Introduction

The rapid growth of religion in China in the past three decades has prompted scholarly discussion on the why and how from various angles. Some have termed this as more of a ‘religious awakening’ with huge numbers of temples and churches being rebuilt, as well as rising practice of traditional folk religious and ancestral worship (Stark & Liu 2011: 283). Whilst there has been recognition that women make up the majority of religious adherents in China, there remains ‘daunting silences’ when it comes to religious studies and gender studies focusing on the Chinese context (Jaschok 2003: 659). It is with these ‘daunting silences’ in mind that this chapter aims to explore the motivations and experiences of women working for religiously inspired charitable organisations (RICOs) in contemporary urban China. Echoing international literature that argues over the ambiguity of terms such as ‘faith-based organisation’ (FBO), there remains divergent use of terms when defining and examining religious organisations in China (Hamrin 2003; Laliberte 2015; Carino 2015, 2016, 2017). However, this chapter utilises Fielder’s (2019a) recent coining of the term ‘religiously inspired charitable organisations’ that seeks to place these forms of organisations back within the five legal religious traditions in the Chinese context, as well as distinguishing them from the FBO sector of the UK/US. What is of particular importance for the RICOs discussed in this chapter, as well as for understanding how these organisations operate in the Chinese context, is that Fielder’s (2019a) definition recognises organisations that may not be registered as religious, but could be viewed as religiously inspired even if the organisation has little formal affiliation within that religious tradition today.

This chapter will present and examine empirical findings from an ethnographic study of women working for two RICOs in Huadong, People’s Republic of China (PRC). It will examine their narratives of arising conflicts, centred on a lack of purpose in their ‘everyday’, that propelled their search for meaning and ultimately led them to their chosen RICO. Within this chapter, the term ‘everyday’ is defined as encapsulating the ‘links between production and social reproduction—how these discursively mark lives, both in the market and domestic spheres, in different social manifestations, and through varied struggles to reshape their lived landscapes’ (Elias & Rai 2019: 203). Social reproduction needs to be understood as that which
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‘encapsulates all of those activities involved in the production of life’ and includes ‘biological reproduction, the work of caring for and maintaining households and intimate relationships, the reproduction of labour and the production of community itself’ (ibid.). By taking seriously both production and social reproduction in the constitution of the daily lives and experiences of the women in this study, this chapter will be able to highlight how these are often a ‘site of struggle’ for women (ibid.: 206). To not do so would mean to ignore specific gendered experiences that shape women’s daily lives in China, including the ways in which ‘work’ is ‘organised, recognised, and/or valued’, and the lack of recognition for how social reproduction manifests and impacts women’s ‘everyday’ in contemporary China (ibid.). Furthermore, by paying attention to the role and use of space in women’s arising conflicts in their ‘everyday’, this chapter will highlight why and how RICOs act and provide a spatial retreat for women living in contemporary urban China. In this chapter, my use of the term retreat refers to a complementary space where there is the ability to engage with the ‘temple’ (religion) without asking for the rejection of the gendered obligations of the ‘hearth’ (home). In doing so, this chapter offers a unique contribution to how we understand the lives and experiences of women searching for meaning in contemporary urban China.

Focus and method

In the last twenty years, there has been growing scholarship on the role and work of RICOs in contemporary China (Laliberté 2003, 2015; Fielder 2012, 2016, 2019a; Carino 2015, 2016, 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019). RICOs have become a ‘more active and vocal sector of society, both in China and abroad’ (Fielder 2019b). Their increasing presence in both the PRC and internationally make them not only a priority for study, but also a unique lens through which to examine Chinese women’s religious subjectivity. However, relatively few studies examine women’s motivations and lived experiences in these types of organisations, despite them making up the majority of their staff (Huang 2008, 2009; Huang et al. 2011).

The analysis and findings of this chapter are taken from an ethnographic study recently conducted in the PRC. It draws upon the narratives of thirty women across two RICOs—one Protestant and one Buddhist—that were shared during semi-structured interviews. It also draws from a group interview undertaken with women from the Protestant RICO where I employed ‘photo elicitation’ to aid discussion about their lives, experiences and work (Padgett et al. 2013). It also reflects upon participant observation undertaken in both RICOs, across several months. All of the participants in this study are female, with a mix of family and marital status. They range in age from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. The majority of the women come under the popular term of China’s ‘rising middle class’ that has been favoured when examining the dramatic socioeconomic progress experienced since the 1980s (Li 2010). By and large, they all speak English as a second language, and all currently reside in urban cities in Huadong. Their social location reflects what other scholars have found in their studies of RICOs and similar organisations (Weller et al. 2017), as well as what was directly shared by individual women in the two organisations.

The ‘hearth’ and the ‘temple’: the role of space in women’s religious subjectivity

The decision to explore the women’s narratives of why they chose to engage with their RICO through specific theorisations of space arose from my want as researcher to disturb the categories of the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ and their ‘presumed meanings and affiliations’ (Knott 2005a:
Furthermore, I want to recognise how the socioeconomic and cultural changes that have shaped the ‘public’ and ‘private’ in contemporary China and women’s ‘entrance’, ‘defiance’ or ‘complete rejection’ of these spatialised spheres of society is central to understanding their experiences (Jaschok & Shui 2011: 13; see also Yang M.M.H. 1999b). Moreover, Jaschok and Shui (2011: 13–14) highlight that religious vocations historically in China were seen as a ‘spatial counterpoint’ to a patriarchal need to have women tied to the ‘hearth’ (home) in the fear that involvement in the temple (religion) would provide an alternative (see also Zhou 2003: 114).

What is of interest for this chapter is women’s ‘capacity for creative circumvention’ for negotiating these perceived spatial counterpoints so that they can still explore their own religious subjectivity (Jaschok & Shui 2011: 12–16).

This means I will take ‘seriously the active role of space’ in the shaping of women’s motivations for choosing their RICO, as well as what it means in terms of understanding what this choice means to them in their broader search for meaning in contemporary China (Knott 2005a: 121–122). However, it cannot be assumed what spatial terminology means when it ‘remains contested’ or that its conceptualisation is clear and the same for all (Knott 2005a: 14). Therefore, within this analysis, ‘space’ is understood as a ‘social construct’ that is made up of ‘vast intricacies’ that pays attention to both localised expressions and global scales and formations (Massey 1994: 155–156; Knott 2005a, 2005b; Kong & Woods 2017). It is also understood to be neither ‘flat’ nor ‘static’ because the social relations that shape it are ‘dynamic by their very nature’ (Massey 1994: 155–156), with an understanding that no individual is ‘outside or beyond’ space, and all human action should be understood as ‘enacted through space’, as well as what constitutes it (Kong & Woods 2017: 4). It also views space as a unification of the ‘physical, mental and social’ so that our analyses are not restricted to ‘geometric coordinates and the physical domain’ (Knott 2005b: 160).

Within this analysis, I am also drawing upon Zhou’s (2003) spatial terms ‘hearth’ and ‘temple’, later developed by Jaschok and Shui (2011). Much like Zhou’s (2003: 114) original use of the term, I will be using ‘hearth’ as a symbol for ‘the domestic realm’. However, I will not be assigning the focus of ancestor worship upon its use like Zhou (ibid.) and Jaschok and Shui (2011) do because this was not illustrated by the women in this study. However, it will still retain the focus on the importance placed on filial piety and the gendered norms and roles attached to it by both the Chinese state and those who inhabit the hearth. When using ‘temple’, it will reflect its previous use by Zhou (2003: 114), who defined it as ‘a freestanding building’ that is a ‘repository of a distinct set of beliefs and practices’ where those attending are ‘engaged in personal cultivation’. I also wish to highlight Zhou’s (ibid.: 115) recognition that having diverse forms of religious buildings and traditions within this one term risks ‘lumping [them] together’. However, what the temple also does is serve to represent a spatial counterpoint that would ask—for the purposes of this chapter—women to reject the hearth completely, by foregoing marriage, children and the sociocultural expectations of filial piety still prevalent in the shaping of family and work in contemporary urban China (Zuo 2016; Hong-Fincher 2018; Xie 2019). By using these spatial counterpoints within my analysis, I will be able to outline and argue how RICOs act as a spatial retreat for the women entering them as they search for purpose in contemporary China. This will be done by conceptualising this retreat as a blend between the hearth and the temple where women can engage in personal cultivation through the values and work of their RICO, whilst not having to reject the gendered obligations of the hearth. I define this ‘blend’ as ‘complementary/interdependent’, where accommodations are continuously made so that women can negotiate with wider patriarchal structures, the power of the Chinese state and their own personal desire to keep all that encompasses their hearth, even when it causes them harm. These accommodations are done through the skilful negotiations of the women.
with the aim of keeping this retreat in their search for meaning in the everyday (Jaschok & Shui 2011: 22). The reasons, the ways in which it happens, and what occurs when women seek to go beyond the retreat will be explored later in this chapter. To contextualise this discussion, I will first examine the changing role of religion in Chinese society and how this gave rise to the RICOs within this study.

The changing role of religion in Chinese society

Currently, the party-state in China legally recognises five religions—Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. However, there is also a plethora of ‘other faiths, popular practices, and unofficial expressions of the five recognised religions in China’s landscape’ (Vermander et al. 2018: 4). The modern term used for religion in Mandarin and in official discourses (zòngjiào) is only around a hundred years old, used originally as a way to translate the term from English and reflect European understandings of the term, with scholars noting how it ‘fits . . . uneasily in the Chinese social world’ (Weller et al. 2017: 6). The term’s arrival and meaning has been characterised by various ongoing state secularisation processes, as well as influences from colonial forces (ibid.; see also Goossaert 2005: 15). The relegation of ‘religion’ to the private sphere meant that it became a category conceived around the Protestant understanding of religion (Weller et al. 2017: 6).

This particularly impacted Buddhism and Daoism, which had to make pivotal institutional changes to ‘fit’ into this categorisation. It also excluded Confucianism and ancestor worship as a term, relegating them to be conceived as ‘backward’, ‘outmoded’ and ‘superstitious’ (ibid.). The complexity and ambiguity around the term ‘religion’ lies in the volatile nature of its relationship with the party-state and how its legal governance has resulted in varied reactions from religious institutions, organisations, groups and followers in contemporary China (Jaschok 2003: 664–665). The importance of official religious policy in the changing social role of religion in Chinese society since 1949 cannot be underestimated, guided by ‘the official interpretation of Marxism by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as well as China’s centuries-old tradition of subordinating religion to the state’ (Fielder 2019a: 78).

Since the 1980s, there have been key shifts in the social role of religion in China, with the reform era marking the beginning of a decreasing hostility from political spheres. In the ‘re-awakening’ of religious activity, it has been argued that policy ‘released’ people’s hidden want for religion (Overmeyer 2003). In 1982, ‘Document 19’ was released, recognising the continuing role that religion had to play in Chinese society. However, the continued growth in religious buildings, organisations and groups in China would prompt fears from the party-state of possible ‘foreign infiltration’ and initiate a clearer management of this space moving forward. This would include former general secretary of the CCP, Jiang Zemin’s (1989–2002) implementation of a ‘two-pronged approach to religious management’ (Fielder 2019a: 78) that sought for religion to ‘adapt’ to socialism (Leung 2005: 908). The 2000s marked a significant period of change for the social role of religion, with the ‘green light’ given for religious organisations to deliver social services and to conduct relief work (Carino 2015: 2). A central component of this shift in the social role of religion was former CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao’s (2002–2012) policy of ‘building a harmonious society’ which campaigned for religious groups to contribute to the wider good of Chinese society (Fielder 2019a: 79; Weller et al. 2017: 64). Whilst this was often viewed as a ‘top-down’ process, scholars also note how it ‘unexpectedly [allowed more] room for different social organisations [and how they found] ways for innovation’ (Weller et al. 2017: 64). Despite earlier publications on religious policy, it wasn’t until the release of ‘Opinions’ in 2012 that religious charities were given
legal recognition and provided them with similar opportunities as their ‘secular counterparts’ (Fielder 2019a: 79).

The religiously inspired charitable organisations in this study

Whilst both RICOs in this study have interesting commonalities, it is important to outline their distinct characteristics and teachings so that any spatial analysis can draw out the implications of these for women. Both RICOs are formally registered as non-governmental organisations (social organisations), yet at the same time are still recognised for their ‘religiously inspired’ history and/or viewed to have a ‘religious foundation’ by those that work for/with them. The Buddhist RICO in this study emerged out of a wider movement that began early in the twentieth century towards what is termed ‘Buddhism for the human realm’ (renjiao fojiao). The central focus is to ‘integrate Buddhist teaching into everyday life’ of the individual, where they will need to live in accordance to Buddhist teachings and values (Kuah-Pearce 2014: 27). This means a move away from scripture towards the vital importance of social actions (ibid.: 29–30). As Kuah-Pearce (2014: 30) explains, the ‘concepts or abstracts . . . need to be routinised, in order that the teachings become useful’. This is founded upon the value of compassion and embedding this within each social action undertaken. The Buddhist RICO also follows this wider movement’s focus on understanding that the manifestation of suffering (shouku) is a result of karma (yebao) and occurs because of an individual’s ignorance (wuzhi). The teachings followed by the women in this study, as well as its other members, are the interpretations of the Buddhist RICO’s founder who is from the Mahayana tradition. The teachings also have a particular focus on the Lotus Sutra with the ultimate goal of members becoming a ‘this-worldly living bodhisattva’ (ibid.) and to establish a Pure Land on Earth (see also Chandler 2004).

The Protestant RICO came out of a Chinese Christian–led initiative that focused on the principle of ecumenical sharing and on giving its members a theological grounding in cooperation and growth amongst all humans. This initiative was spurred on by the aim of wanting an active participation and a voice in the social development of China and the formation of a ‘good society’ (Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019a). The Protestant RICO in this study is founded upon the core message that God is ‘love’ and, much like the Buddhist RICO, centres the value of compassion in how this is achieved in the daily actions of individuals and the organisation. A focus on ‘love’ and ‘compassion’ is central to both organisations’ missions and culture. It also provides them with a way to ‘justify themselves in the state’s terms’, whilst simultaneously being able to stay committed to their religious foundations (Weller & Wu 2017: 60). This chapter will now focus on the narratives of the women—centred on the story and experiences of Sister N—who work for the Buddhist and the Protestant RICO, exploring the ‘arising conflicts’ that spurred on the personal search for their chosen organisation.

Arising conflicts

The rapid socioeconomic developments since the start of the opening-up and reform era (1980s–) in China have had specific implications for women’s changing experiences of self, family and work in urban contexts (Walker & Miller 2020: 1–3; see also Chen, B. & He 2020). These have been shaped by wider gendered public discourses and social ideals on what it should mean to be a ‘Chinese woman’ (Hooper 1994; Yang, M.M.H 1999a; Bishop et al. 2005; Hong-Fincher 2014, 2018; Xie, K. 2017, 2019). The literature discussing Chinese women’s experiences of the workplace since the reform era has focused on the gendered consequences of moving from a planned to a market economy, including the impact of removing
social welfare benefits such as childcare facilities and the mass unemployment of women after the dismantling of ‘work units’ and state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Entwistle & Henderson 2000; Cook & Dong 2011; Zuo 2016). This changed the formation of the family, regulating it back into the private (inner) sphere of daily life (ibid). Despite women’s reproductive benefits still being protected by state policies during this shift, there was a gap between legal requirements and their enforcement during a time of marketisation and the pursuit of profitability (Zuo 2016: 84).

These socioeconomic changes occurred alongside changing gendered public discourses on the ‘feminine ideal’ in urban China. Sun and Chen (2015: 1094) argue that there are two clear trends when it comes to research examining changing formations of gender in contemporary China. This, firstly, focuses on the commodification of women’s bodies that seeks the ‘refeminisation’ of the women (Yang, M.M.H. 1999a; Hong-Fincher 2014; Xie, K. 2019). The second they identify is the shift from the ‘state-dominated Marxist political discourse’ of liberation and gender equality to discourse that is market-orientated (Chen & Sun 2015: 1094). This has seen a move by the party-state to build up the family to provide social stability by ‘reinforcing traditional family values’, especially that of filial piety (Xie, K. 2019: 77; see also Hong-Fincher 2014, 2018; Zhang 2016; Sun 2017). This has shaped contemporary gendered social ideals around reproduction and marriage that has the negative implications of social stigma for Chinese women who do not fit this ‘feminine ideal’ (Hooper 1994; Cook & Dong 2011). It also intensified the ‘role strain, role conflict, and anxiety’ felt by women in contemporary Chinese society (Zuo 2016). This results in the search to reconcile individual feelings of alienation in the face of a market-driven economy that promotes a certain image of the ‘feminine ideal’ and the harms created when trying to meet the requirements of the workplace alongside renewed gendered social roles enforced by the value of filial piety and supported by current party-state propaganda (Cook & Dong 2011; Hong-Fincher 2014, 2018; Xie 2019).

These changes and harms are reflected in the narratives of the women in this study when asked, ‘why this organisation?’ Their responses centred on feelings of a ‘lack of purpose’ with the desire to search for meaning in their everyday, whilst not necessarily seeking to disrupt the formation of the family. Rather, this could be done by either entering the RICO alongside a current workplace that doesn’t fulfil their search for meaning or replacing a previous workplace with the RICO as an alternative. I will now examine their narratives of arising conflicts, centred on a lack of purpose experienced in the everyday in order to explore why and how they entered their RICO. As stated previously, this will be done by paying particular attention to the conflict narrative of Sister N to highlight commonalities and differences across the women’s varied experiences.

**Lack of purpose**

Sister N is slight in stature but has a warm smile and welcoming eyes. She has a gentle power about her, strong and unassuming. It was late October in 2017 when I took a high-speed train to meet Sister N for the first time. The weather was starting to turn, with the wind having a slight bitter edge and the leaves changing colour. Sister N came out to greet me. There was a gentle power about her, unassuming but strong. Now living full-time in the grounds of one of the Buddhist RICO’s offices, she shared how, despite feeling ‘successful’ in many ways before working here, she had been ‘lost’ before joining the organisation—‘my life lacked purpose’.

We did not speak whilst eating our lunch together—a delicious bowl of rice and vegetables from the office’s canteen where Sister N eats her three meals a day. Once we had finished, we cleaned our bowls together—something done by every individual who eats here, with stations
set up for each stage of the cleaning process. We scrubbed, rinsed and dried, quietly concentrating on the task at hand. I had not asked her any questions up until this point, sensing that we needed to sit in each other’s company for a while before she felt ready to share. I started by asking where she had worked before joining the Buddhist RICO. She told me that she had chosen book auditing to help her with her English—a route often taken by those seeking to travel abroad and learn a second language (Cooke & Xiao 2014: 38). Having twice moved industry since then, she ended up doing work in the financial sector of an international firm that included a lot of travel and thought she had found ‘happiness’ in her work.

Early on, the challenge of the work itself and the travel had fuelled her to work harder and make certain sacrifices such as living in a large city that often overwhelmed her. When I asked Sister N to describe herself at this time in one word, she replied with ‘successful’, before pausing and adding ‘economically successful’. At this time, her understanding of her self-worth had been wrapped up in the prestige and economic capital of her work (Rofel 2007) and the accompanying social acceptance from her family and friends. Unlike other women’s experiences of the workplace across both RICOs, Sister N did not speak negatively about her time in the company. She shared that she was incredibly grateful for the experiences they had exposed her to and that she had enjoyed a high-level position that some Chinese women ‘can only dream of achieving’.20 And yet, the satisfaction that she had derived from work became more and more fleeting. She used the metaphor of returning from a holiday and realising that the initial excitement of going away would fade because eventually you would have to come back to your ‘real life’. She told me that she felt like ‘a monster had eaten me whole’, but she had no option but to go on living in it. It was only by becoming involved in the Buddhist RICO that she started to ‘find the right path’ for her life. This was similar to the narratives of two other women in her work team who had also come from well-paid leadership positions in the private corporations they had previously worked for, with one commenting: ‘I had a good position for a woman.’

Sister N’s first experience of the Buddhist RICO was when she attended one of her local office’s biggest events of the year after an invitation from a friend. She spoke of this initial event as a ‘moment of change’ where she had found what she didn’t even realise she had lost.

Sister N’s narration of her journey is not dissimilar to stories related in other studies where women’s experiences of Buddhism and their growing commitment to it was gradual and ongoing, especially as they negotiated the tensions and influence it had on their daily lives and relationships (Huang 2009; Cavaliere 2012, 2015; Starkey 2014, 2019).21 However, what is of note here is the severity of conflict that she experienced when she took up her current full-time role in the RICO. When she had spoken about this, her eyes had fallen to the ground and she whispered, ‘My parents do not agree or understand the life I have chosen. They think it is the life of poor people.’ Her desire to be ‘economically successful’ was shaped by the idea of what success meant to her parents, and her rejection of this was an affront to the opportunities they had worked hard to provide for her. The rift caused by her entering the office-campus and working full-time for the Buddhist RICO means she only sees her parents on public holidays, but she is quick to share that she is ‘being patient with them’ and is eager for me to know that she has seen some progress lately with her mother attending certain events put on by the RICO. She tells me she is optimistic that she can persuade her mother to see her ‘way of life’, but she does not feel the same with her father who still refuses to engage with the organisation at all and will not discuss it with her. This external conflict caused by her parents and the particular expectations she felt that they held for her life are made worse by her desire for full monastic ordination in the tradition that inspires the Buddhist RICO. In order to do this, she would need her parents’ written permission and, so far, they have refused to give this. This requirement put in place by the Buddhist RICO is argued to be an expression of their commitment to the value of ‘filial piety’ that

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permeates its teachings and activities in order to create a more harmonious society. Sister N’s initial involvement in the Buddhist RICO offered the step in from the ‘cold’ that she had been searching for. It provided a *retreat* that blended the *hearth* and the *temple* and was complementary until she began to reject the obligations and wants of the *hearth*.

Sister N’s feelings of emptiness and ‘lack of purpose’ were shared by all of the women in both RICOs but in varied ways. These feelings, as stated earlier, centred on attempts to reconcile the alienation felt in the face of sociocultural, political and familial ideals of what it means to be a woman in contemporary China (Cook & Dong 2011; Hong-Fincher 2014, 2018; Xie 2019).

For example, another sister who worked alongside Sister N in their small team at the Buddhist RICO’s PRC head office told me—in response to my question of why she thought her RICO had so many female volunteers,

*Women’s happiness is wrapped up in husband, children and the material . . . or at least, this is what they are told their happiness should be.*

This was echoed by another participant in the Protestant RICO who shared that she felt she was consistently trying to remove herself from the ‘pre-set schedule’ she sees other Chinese women trying to live up to, especially those of her age who are near to turning thirty—an age where women are meant to have achieved certain goals in relation to marriage, family and the material (Hong-Fincher 2014, 2018; Xie, K. 2019). This was reflected in a group interview conducted with women from the Protestant RICO when using ‘photo elicitation’.22 Having chosen an image of a lotus flower floating on calm water, one woman shared,

*This one is more about me, alone. Being a woman is hard in China, maybe it is everywhere but I feel like I have many roles and must balance these with my work and my child. I have many relationships to take care of, like my parents and in-laws. This can be challenging. I often feel alone in dealing with it all.*

Another woman in the group pushed forward the image she had chosen of a large metal chain laid against a wall. She explained that the image also represented how she felt about her life right now. For her, each link that made up the larger chain represented a different relationship. They were her child, her parents, her husband, her work and her health. She shared that, for her, they are all connected like the chain, different in their own way and yet, often experienced as the same. All of these cause her great worry, even if not at the same moment, but they will often overlap with one another. She shared that sometimes she wishes she could just break these connections because it would make her life easier by getting rid of so much of her inner conflict. However, for her, this was not life:

*. . . life is staying, accepting and caring for them.*

These feelings were exacerbated by tensions with work, either being similar to Sister N’s experience of lacking meaning from the nature of the work itself or contrastingly that the workplace was a source of gendered discrimination that amplified the arising conflicts emerging from the feminine ideal they were being asked to live up to. For example, many shared that they felt there was a lack of mobility for them in the ‘highly competitive environments’ they were a part of. This caused increased anxiety, and they started working long hours in the hope of being promoted. However, this would in turn increase conflict in the relationship with their family because they were unable to spend time with spouses and children. One
woman shared how the competitive nature of her workplace, in which her yearly salary was correlated with certain sales targets, meant that she had been working exhausting hours that made it impossible for her to see her family. She would often try to ‘buy’ her family’s affections. She was not alone in feeling this way, with many saying they experienced periods of ‘intense guilt’. The ‘harm’ felt by the women was also exacerbated by the double burden of work that they undertook in the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ spheres of their lives (Elias & Rai 2019; see also Jaschok & Shui 2000, 2011). Several of the women describe their previous workplaces as being ‘not good for women’ because male bosses would treat them differently if they needed time off when their children were sick or if they were late in the mornings for family reasons. Many spoke of how this ‘lack of care’ towards their needs ‘as women’, both in respect to family and their career progression, meant that they grew apathetic towards their workplaces, feeling disconnected and isolated.

A final way that this lack of purpose manifested in the women’s narratives was from those who were now retired. All but one of the women I spoke with shared that retirement had brought them ‘great suffering’ and ‘unhappiness’ and left them feeling as though they had ‘no more purpose’.24 It is of note that this particular retired woman was from the Protestant RICO, whereas all the others were working for the Buddhist RICO. These retired women’s experiences of work had taken place during the Mao era and the early stages of the reform era where some SOEs were still in place. All of these women spoke positively about their prior workplaces, sharing that they felt they had been recognised as ‘experts’ in their fields and had been satisfied with the ‘level of success’ it had granted them. One woman noted that she may not have been a ‘CEO, like some of the young women today’, but she had been happy with her work and content with the balance between work and family. This reflects the experiences of work and family by Chinese women during the Mao era that are shared in Zuo’s (2016) work, in which she presents a detailed ethnographic study of varying generational attitudes and experiences of women in China since 1949. The same sister who spoke of Chinese women’s happiness being wrapped up in the ‘husband, children and material’ also told me that she thought that the organisation has a lot of retired women working for them, because

"Before [working for this organisation], they do nothing but complain about their daughter or daughter-in-law. After [starting to work for this organisation], there are no more complaints, they are doing something . . . it lets them understand their sons and daughters better."

She spoke of how these ‘hot tempers’ had been developed after retirement because the women had not been ready to give up work and how this conflict within themselves would often manifest as anger and discontent with their family members. It meant that they would become focused on whether their children or grandchildren (including in-laws) were spending enough time with them, whether they were having marital problems, or whether their grades at school were ‘good enough’. The retired women in the Buddhist RICO spoke of how they suddenly felt ‘unvalued’ by those in their life and how they did not have anywhere to draw meaning from now that work no longer provided this for them. These narratives demonstrate the varied gendered reasons that the women in this study narrated having a lack of purpose in their everyday. These resulted in a fracturing of their sense of self and creating ‘harm’ in their ‘everyday’ (Elias & Rai 2019). Whilst this is not a unique story to just women in China, it is the specific drive by the party-state to make the family unit a ‘private’ sphere that upholds traditional Confucian values that has prompted other scholars to note the return of women to the home (Zuo 2016). However, what has occurred within the narratives of the women in this study is that these ‘fractures’ have propelled their searches for their chosen RICO.
RICOs as ‘retreat’?

Having explored the women’s narratives of arising conflicts, centred on a lack of purpose, it can be seen that whilst there is a want for meaning there is not the want to upset the gendered obligations of the hearth in order to do this. For Sister N, her initial entry into the Buddhist RICO did not include a rejection of these norms, but rather it provided the ‘complementary’ blend between the hearth and the temple as outlined earlier in this chapter. However, her continued long-term experience of the retreat that the RICO provided for her created the want to fully reject the hearth and join the monastic community associated with the Buddhist RICO. Much like other examples of ‘retreats’ within Buddhist groups in China and elsewhere, it provided Sister N the ability to ‘perfectly realize the Buddhist values of equanimity, wisdom and compassion’ in an ‘intense and sustained encounter’ (Laidlaw & Mair 2019: 329). However, unlike the other women in this study, Sister N did not wish to leave this retreat in any sense, and this would have meant a rejection of the hearth and the RICO becoming the temple for her. In doing so, the full rejection of the hearth caused a rupture with the wider sociocultural gendered norms of what it means to be a ‘woman’ in contemporary China. This is evidenced in the reactions of her parents and friends who cannot understand her desire to work and live in the office-campus full time. This is exemplified further by her parent’s not giving the consent needed in order to join the monastic order attached to the Buddhist RICO.

This shift from retreat to temple for Sister N is not shared by any of the other women in the study except for the other sisters in her small team that work full time in the RICO’s office-campus. They didn’t experience the same conflicts from the hearth as Sister N did, as they did not have families that would need to grant consent for their eventual monastic ordination. For the other women in the Buddhist RICO there was never discussion of a want to enter into monastic ordination and fully enter the spatial counterpoint of the temple. This was because despite the recognition of the arising conflicts felt in the everyday, there was no desire to leave their individual hearths. Instead, what they wanted was to find a space that would be complementary/interdependent to the hearth by not asking them to renounce what that involved, but still include the teachings, values and practices of the temple where the women could work towards becoming a ‘this-worldly living Bodhisattva’ (Kuah-Pearce 2014 30). For the women in the Buddhist RICO, this is done by partaking in social welfare projects specifically aimed at caring for the elderly where actions of ‘proper filial care’ can be enacted. It is also the specific teachings of ‘suffering’ being linked to ‘selfishness’ and ‘wilful ignorance’ (for example, the need for material wealth) that the women narrated as providing them with the ability to ‘calm their tempers’ and stop the ‘anger’ and ‘emptiness’ experienced prior to their entrance.

This blending recognises the gendered obligations of the hearth with the individual desire for the meaning found in the temple is echoed in the Protestant RICO. Those within the Protestant RICO have this retreat as their primary workplace, whereas those within the Buddhist RICO are either engaged with their organisation alongside another formal workplace or are housewives (full- and part-time) within the hearth. The women in the Protestant RICO spoke of how the organisation’s mission of expressing ‘love’ and ‘compassion’ through concrete social action altered not just their perspective on their caring responsibilities but also the importance they were placing on the ‘feminine ideal’. They also spoke of how the ‘spirit’ of the Protestant RICO was ‘good for women’ because the needs of the hearth were considered and taken into account, for example childcare and pregnancy. This is also reflected in the Buddhist organisation with importance placed on the family, with spouses and children encouraged to attend both activities and worship.
'A monster had eaten me whole'

Conclusion

Having examined the changing role of religion in Chinese society and the implications of the drastic socioeconomic developments on women in urban contexts, this chapter drew upon the narratives of women in both RICOs—one Buddhist and one Protestant—to demonstrate the 'arising conflicts' they were experiencing in their everyday lives. This centred on a lack of purpose felt in the face of sociocultural norms and expectations of what it means to be a woman in contemporary urban China and/or the apathy/gender discrimination faced in relation to the workplace (or lack of it in the case of the women who had retired). I argue that their initial entry into their RICO is a spatial act taken physically, mentally and socially, in the hope of finding meaning. Their RICO provides them with a complementary space that blends the personal want for the 'repository of a distinct set of beliefs and practices' and providing the ability to 'engage in personal cultivation' found in the temple (Zhou 2003: 114). However, it does this without requiring them to reject the gendered obligations of the hearth. This complementary space that blends the hearth and the temple is what I argue creates a spatial retreat where women can develop their religious subjectivity. Therefore, their RICO, as a retreat, imbues a sense of meaning in their daily lives, where feelings of anger, anomie and stress can be discursively addressed, put into action and developed through their engagement with the organisation. All of this can be done without disrupting all that makes up the hearth for them. By exploring these narratives of why women are choosing to engage with RICOs over other spaces, this chapter has highlighted the experiences of those who are often silenced in the fields of both religious and gender studies. In doing so, this chapter offers a unique contribution to how we understand the lives and experiences of women searching for meaning in contemporary urban China.

Notes

1 For discussion on the growth of religious activity in contemporary China see Dean (1993); Feucht-wang (2001); DuBois (2005); Chau (2006); Stark and Liu (2011). For an in-depth examination see Goossaert and Palmer’s (2011) work titled The Religious Question in Modern China.
2 See Tomalin (2013: 205–229) for a full discussion on the ambiguity of the term ‘FBO’. See Clarke and Ware (2015) for various proposed typologies of FBOs and see Clarke (2006); Deneulin and Rakodi (2011); Deacon and Tomalin (2015); Occhipinti (2015) for discussions on what makes this distinctive to their ‘secular peers’ (Clarke 2006: 845).
3 Distinguishing these organisations outside of the FBO sector of the UK/US is vital because of the different sociohistorical ways in which these sectors have emerged, particularly the regulation of the sector by the Chinese state. See Fielder (2019a) for a detailed overview of these specific sociohistorical processes that have taken place in China’s recent religious history. These are also discussed later in this chapter when exploring the changing role of religion in Chinese society.
4 The use of ‘Chinese women’ here does not speak to the gender, ethnic and sexual identities and experiences of all (identifying) women in contemporary China. This chapter, as will be discussed further in this section, refers to the experiences of a particular group of women and their experiences in China today. However, this can help to shine a light on the future research that needs to be done to take these intersecting identities into consideration to gain a fuller picture of religion and gender in contemporary China.
5 The exact dates of the research are not disclosed for participant safety.
6 By ‘photo elicitation’, I mean where an interview ‘involves photographs . . . for reasons particular to the study’ (Padgett et al. 2013; see also Harper 2002).
7 Knott (2005a: 128) notes how the use of the term 'space' (like religion) has 'no single fixed meaning', and therefore there is a need to 'incorporate' and 'reject' certain closures to present a feasible theory of spatial analysis. In doing so, it becomes possible to 'focus the task' and 'make it manageable'. However, this does not mean that these closures eradicate the 'openness' that a spatial analysis provides for research focused upon religion or other social categories such as gender (ibid.).
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8 A foundational work on the meaning of the term ‘religion’ in Chinese society is C.K. Yang’s (1961) work titled *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of their Historical Factors*. By drawing a distinction between ‘diffused’ and ‘institutional’ religion, Yang’s study debunks the common assumption that Chinese culture was irreligious in nature (see also Stark & Liu 2011; Yang, F 2012: 34).

9 For fuller discussion on the term ‘zongjiao’ and the processes that took place during the Mao era, see Yang, M.M.H. (2008); Goossaert and Palmer (2011); Laliberte (2015).


11 Such as ‘Regulations on Religious Affairs’ (2005).

12 Opinions about Encouraging and Standardising the Participation of Religious Communities in Charitable Activities.

13 The Chinese state has several categories within this broader term of ‘social organisations’ such as ‘mass organisation’, ‘social associations’ and ‘foundations’. I have not included which specific categories each RICO falls under to help protect their anonymity.

14 This is the same, and just as important, for rural contexts but is not the focus of this chapter.

15 As a result of the ‘Labour Law’ in 1995 permanent employment for workers was ended, impacting urban workers in particular (Zuo 2016: 85). Furthermore, by 2007 nurseries and day-care facilities in the workplace had all but disappeared. In addition, childcare fees in urban cities increased to the point of constituting around 60 percent of the average monthly salary earned by a working mother at the time (Zuo 2016: 83).

16 This is reflected in other studies (Cooke & Xiao 2014) which discuss how gender discrimination still takes place in contemporary workplaces in China with ‘subtle discrimination’ of women who are viewed by male bosses as ‘less productive’ due to potential maternity leave or current childcare needs. In contrast, men who are fathers and work long hours are seen as providing for their families (Yang et al. 2000).

17 Many scholars also note the ‘gender sameness’ that emerged from public discourse in the Mao era that served to create ‘gender neglect’ when it came to the specific needs of women (Evans 1997; Xie, K. 2019) and the ‘triple burden’ this placed on them in terms of care, work and national responsibility (Zuo 2016).

18 Xie, K. (2019: 61–62) examines how the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF) have been a driving force in the delivery of official discourses on the ‘ideal Chinese woman’ (see also McMillian 2006: 15). This is evidenced further by a recent campaign in 2018 where President Xi stated to ACWF leaders that the ‘unique function of Chinese women in family and society’ should be the central focus of their service and vision for Chinese women (Xinhua Wang 2018; as cited in Xie, K. 2019: 61–62).

19 All participants have been anonymised by name. Those from the Buddhist RICO are referred to by ‘Sister’ as this is how they refer to one another in the organisation. In-text quotations from participants have been italicised in order to distinguish them from quotations in literature.

20 Various scholars argue that one of the ‘unexpected consequences’ of the one-child policy for women was the ‘unprecedented educational investment’ they were given from their parents due to not having to compete with other siblings, in particular brothers who would have normally been shown preference because of the sociocultural importance placed on the patrilineal line (Tsui & Rich 2002; Hong-Fincher 2013, 2014; Xie, K. 2019).

21 Starkey’s (2014, 2019) work examines women in British Buddhism but offers insights into the various negotiations that take place on the ‘journey to ordination’, including how this can be viewed as a gradual process. Cavaliere’s (2012, 2015) studies focus on women involved in ‘faith-based volunteering’ in Japan but share similar narratives of how women became increasingly involved. Huang’s (2009) study explores Taiwanese women’s reactions to Master Cheng Yen of the Buddhist Compassion Tzu-Chi Foundation and their ongoing commitment to the organisation.

22 Various discourses talk about the particular pressures on women in China to adhere to certain goals by a particular age, with these primarily being centred on their twenties (Hong-Fincher 2014, 2018; Xie 2017, 2019). Xie’s (2019: 68) study offers a clear figure to display these expectations, taken from her interviews with ‘privileged daughters’ of the one-child generation.

23 This was done with the intention to make the ‘invisible visible’ by prompting memories, feelings and ideas through a visual element in what is normally a predominantly verbal-only environment (Bukowski & Buetow 2011: 739).

24 The other woman spoke of how she is enjoying her retirement, but she also remains actively engaged in several work projects with partnerships she has, in her words, ‘nourished’ for years. She commented to
me that many of her family will often joke about her inability to ‘sit still’ and not do any work. Whilst this differs a little to those discussed, it is strikingly similar in the fact that she is still doing some form of ‘work’. Her, in her own words, ‘happy retirement’ includes the ability to keep on doing elements of the work she had done for the Protestant RICO and was enabled by her connections made during her time there. I was only able to speak to one woman who had retired from the Protestant RICO, otherwise I could have explored this point of comparison further.

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