of their existence in a whole range of sources that escaped the usual cataloguing. This required the historian to have a new open-mindedness and to use methods belonging to other disciplines, such as anthropology, ethnography, art history, and more.[6]

In 1978, Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* summarized a wide variety of previous scholarship and offered an overview of what he called the "common stock" of European popular culture. In a chapter entitled "Traditional Forms," Burke wrote:

> The approach adopted in this chapter will be *morphological*. Its purpose is to describe the principal varieties of artefact and performance in European popular culture, and the *formal conventions* of each. It is concerned with the *code* rather than the messages (a cultural code which has to be mastered before the meaning of individual messages can be deciphered). It attempts to provide a brief inventory of the *stock* or *repertoire* of the forms and conventions of

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4 Christian, "Folk Religion", p. 371.

5 Ibid.

6 Palmer Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

popular culture […]. In any one region this stock or repertoire was fairly limited. Its riches and variety are apparent only when the inventory is extended to the whole of Europe; when this is done, the variety is so bewildering as almost to hide the recurrence of a few basic types of artefact and performance. They are never quite the same in any two regions, but they are not all that different either: unique combinations of recurrent elements, local variations on European themes.[7]

The section of Burke's book cited here was entitled "Structures of Popular Culture," and indeed its language is markedly structuralist, including concepts such as morphology, formal conventions, code, stock, repertoire, types, recurrent elements, and—the most revealing of all—"local variations on European themes." This was a historian's rephrasing of the fundamental debate on unity and diversity in culture that has been at the core of anthropological discussions for a long time. Christian, the anthropologist-turned-historian, embraced the unique context of each place, while recognising larger collective connections at the national and international level. Burke, a more traditional historian, tried to bring order to what he saw as a bewildering variety of local diversity by discovering broader patterns or codes.

In the 1980s and 1990s, historians working on extra-European cultures explored similar themes and adopted similar analytical grids within the debate on cultural unity and diversity in their probing of the peculiar conditions of each case study and culture. It would be impossible to offer an exhaustive survey here (my bibliography includes a selection of studies organised by region). Rather, I will use examples from my own field of expertise, Chinese studies, and show its responses, starting in the mid-1980s, to larger discussions on the nature of popular culture and religion, and ultimately on "local religion."

In 1987, a group of anthropologically trained China scholars, following the lead of early modern Europeanists, began to use the concept of cultural hegemony outlined by Antonio Gramsci in the 1930s to analyze late imperial Chinese society, specifically to assess the relationship between elites and "subordinate classes." Aiming "to examine the operation of folk ideologies in the continuous creation and recreation of Chinese culture; and to expand the theoretical reach of the concepts of hegemony and ideology, which have thus far not been much tested in the literature on China," they observed how

officials consciously manipulate popular ritual, enforce the performance of state-mandated ceremonies, set forth orthodoxy on magical healing and filiality, point up (through police control) the relative social status of occupational groups, and shape families through business

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7 Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, p. 91. Italics mine.

regulation. The populace, in response, recasts its rituals, layers new meanings over the symbolism of the state cult, enacts alternative social hierarchies, and ironically resists state economic meddling through withdrawal into state-sanctioned kin solidarity.[8]

These hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes were particularly effective during China's late imperial period (1500–1911). The approach of these scholars can be effectively summarized as a critique of the concept of hegemony, considered as a form of "passive" or "automatic" domination, and with a certain emphasis on the active role of the state and various social classes in dominating or resisting domination. They identified a set of popular beliefs that the central state, in its attempts to reshape local societies, failed to penetrate. The reference was specifically regarding insurgent movements, such as the millenarian White Lotus tradition, partly inspired by Buddhism, or the nineteenth-century Taiping (Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace), rooted in Christianity. These scholars highlighted the complexity of the process of hegemony and resistance, and its localized variations:

> even the strongest cases for a dominant hegemony do not assume its dominance, but try to show how such ideas become convincing in daily life; and even the strongest cases for alternative ideologies and resistance look to the conversation of such resistance with the ruling discourse. Chinese hegemony consists of more than just the elite statements that are most easily available to us; it consists as well of the complex interrelationships of all groups in the society, and it becomes broadly powerful only when it is part of people's daily lives.[9]

In the mid-1980s, a less "dialectical" stance between China's elites and popular strata was offered by historian David Johnson in the landmark volume *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*. Johnson attempted to account for unity and diversity within Chinese popular culture through a theoretical framework once again based on Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and "structures of domination," this time filtered through the writings of British Marxist historians such as Raymond Williams, Edward P. Thompson and others, but without adhering to their Marxian agenda.[10] In Gramsci, popular religion was one of the keys with which to interpret popular culture, and for Johnson it played an important role too. While drawing a dividing line between elites and subaltern classes somewhat deeper than proposed by Burke for Europe, and rejecting the idea of "bi-cultural and bi-lingual" educated men who were concurrently part of both educated and popular culture, Johnson recognised a degree of ideological homogeneity provided by neo-Confucianism that was common to all classes. Different degrees of education,

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8 Gates and Weller, "Hegemony and Chinese Folk Ideologies", p. 6.
9 Ibid., p. 16.
10 Johnson, "Chap. 2. Communication, Class, and Consciousness", p. 34–72.

economic positions, and roles in the "value communication" system of late imperial China formed the hierarchy of China's social groups. In the essays of *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, the subversive potential of popular culture was downplayed and the unifying power of state-endorsed ideologies was highlighted. The emphasis on the effectiveness of the Chinese élite's "structure of domination," which found its strength in the "hegemonic weapons" of written culture and in the laws of ritual, could indeed lead to a downplaying of the autonomy of popular culture.

As mentioned, religion played a central role in popular culture. Unlike institutional religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism), however, localized cults did not have a clergy, a defined pantheon, canonical sacred texts, or precise ritual rules. Despite this, local religiosity was not limited to the poorer and unlettered classes. In fact, local religious beliefs could more accurately be defined as an integral part of a common Chinese cultural background from remote antiquity (ancestor worship, cults of local divinities) that was transversally present in all social groups and expressed in many local forms. This was the case, despite the traditional conception that long divided Chinese religious practices and ideas between "high" and "low" traditions, influenced by the ancient Confucian categorization of elite and popular rituals as first systematized by the political philosopher Xunzi (298–238 BCE).

Partly based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, specialists today seem to have reached a consensus that "popular religion" as an "entity" does not exist; it must be hypothesized as an "activity" and studied in *local* contexts. People's daily lives are always localized, and studies on national-level ideologies in comparative perspective across the Chinese empire have increasingly been enriched and nuanced through research on local cases, with a more intensive and refined use of local primary sources within what historian Peter Bol has dubbed the "localist turn" in Chinese middle and late imperial history (tenth to nineteenth centuries). This turn was reflected in the production by Chinese intellectuals and religious specialists of locally-focused geographic gazetteers, literary collections, temple records, and religious scriptures, and expressed "changes in the ways literati conceptualized the locality," fuelling a powerful discourse of local identity from the late fifteenth century to the twentieth century.[11] This elite discourse was never removed from a sense of local belonging pervading society at large, which was communicated through long-standing oral traditions. Religious rituals were among the most powerful expressions of localism, a fact that is borne out by the veritable explosion in Chinese local religious history in recent years.[12]

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11 Bol, "The 'Localist Turn' and 'Local Identity'", p. 1–50.

12 For overviews of recent religious historical scholarship in China, see the following two landmark volumes: Lagerwey and Marsone, *Modern Chinese Religion I*; Kiely, Goossaert, and Lagerwey, *Modern Chinese Religion II*. Specifically on local religion, cf. DuBois, "Local Religion and Festivals", p. 372: "the geography of everyday life for most Chinese peasants has historically been a very small, but also very intimate world of walkable villages and markets. Local society developed not only its own variations on general customs

Most of this research has focused on the post-Song period (thirteenth century onward), since during that dynasty a profound change in religious activities seems to have taken place, spurred by state interference in popular cults, the emergence of a socially diverse urban population, and the dissemination of printed texts. Until at least the 1100s, the voices we persistently hear in the sources are those of the Confucian elite and the Buddhist and Daoist clergy. But during the Southern Song dynasty, the components commonly associated with the concept of local or folk religion coalesced to reformulate an autonomous tradition. The Song state favoured the canonisation of local deities, and a new type of religious specialist, unaffiliated with the Buddhist or Daoist clergy, made its appearance. This local religion also found favour among Confucian literati, despite persecution, since segments of the elite sincerely shared beliefs in spirits, divination, and many practices associated with local folk religion.

Fortunately, sources useful for the reconstruction of local religion and culture in late imperial times (sixteenth to twentieth century) abound as a consequence of the Song printing revolution and of modern fieldwork. Evelyn Rawski has identified a number of these sources: research campaigns carried out by ethnographers, anthropologists and sociologists on Chinese society, particularly before the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949; oral histories collected by foreign and Chinese scholars; government documents in the Ming–Qing archives in Taiwan and Beijing; collections of documents from intermediate and peripheral government bodies, preserved in local archives and libraries; essays in *biji* 筆記 (jottings) collections, written by literati and containing information on local customs; local gazetteers (*difangzhi* 地方誌); collections of dialect literature, ritual works and regional theater, folk poetry and proverbs (*chengyu* 成語); inscriptions on stelae; sectarian scriptures (*baojuan* 寶卷 or "precious scrolls"); almanacs and divinatory material, technical manuals, encyclopedias, moral treatises, travel guides, contracts; iconographic materials (paintings, prints, talismans, etc.) and architectural studies revealing new aspects of past material culture (housing, town planning, etc.); studies of eating habits; and more.[13]

2. Christianity in China as Local Religion

Christianity is today increasingly seen as part of the religious history of China, though scholars of Buddhism, Daoist, Confucianism, and other native traditions have long looked askance at it, as at Islam, as a foreign and even imperialist teaching. In fact, Buddhism was also a foreign religion in China, but the process of "sinicization" has

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and traditions, but also an affective sense of community. Either alone or in conjunction with surrounding communities, villages create their own religious culture, formulating unique traditions, prayers, and rituals."

13 Rawski, "Problems and Prospects", p. 416–417.

had simply more time to transform it into a Chinese religion. In my 2009 monograph *Ancestors, Virgins and Friars: Christianity as a Local Religion in Late Imperial China*, I have hopefully helped put to rest the idea that Christianity is an extraneous object in Chinese history.[14] Some of the very same sources mentioned above, useful for reconstructing the world of China's local religion, can also be used to uncover the story of Chinese Christianity.

This new, more open attitude is part of a broader scholarly shift. Over the last thirty years, scholars have increasingly focused their attention on the social and ritual life of Christian communities across the globe, beyond early modern Europe, using the concept of "local religion." William Taylor, for example, adopted this concept when describing the kind of Christianity found in eighteenth-century Mexican parishes, offering a summary of the state of scholarship on the topic up to the mid-1990s.[15] Many others have followed suit (see the bibliography). As for China, the historiography of the Catholic mission has traditionally revolved around the impact of Christianity and "Western knowledge" brought by the missionaries (religion, sciences, arts, technology) upon literati and court circles in late imperial China. In the last two decades, however, this research paradigm has been both refined and broadened to a great extent. Despite an earlier, long-standing tradition which gave almost exclusive attention to Western sources and the deeds of foreign missionaries, new scholarship has endeavored to contextualize the scientific and artistic accomplishments of the Jesuits in China by studying works written in Chinese by missionaries, converts, and opponents, as well as the social circumstances of scientific interactions at the center and the periphery of the empire. The Western and Chinese scholarship presented in the *Handbook of Christianity in China* (2001) edited by Nicolas Standaert and Adrian Dudink, as well as the bird-eye view of the "Jesuit phase" of Chinese science in Benjamin Elman's *On their Own Terms* (2005), both reflect this shift, which continues unabated.[16]

Much of this scholarship on the interaction of Christianity with Chinese thought, religion, society and institutions in the Ming and Qing periods has been influenced by a paramount preoccupation with the internal transformation of Christianity under pressure from what Erik Zürcher called the "cultural imperative" of Confucian orthodoxy. Zürcher famously wrote that "no marginal religion penetrating from the outside could expect to take root in China (at least at the *social* level) unless it conformed to [the Confucian] pattern that in late imperial times was more clearly defined than ever. Confucianism represented what is *zheng* 正 'orthodox' in a religious, ritual, social and political sense."[17] In other words, as Liu Kwang-ching also observed, religions could

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14 Menegon, *Ancestors, Virgins, and Friars*.

15 "Issues of Local Religion" in Taylor, *Magistrates of the Sacred,* p. 47–73.

16 Standaert, *Handbook*; Elman, *On Their Own Terms*.

17 Zürcher, "Jesuit Accommodation", p. 41; for his view of orthodoxy, see Zürcher, "A Complement to Confucianism", p. 71–92; Standaert, *Handbook*, p. 639–640.

peacefully coexist with the established social order in China only if they conformed to the "moral orthodoxy" of Confucianism, embodied in the rituals (*lijiao* 禮教) of the imperial institutions and the kinship system. This coexistence represented a balance of "religious pluralism and moral orthodoxy." Liu specified that "orthodoxy," as a socio-ethical system of belief, encompassed both elite and popular milieus and was based on the "Three Bonds" (i.e. the subordination of the subject to the monarch, child to parents, and wife to husband), a triad that supported state institutions and the patriarchal organisation of kinship. Ancestral rituals were the central institution of orthodox socio-ethics in the kinship system, and one of the universal elements in the life of most Chinese. Even popular cults were co-opted to buttress the values of this official orthodoxy.[18]

The corollary to this vision is that Christianity could take root in China only by becoming "Confucianized" and by engaging the Confucian elites. According to this view, it was imperative for missionaries and Christians to attempt to reconcile with Confucian ideological and social dictates whenever Christian tenets were at odds with them. This was indeed reflected in the strategy of early Jesuit missionaries and their converts. In responding to the accusations of heterodoxy levied by élites and the Chinese state against Christianity for its non-canonical scriptures, its advocacy of a celibate priesthood, and so on, early missionaries and converts embraced the main tenets of the moral system of Confucianism and validated the political order of China. Through this move, they could proclaim the orthodoxy of Christianity and contrast themselves with the other religious traditions of China, considered heterodox by a portion of the educated. Behind this effort was also the hope that slowly Christianity could change those elements of the Confucian worldview that were deemed incompatible with Christian theology and moral practice.

What Christianity became in the late Ming, however, did not necessarily conform to the plans of the missionaries. Zürcher himself, who concentrated on the mission of the Italian Jesuit Giulio Aleni (1582–1649) in the southern province of Fujian, came to the conclusion that the late Ming Chinese converts "created a marginal religion of a very characteristic type that has to be studied by itself, as an *Indigenous religious movement* that may be called 'Confucian monotheism.'"[19] Eschewing a direct presentation of the figure of Christ, which the missionaries themselves had not emphasized in their catechisms, many Christian literati conceived of Christianity as an alternative spiritual

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18 See Kwang-ching, ed., *Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China*, passim. These ideas, and the meaning of heterodoxy, were most systematically explored in Yang's classic *Religion in Chinese Society*, p. 192–217. Cf. also Dudink in Standaert, *Handbook*, p. 504–505, for a summary of discussion of Confucian orthodoxy and its relationship to Christianity as heterodoxy.

19 Zürcher, "Jesuit Accommodation," p. 33. Italics mine.

system supplementing deficient aspects of Neo-Confucianism.[20] Nicolas Standaert also argued from a different angle that, although the foreign element did not completely disappear in the eyes of the Chinese, the "Teachings of the Lord of Heaven," as Catholicism is called in Chinese, became a "syncretic" Chinese religion. Standaert maintained that converts elaborated complex Confucian-Christian theological explanations for their new faith, trying to harmonise Catholic dogma and Neo-Confucian ideas. They learned the doctrine in Chinese translation and brought their own cultural baggage to the process of interpretation. Some of them then created new ideas that failed to faithfully conform to Catholic orthodoxy. Standaert called this doctrine "a new Christian orthodoxy," a system following internal principles of coherence based on a highly selective process of "inculturation."[21]

The scholarship discussed above has addressed the transformation of Christianity into a Chinese religious movement among the mobile, higher echelons of literati converts. However, by concentrating on this "Confucian Christianity" and its textual tradition, past scholars viewed the matter mainly from a doctrinal point of view, and across the empire. This focus limited most research to a small number of prominent scholarly converts, especially in the late Ming, and resulted in the neglect of lower social strata and the world of "practiced religion" (ritual and devotion) in which they *locally* lived. At the level of commoners and lower gentry in the different locales of China, the "Confucian monotheism" of prominent literati converts did not occupy the place of honour. Zürcher himself, in fact, acknowledged that "Christianity was not just an intellectual construct but a living minority religion, a complex of beliefs, rituals, prayer, magic, icons, private piety, and communal celebration. In that whole sphere of religious practice Christianity was by no means a semi-Confucian hybrid; in fact, it came much closer to devotional Buddhism than to Confucianism."[22] Using records produced in

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20 See Erik Zürcher, "Confucian and Christian Religiosity", p. 614–653. This view was also shared by Mungello, *The Forgotten Christians of Hangzhou*, who, as an intellectual historian, showed less interest in sociological and ritual dimensions. Such emphasis on intellectual history led Mungello to emphasize the "Confucianisation" of Christianity in the thought and writings of Christian literati (a point well-taken), while he underestimated the fact that even converted literati adhered to a rather orthodox Catholic position in matters of ritual and devotion; see Dudink, "Review", p. 196–213. On the presentation of Christ (Christology) by the late-Ming Jesuits Ricci and Aleni, see Criveller, *Preaching Christ in Late Ming China*. Although missionaries did present the image of the crucifixion and the life of Christ in their catechetical works, Chinese literati converts in their own writings did not emphasize the figure of Jesus Christ, but rather that of the "Lord of Heaven," corresponding more to an image of "God as king."

21 Standaert, *Yang Tingyun, Confucian and Christian*, p. 223. Inculturation is a Catholic theological term that indicates the "reshaping" of a new message (usually religious) in terms of the receiving culture.

22 Quotation from Zürcher, "Confucian and Christian Religiosity" p. 650. See discussions on "levels of response" in Erik Zürcher, "The Jesuit Mission in Fujian in Late Ming Times: Levels of Response", in Vermeer, *Development and Decline* and Standaert, *Handbook*, p. 634–636; on social stratification of converts, see Standaert, *Handbook*, p. 386–391.

late Ming Fujian, Zürcher offered a "model" of Christian life more integrated into the local social and religious landscape. While he saw some Christian rituals and religious practices as typically Christian, others were "cross-cultural hybrids," in the sense that they shared both Christian and Chinese Indigenous roots. He, for example, researched a rare collection of Christian miracle stories (*A Mirror to Encourage Self-Cultivation*, *Lixiu yijian* 勵修一鑑), identifying the concerns that loomed prominently in the religious experience of Fujianese converts: exorcism of evil powers, cases of miraculous healing, supernatural rescue from worldly disasters, strange qualities of auspicious objects, supernatural revelation of texts, and revival from temporary death.[23] Many of these concerns and phenomena were common in Chinese folk religion and are still. Moreover, preoccupations with personal salvation and the afterlife, although based on different ontological and theological models, were shared by Christians and lay Buddhist practitioners. These characteristics of "popular Christianity" led Zürcher to qualify it as "an indigenous complex of beliefs and practices that was only marginally controlled by the foreign missionaries, and that by its amalgamation with popular 'heterodox' cults and rituals easily could become the target of suspicion and repression [by the government]."[24] Zürcher also pointed out that "the modern reader is tempted to view [Christian] beliefs and practices [dealing with the supernatural] as characteristic of popular, non-elite Christianity, but that would be quite wrong. Also on the level of Christian literati, the supernatural and the miraculous were fully accepted."[25] If to this we add that the missionaries themselves shared with most Chinese literati and commoners many of the same presumptions about the supernatural world, then we will come to the conclusion that no clear-cut boundary between popular and elite religiosity can be sharply drawn, a conundrum that has been at the core of much discussion in the study of religion for decades.[26]

After having devoted most of their energy from the 1980s to the mid-2000s to reconstructing the doctrinal and theological creations of Chinese Christian literati ("Confucian monotheism" or "*Tianzhu*-ism," in Zürcher's words), researchers started to pay more attention to the ritual and devotional side of Christianity, and the daily life of the Christian communities, which comprised the vast majority of converts at any time. The examination of the social, ritual, and spiritual dimensions of "Chinese-Christian life" has today become one of the most interesting subfields within the study of Christianity

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23 Zürcher, "The Lord of Heaven and the Demons", p. 359–375; cf. also Boin, "When the Twain Met", p. 58–76; Standaert, "Chinese Christian Visits", p. 54–70.

24 Zürcher, "The Lord of Heaven and the Demons", p. 373.

25 Zürcher "Confucian and Christian Religiosity", p. 643.

26 The use of "popular" applied to religion has been a contentious issue, both in the study of pre-modern Europe and China. I have summarized the debate in Menegon, "Le fonti per la storia della cultura popolare nella Cina tardo-imperiale" and Menegon, "Popular or Local", p. 247–307; see also Teiser's chapter "The Problem of Popular Religion" in his Introduction to Lopez, *Religions of China in Practice*, p. 21–25.

in China. Such examination borrows methodological and theoretical frameworks from the larger field of the study of Chinese local religions, particularly those traditions that were seen as heterodox by the Chinese state. The most innovative research on local Christianity shows that rituals, devotions, and beliefs in the same set of supernatural realities were shared by Chinese converts in different social groups who belonged to the same Christian community (*christianitas*).[27] By looking at practices and beliefs in terms of "local community," we shift attention away from the broad elite/popular dichotomy and focus instead on locality. This interpretive move addresses an important characteristic of Christianity in China, namely, its embedment in kinship and place. Christianity had obviously a regional, empire-wide and global reach, as well as a stock of symbols proper to its own tradition, but in the Chinese countryside the survival of Christian practices and beliefs was guaranteed by kinship networks at the local level, rather than by looser supra-regional networks. The Christian communities of China did connect in a larger "cultural and symbolic system," competing with, but also accommodating, existing Chinese cultural systems; yet at the basic level they found strength in localized kinship ties, even during periods of official suppression. Thus, the ultimate "glue" in many Christian communities was the family.[28]

Yet, when thinking "local" we must resist the temptation to generalize: each region of China produced different forms of Christian communities (some more cohesive than others) that reflected local social arrangements. Precisely because Christian communities experienced a diverse range of historical developments linked to their local contexts, in my own research I have employed the idea of "local religion" to describe the historical process through which peculiarly Christian *practices* (e. g., rituals, prayers, or uses of religious symbols) and *values* (e. g., perpetual virginity, celibacy, anti-idolatric attitudes) imported by foreign missionaries became part of the daily religious and social experience of Chinese Christians living in specific places during the Ming and Qing periods. Local Christianity in turn describes a community of people performing Christian rituals and adhering to some rules of conduct influenced by Christian values in a local context, rather than a reified religious system.[29] This focus on the locale does

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27 The Latin concept of *christianitas* indicates a group of people sharing the same Christian faith. It also indicates the physical locales with a church or missionary residence; see Standaert, *Handbook*, pp. 536–537.

28 On regional cultural and symbolic systems in China, see Seiwert and Xisha, *Popular Religious Movements*.

29 There is a vast literature on what in Chinese has been often termed *bentuhua* 本土化, translated as "indigenisation" [of Christianity]. Most of this literature stems from theological debates among Protestant scholars in China and the West. Recently, the terms "globalization" (*quanqiuhua* 全球化), "localization" (*difanghua* 地方化) and "glocalization" (*quanqiu-difanghua* 全球地方化) have been employed to describe the contemporary articulation and opposition between global capitalism and cultural messages, on the one hand, and the local dimension, on the other hand. Lozada 2001 has applied the concept of localization to a contemporary Catholic community in Guangdong. For an overview of the literature on globalization/localization and its implications for Christian-Chinese theology and the history of Christian theology in China, see Pan, "Jiaoli jiangshou zhi quanqiudifanghua: cong 'Wanwu zhenyuan' yu 'Sanshan lunxue ji'

not entail an erasure of social stratification in the community. However, it counters the tendency to privilege elite arenas (sojourning officials, higher-degree holders, the imperial court) over local actors, including not only lower social strata (commoners), but also the lower fringes of the local elites. Such an approach also highlights the singular historical experience of each locale.[30]

Zürcher's revised definition of Christianity at the level of the lower gentry and of commoners appropriately describes the social gamut of a local *christianitas*: "a minority religion practiced in small communities of largely illiterate or semi-literate believers."[31] Literacy is, to a certain extent, the discriminating factor, and it closely follows social stratification. Most members of the Christian communities were illiterate or had a minimal knowledge of characters. They were farmers (of varying degrees of prosperity), small businessmen, and artisans, together with their family members, including a large percentage of women.[32] The label of illiterate obviously cannot be applied to the lay leaders of the communities (mainly men), who were sometimes holders of gentry lower degrees in the imperial examination system, and who lived off inherited land, found occupation as schoolmasters or local government clerks, or engaged in small businesses. Moreover, a select number of women belonged to the same lower-gentry milieu of community leaders, and they may have had rudimentary literacy, such as the ability to read and recite texts. Nevertheless, the social position of these people at the lower fringes of the *local* elite and their conventional mental outlook did not separate them dramatically from the rest of the community. This social picture of the Christian community is better drawn in terms of localization than in terms of a "popular-vs.-elite" dichotomy.

Chronological "local histories" of Christianity in China (including the early modern period) have been written since the beginning of the twentieth century.[33] However, while the chronicles by missiologists or missionaries in generations past have, with rare exceptions, concentrated on the ecclesiastical structure of the missions, more recent works have tried to focus on the religious and social life of the Christians themselves,

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yu 'Shensi lu' tan dangdai jiaoli jiangshou de chujinghua wenti 教理講授之全球地方化: 從《萬物真原》《三山論學紀》與《慎思錄》談當代教理講授的處境化問題 - Chinese lay Catholics and the Catholic movement: Speaking about the inculturation problems of catechesis from 'Wanwu zhenyuan', 'Sanshan lunxue ji' and 'Shensi lu'", p. 339–372.

30 My discussion here concerns the Catholic missions in the period before the Opium Wars. I am aware that studies touching on the topic of Christianity in specific locales in the nineteenth century already exist. With few exceptions (e. g., Wiest, "Lineage and Patterns of Conversion in Guangdong", p. 1–32), however, such studies are mainly interested in the reaction of the state and the local power structures to Christian activities, and not so much in the internal developments of the communities. For examples, see Bays, *Christianity in China*, passim.

31 Standaert, *Handbook*, p. 634.

32 Standaert, *Handbook*, p. 391.

33 For a list of such histories, see Standaert, *Handbook*, pp. 573–574.

and to "localize" it in the social, religious, and economic context of a region. Besides using rare Chinese sources by converts on "popular Christianity," this newer literature has probed the topic mainly through a critical reading of missionary sources and imperial government memorials. In addition to the studies already mentioned on Fujian, Western scholars have conducted research on Shandong, Jiangnan (including the cities of Hangzhou and Changshu), Sichuan, Shanxi, and northern China.[34] The works of Tiedemann and Entenmann have been among the earliest, for example, to situate Christianity in its respective local contexts (i. e. Shandong and Sichuan). Tiedemann, for example, found that the growth of Christianity in the late Kangxi period (1700s–1720s) in western Shandong was a result of the combination of local official malfeasance and the role of Catholic missionaries as local power brokers. Thanks to the emperor's protection of the court Jesuit missionaries, Franciscan friars in Shandong acquired enough leverage to be able to offer local converts some protection from rapacious officials, and some members of the lay Buddhist "White Lotus" groups even employed the newly acquired Catholic identity as a cover for their "heterodox" beliefs. Entenmann, on the other hand, attributed the flourishing of Christianity in eighteenth-century Sichuan to the situation of that recently settled province as a "frontier society" relatively free from official control, and where kinship networks were fragmented due to the immigrants' fresh arrival in the region. The fellowship offered by heterodox religions, including White Lotus traditions and Christianity, was thus important in providing these deracinated immigrants with a sense of community. Therefore, the historical experience of different Christian communities varied according to local circumstances. Among Western scholars, Entenmann offered early on the most integral picture of a cluster of regional communities, their organisation and social composition, although the limits of space imposed by his articles and the kind of sources employed only allowed him to outline the social and religious dimension of Sichuan Christianity in broad strokes. One of the major insights of Entenmann's research (which was inspired by the pioneering work of Daniel Bays) was the recognition that once a Christian community was established in a locale, it tended to survive as a tolerated part of the local religious panorama over long stretches of time (in most cases up to the present day), in spite of periodic government suppression.[35] Entenmann and especially Laaman have also shown how

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34 On Shandong: Tiedemann, "Christianity and Chinese 'Heterodox Sects'", p. 339–382; Mungello, *The Spirit and the Flesh in Shandong*; on Jiangnan: Mungello, *The Forgotten Christians of Hangzhou*; Golvers, *François de Rougemont*; Xiaojuan, "Christian Communities and Alternative Devotions in China"; Brockey, *Journey to the East*; Amsler, *Jesuits and Matriarchs*; on Sichuan: Entenmann, "Catholics and Society", p. 8–23; on Shanxi: Harrison, *The Missionary's Curse and Other Tales*; on northern China: Laamann, *Christian Heretics in Late Imperial China*.

35 Although others had sporadically commented on this phenomenon, Entenmann stated it most clearly early in "Catholics and Society," p. 23: "By the mid-eighteenth-century Catholicism had become a *popular religion* [emphasis by E.M.] with roots in Chinese society. The foreign provenance of the religion did not seem particularly important to its adherents, their neighbours, or even the authorities. […] Chinese

pre-existing religious traditions (especially lay Buddhism) were important in making Christianity an accepted fixture of local religious life. Finally, Brockey's exploration of seventeenth-century Jesuit lay institutions in Jiangnan has shown the importance of European-style confraternities in offering standardized religious instruction and in shifting religious responsibilities to local leaders, a possible factor in the resilience of the region's communities in the eighteenth century.

In my own 2009 book *Ancestors, Virgins and Friars* I did not attempt to offer a model applicable to all Christian communities in pre-Opium War China. Rather, by taking a micro-historical approach, and combining textual study and fieldwork, my study of the Dominican communities of Fuan and its vicinity in northeastern Fujian (known as Mindong) between the seventeenth and the mid-nineteenth century not only offered a richer, more detailed picture of the chronological development of this given community, but also a depiction of the peculiarities of its sociology, its ritual and devotional practices, and its moral-ethical values. In the case of Mindong, this approach was facilitated by at least three main factors. First, the territory of the Dominican mission historically covered the relatively small county of Fuan (today Fuan Township). This meant that the social, religious, cultural, and economic environment of the region was relatively homogenous and that Christian records could more easily be associated with specific places, families or institutions than is possible in larger mission territories. Second, Christianity in Mindong had an uninterrupted history of almost four hundred years. This meant that Christianity in Mindong, especially in the district of Fuan, became embedded in local Christian families and lineages over many generations. Moreover, these communities never lacked priests, except for brief periods. Therefore, the process of localization became particularly evident and could be observed in fine detail and chronological perspective. Third, this mission happened to be well documented. From the 1630s to the late 1940s, foreign and Chinese Dominican priests regularly sent reports on the state of their communities to the headquarters of the Province of the Holy Rosary located in Manila. Complemented by other sources (e. g., Qing dynasty documents preserved in the First Historical Archives of China in Beijing and in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, gazetteers, genealogies), these records offered a multifaceted picture of Christian activities in this region of Fujian. My book was chronologically limited to the period between the arrival of the Dominicans in the early 1630s and the 1860s, when the implementation of the unequal treaties allowed missionaries to gain free access to

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Catholics usually lived in peace with their non-Christian neighbours. When conflict arose between them, the Catholics' membership in an illegal religion gave their adversaries an advantage in the dispute. Yet such strife was generally caused not by religious differences but merely reflected the ordinary economic and social conflicts of eighteenth-century China." Cf. similar conclusions about the nineteenth-century experience in Bays, "Christianity and the Chinese Sectarian Tradition", p. 33–55.

the Chinese hinterland, and to purchase properties there, thus dramatically changing the dynamics of power between the Christian communities and local society at large.[36]

Most recently, the wave of new research from Anglophone countries and continental Europe on early modern local Christianities in Asia has yielded a volume collecting case studies from Persia, Turkey, Palestine, India, China, Japan, and Tibet, further cementing the strength of "local religion" as academic concept in comparative perspective.[37]

Chinese scholars in the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan have focused on detailed examinations of the life of missionaries and converts in specific provinces, on the reactions of Chinese society in local contexts, or on the work of specific missionary congregations. Here are some examples: Fujian province has been an object of research for Lin Jinshui (formerly at Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou) and his student Zhang Xianqing (Xiamen University). In his 2009 monograph, significantly focused on local officialdom and kinship lineages (*Officials, Lineages and Catholicism. A History of the Rural Church of Fuan in the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries*), Zhang offered a complementary analysis of the northeastern Fujianese Christian communities to that found in my own *Ancestors, Virgins and Friars*. Besides using Chinese imperial archival documents and Western-language histories of the mission, Zhang conducted fieldwork and gathered rich local materials (genealogies, local publications, local archival sources, etc.), and interviewed local Christians. His work showed the concrete workings of the "localization" of Christian practices and values within lineages, according to different patterns closely linked to lineage structures. It also illustrated how pre-existing lineage rituals and values were adapted to Catholicism and its rites and proved that "Catholic lineages" coexisted with traditional lineages. Huang Yi-long (formerly at Tsinghua University, Taiwan) studied the Christian community of Jiangzhou in Shanxi, including the creation of a "Confucian-Christian" moral synthesis at the local level. Kang Zhijie (Hubei University) explored the *longue durée* history of a rural community in Hubei. Ma Zhao (formerly at the Institute of Qing History, Renmin University, Beijing, now at Washington University in St. Louis) worked on patterns of official control of Christianity in the early to mid-Qing period, using archival sources and selecting certain regions as representative of local specificities in the development of Christian institutions and Qing bureaucratic responses. Li Ji (University of Hong Kong) and others chronicled the adaptation of the Missions Étrangères de Paris to local societies in Sichuan and Guangdong. Liu Qinghua (Central China Normal University) investigated in detail the Beijing parish of the French Jesuits in the long eighteenth century. Generally speaking, this scholarship by Chinese scholars has mainly concentrated on the reaction of local society (e. g., lineages) to Christian activities, on official control, or on the life of

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36 Some work on modern and contemporary Catholicism also has implications for an understanding of the historical development of localized Christian communities in late imperial times; for examples, see the bibliography below.

37 Amsler, Badea, Heyberger, and Windler, *Catholic Missionaries in Early Modern Asia*.

rural and urban missionaries and Christian literati and other converts. It has paid less attention to the *internal* life of local Christian communities, including the aspects of religious fellowship and ritual.[38] The publication of collections of primary sources from the Qing archives on the history of pre-Opium War Christianity, as well as catalogues and compilations of Chinese materials from European archives since the late 1990s, are offering to scholars new materials to explore the life of local communities and their rituality, which together with Christian materiality has received increasing attention.[39]

3. Conclusion

In 2001, the editors of the *Handbook of Christianity in China. Volume One: 635–1800*, recognised that at that time, "there … [was] hardly any research on the topic [of popu-

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38 Lin, "Ai Rulüe yu Mingmo Fuzhou shehui 艾儒略与明末福州社会 [Giulio Aleni and Fuzhou's Society in the Late Ming]", p. 56–66, p. 99; Huang, "Ming–Qing Tianzhujiao zai Shanxi Jiangzhou de fazhan ji qi fantan 明清天主教在山西絳州的發展及其反彈 [Development of and reactions to Catholicism in Jiangzhou, Shanxi, during the Ming and Qing periods]", p. 1–39; Kang, *Shangzhu de putaoyuan: E xibei Mopanshan Tianzhujiao shequ yanjiu (1636–2005)* 上主的葡萄園：鄂西北磨盤山天主教社區研究 (1636–2005) [The Lord's vineyard. Study of the Catholic community of Mopanshan in northwestern Hubei, 1636–2005]; Zhang, *Guanfu, zongzu yu Tianzhujiao: Shiqi-shijiu shiji Fuan xiangcun jiaohui de lishi xushi* 官府、宗族与天主教：17–19世纪福安乡村教会的历史叙事 [Officials, lineages, and Catholicism: a history of the rural church of Fuan in the 17th–19th centuries]; Zhang, *Diguo qianliu: Qingdai qianqi de Tianzhu jiao, diceng zhixu yu shenghuo shiji* 帝国潜流：清代前期的天主教、底层秩序与生活世界 [Imperial undercurrents: Catholicism, commoners, and the living world in the early Qing period]. Ma, "Qianlong chao difang gaoji guanyuan yü chajin Tianzhujiao huodong 乾隆朝地方高級官員與查禁天主教活動 (Provincial high officials and the activities of suppression of Catholicism during the Qianlong period)", p. 55–63; Li Ji, ed., *Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) and China*; Qinghua, *Une paroisse à la Cité impériale.*

39 Documentary Collections: Zhongguo di yi lishi dang'anguan 中國第一歷史檔案館 [First Historical Archives of China], *Qing zhong qianqi Xiyang Tianzhujiao zai Hua huodong dang'an shiliao* 清中前期西洋天主教在華活動檔案史料 [Historical materials on Catholic activities in early Qing China], 4 vols.; Standaert et al., eds., *Xujiahui zangshulou Ming-Qing Tianzhujiao wenxian* 徐家滙藏書樓明清天主教文獻 [Chinese Catholic texts from the Zikawei Library], 5 vols.; Standaert et al., *Xujiahui cangshulou Ming Qing Tianzhujiao wenxian xubian* 徐家匯藏書樓明清天主教文獻續編 [Chinese Catholic Texts from the Zikawei Library. Second Series], 34 vols.; Standaert and Dudink, eds., *Yesuhui Luoma dang'anguan Ming-Qing Tianzhujiao wenxian* 耶穌會羅馬檔案館明清天主教文獻 – *Chinese Christian Texts from the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus*, 12 vols.; Standaert et al. (eds.), *Faguo guojia tushuguan Ming-Qing Tianzhujiao wenxian* 法國國家圖書館明清天主教文獻 – *Chinese Christian Texts from the National Library of France – Textes chrétiens chinois de la Bibliothèque nationale de France*, 23 vols. Catalogues: Chan, *Chinese Books and Documents*; Dudink, Raini, and Hongtao, *Catalogue of Chinese Documents in the "Propaganda Fide"*; Ceccopieri, *Il fondo "cinese" della Biblioteca Casanatense*. Research on rituality: Standaert and Dudink, *Forgive Us Our Sins*; Standaert, *The Interweaving of Rituals*; Hongfan, *'Ite Missa Est'—Ritual Interactions.*

lar/local Christianity].”[40] Fortunately, from the initial abstract model of Christianity's development in the late Ming offered by Zürcher twenty-five years ago, we have come a long way in the study of local communities, their ritual-devotional life, and their geographic and social contexts. A search of recent literature on pre-1800 Christianity in China in the *Chinese Christian Texts Database* (CCT-Database; Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium) testifies to this. This new work is recognising and evaluating the *diversity* of local communities. The Sichuan mission described by Entenmann, or the cases of extreme syncretism between Christianity and other local religions in isolated Christian communities of northern and central China, as discussed by Laaman, present a rather different picture from the more homogenous situation of the compact Mindong mission studied by Menegon and Zhang. Only after in-depth work on local communities is accomplished will regional patterns become more easily discernible. This new trend has been gathering strength, partly aided by the emergence of digital humanities approaches, and the possibility of mapping regional differences through geographic and prosopographic projects like the *China Historical Christian Database, 1550–1950* (CHCD) at Boston University (USA), and other similar work.[41]

The growing interest and research on local communities is finally revealing in richer detail what scholars had been commenting on in general terms for a long time, i. e., the importance of the village community and of the family in the rural context of Chinese Christianity. This seems to have been particularly true for Catholicism since the seventeenth century, but it also reflects the reality of rural Protestant communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Owen Lattimore described a Catholic village in the 1920s in this way: "The Catholics begin with the land, which is the heart of the Chinese people, and aim less at the soul of the individual than at the life of the community. The principle seems to be that if you build up a Catholic community, family by family, grounded on the Church, instead of gathering a lot of stray sheep, here a son and there a brother and there a grandmother, then the individual in the community will have the same chances of Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory as the individual in a Catholic community in Europe or America."[42] This general observation was valid not just for the early twentieth century, but also for earlier times.

This interest in localization and kinship, however, is not just an internal shift within the field of Christianity-in-China. Rather, it should be seen as part of a movement to historiographically position Christianity within the broader research field of "Chinese

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40 Standaert, *Handbook*, p. 636.

41 The *Chinese Christian Texts Database* is available at https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/chinese-studies/english/cct; and the *China Historical Christian Database* at https://chcddatabase.com/. For a recent article on regional printing and diffusion of Christian literature in late imperial times, employing digital humanities methods, see Standaert and Van den Bosch, "Mapping the Printing of Sino-European Intercultural Books in China", p. 130–191.

42 Lattimore, *High Tartary*, p. 49, as quoted in Madsen, *China's Catholics*, p. 50–51.

religion." The most innovative scholars, in other words, are attempting to break away from a history centred on foreign missionaries, perceived by most China scholars as tainted by imperialism and "foreignness," and move towards a history of Chinese Christians as fully *Chinese* historical subjects in late imperial and modern times. Christian communities thrived within the structures of traditional Chinese society (although they also frequently encountered opposition, and subsequently dwindled), and included in their ranks people of several classes. Thus, this process of historiographical "normalization" seems to better reflect the historical record, at least for the countryside and the period before the Opium War (but even beyond it, as recent scholarship has shown).

Another important historiographical shift is the association of Christianity with "heterodox religions." This label is obviously elite- and state-imposed, but it has its merits. By clustering Christianity with other religious traditions, the label encapsulates what empirical research is indeed showing: that Christianity had a ritual and even magic appeal among the Chinese similar to that of other traditions. While not entirely new (de Groot was the first to make the association of Christianity with "sects" in his *Sectarianism and Religious Persecution*, published in 1903), the idea that Christians are simply another heterodox group in the eyes of the Chinese state and elites makes them more similar to existing popular local religions than the missionary tradition would have wanted. Ironically, especially in Mainland China, the study of Christianity is often conducted in institutes that isolate the "Great Traditions" from the lived religious traditions of the countryside, reproducing the theological and doctrinal differences created by clergies and state. But those theological distinctions, upheld by the clergy, become less important when we observe exorcisms, healing, miracles and the like as experienced by local people. Christianity can then be seen as yet another "heterodox" group that, in its own peculiar ways, straddled the divide between family ethics and rituals in the "Confucian tradition," and sectarian beliefs and rites forbidden by the state.

The study of the liturgy, devotionality and socio-ritual life of late imperial Christian communities has helped refine this picture of Christianity as part of the Chinese religious landscape. This research is revealing subtle transformations of Christian rituals to suit local needs, but also shows how local Chinese were attracted to Christian rituals in their Counter-Reformation form. This suggests that the religious experience of Chinese Christians in local contexts was shaped by a constant negotiation among Chinese cultural imperatives *in the plural* (including Confucian ones, but also "heterodox" ones, like needs for exorcism and healing); Christian liturgical and theological imperatives, determined by missionaries and church policies; and Christian ritual and devotional elements, congruent with existing needs and religious traditions, and thus attractive for the Chinese. Christian religious experience in China's regional cultures should be seen as a balancing act within this tension among diverse elements, and should be compared to similar experiences in the rest of Asia, Europe, the Americas and Africa.

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