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The role of the church and religious learning of young women migrant workers in western China

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Abstract

In this chapter, we document the vital role of incidental informal religious learning for young Catholic rural women seeking a new life in the city as migrant workers in western China. The participants in this study came from the same remote village lying in the Qinling Mountains, where all residents had “always” been Catholic for as long as anyone knew. We found that being surrounded with others of the same religious upbringing, participating regularly in church activities, and accepting religious moral values served to shield these young women from typical urban hazards. Thus protected from the harshest dangers faced by female migrant workers, these young women were able to cultivate and exercise agency, experience well-being, and form aspirations for a better future. We propose that a dialogue regarding the role of religion in promoting a harmonious society be considered in China and re-integrated into mainstream development discourses in the time of the Sustainable Development Goals.
Introduction

In China the question of religious practice in society is not settled \(^1\) and communities of faith feel themselves under a cloud of political suppression, subject to the whims of recurring political campaigns. \(^2\) The families in one village in the midst of the Qinling mountain range in western China have “always” been Catholic, as long as anyone can remember, despite persecution and the demolition of their 2-steeple church in the Cultural Revolution, and continual government crackdowns to this day. \(^3\) The daughters of this village were raised in the Catholic faith, regularly attended church, studied in the local lower schools, and around age 16 to 17 moved to a city nearby, a few to attend senior secondary school and on to college or, the majority, to make money and a new life in the migrant labor economy.

Despite the controversial nature of the issue, it seemed reasonable to assume that the religious upbringing experienced in the village would play a role in people’s lives and, in the case of our migrant young women, in the adjustment to the uncertain urban surroundings and migrant labor jobs. In this chapter we explore their informal, incidental religious-moral learning, sometimes called socialization in the faith, and the role it played in contributing to the young migrant women’s well-being. In particular, we are looking at the religious context and moral education and its interaction with identity formation, personal security, socio-economic opportunity, formal schooling,
formation of agency and aspirations, and their well-being as rural migrants in the fast-paced world of China’s cities.

In this research, we are not concerned with the formal structures of religious education but rather with the way that religion is lived. Given the taboo on talking about the “indoctrination” that a religious organization like the church might carry out, this research did not seek to ascertain where and how formal religious education took place. No mention was made by the Xiangcun Sisters of participating in organized catechism sessions in the church in the village nor in the city. We focus instead on the informal and incidental learning and its expression in the lives of the young migrant women challenged by the social adjustment to an urban modern life.

It is our observation after 16 years of field work that the religion in their lives, doings and being, held for these villagers both intrinsic and instrumental value (field notes, 2004-16). Though the Chinese Constitution provides for religious freedom, it is limited by a vague boundary described as “normal religious activity” (PRC Constitution). In practice, after the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in destroying all forms of religious practice and material facilities, the organization of religion has been questioned on the principle of loyalty to the Party and practitioners have been under duress. Hence expression of religious beliefs and practices still often remains covert (see endnotes 1-4).

To respect the position of our participants vis a vis religion, we needed a sensitive and secure way to allow young women to convey their views of
importance of their religiosity in their values and practice. The participatory methods often used in conjunction with the capability approach to human development (Sen 2001) opens up this kind of inquiry. The capability approach is centered on the person and what is ultimately important to her to lead the kind of life she values (Sen 2001). The participatory method explores how a person feels about and judges something to be of importance (White & Pettit, 2004). The capability approach is based on the normative principle that the enhancement of freedom is the objective of a better life that she values and of collective human development (Robeyns, 2016). Religion is one of the civic freedoms that she may be able to realize in her daily living and, hence, also an element of collective human development (Sen, 2001; Robeyns, 2016, p. 403). Though a substantial and diverse literature exists on religious forces in civil society and human development (e.g., the Global Civil Society Report 2004/5 and other works reviewed by Alkire, 2006), little has been written on its role in China and China’s migrant labor economy.

The framework of the capability approach stipulates that individual freedom, in this case to practice religion, occurs in the context of opportunities, constraints, liberties, social arrangements, and facilities that meet basic survival needs. In the terminology of the capability approach, a person may have an intrinsic capability to be religious, but may be able to practice it only within contextual arrangements which may be conducive or oppressive. Sen (2001) argues that the interconnections between different capabilities, such as religion and education and how they are practiced by
persons, create social change (several dimensions). Sen (2001) concludes that “free and sustainable agency emerges as a major engine of [human] development” (p. 4).

Accordingly, based on a subjective or objective aspiration a person exercises agency that converts her intrinsic and instrumental resources into enhanced capabilities and achieved freedom - a changed state of being. Because the capability approach presupposes that constraints and opportunities are embedded in capabilities, the person identifies whether an action is taken on the basis of an imposed structural context, and whether the change constitutes enhanced freedoms or worsening deprivation. The participatory methodology attempts to capture exactly that, how a person feels about and judges a changed state. Thus, enhanced freedoms, individual and collective, describe and evaluate social justice.

In this chapter, we explore the interconnection between the young migrant women’s religiosity, other capabilities, agency, aspirations and their well-being.

**Methodology**

The study discussed in this chapter is part of a long-term ethnographic investigation of the lives of the daughters of one set of villages in the remote Qinling mountains in Shaanxi Province. The current sample of 23 rural young women was drawn from a study population of 31 rural girls/young women knowns as the “Xiangcun (village) Sisters” whose ages ranged from 16 to 24 and were interviewed by us in 2010, 2014, and 2015. Among the 23 Xiangcun Sisters, by 2015, 22 had become migrant laborers and 1 was still attending an urban senior secondary school.
The interviews held all three years addressed questions regarding the Xiangcun Sisters’ well-being in school and at work. We did not focus in our field research over the years on the role of religion nor in the interviews ask any single direct question about religion. We respected the request by our local contact Pang to avoid delving into the subject due to the precariousness of the political environment around organized, particularly “western” religion including the Catholic Church in China. What we know about religious practices of the villagers is based on stories villagers volunteered or mentioned in passing during interviews and from sixteen years of ethnographic field work in the village and surrounding area.

For this current research, we set out to focus on the role of their religion in the Xiangcun Sisters’ lives. Twenty-three of the 31 Xiangcun Sisters used words related to religion, such as church, faith, Bible, in a range of answers to the interview questions. We then categorized their responses in themes based on a fuzzy frame of intrinsic and instrumental capabilities and their context. The themes derive from theorizing the human development and capabilities approach (Sen, 2001), in the local context (Seeberg & Luo 2012; Seeberg, 2014) where what the Xiangcun Sisters “do” and “are” is analyzed in terms of domains of freedom to practice intrinsic and instrumental capabilities.

Limitations

We want to point out that of the 31 Xiangcun Sisters in the research population, only 23 volunteered information about their religion, its role in their lives and how
they felt about it. Among these 23, the minority who worked in Xi’an showed less regularity in their church attendance, however they were perhaps more adventurous than the Xiangcun Sisters in the smaller country city S and participated in the more intensive mission trips. We could not detect in their stories any differences in how they evaluated the importance of religion in their lives; their expressions were personal to their lives but shared many similarities. These commonalities we chose and categorized into themes. There were no stories of falling away from the church or the faith among the 23 Xiangcun Sisters who mentioned religion in their interviews. We cannot draw any inferences about the remaining 8 Sisters in the study population who did not use any of the terms related to religion. We cannot assume anything about how they felt about the incidental learning of faith that imbued the ethos of their village surroundings during their upbringing. Due to the delimitation of the study design, variability in strength or religiosity was not necessarily determinable.

**The Setting, Physical, Religious, and Time of Life**

The home of the Xiangcun Sisters was a remote mountain village lying at an altitude of 2,000 meters (6,000 feet) along the slopes of the massive Qinling mountain range in Shaanxi Province, western China. Their and surrounding counties were designated by the PRC central government as official “poverty counties.” in the second decade of the 20th century subsistence farming had been supplemented and by 2015 finally abandoned by the parents of the Xiangcun Sisters. A Confucian world view persisted emphasizing a close kinship network enforced through role obligations
(Seeberg & Luo, 2012). Yet these villagers had long considered themselves Catholic.

We include photos here that we took in 2016 to show how the villagers expressed their religion and its interaction with Chinese folk ways and Confucian traditions. The type of objects are completely normal aspects of life rather than formal religious practice, which we interpret to show that the religion had become part of the ethos of the village, absorbed seamlessly into everyday culture. The photo below of the Confucian home altar honors the family’s ancestors as well as Catholic icons.

![Family home altar](image)

*Figure 1. Family home altar.*

We see a similar symbiosis of beliefs in the photo of the family tomb constructed
in local Chinese tradition carrying graphic symbols such as the character for good fortune, dominated by a large Christian cross.

Figure 2. Family tomb.

The Catholic Diocese in Xi’an was reestablished after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1979) and had sent a priest and later a nun to the village to rebuild the church and revive the religious practices in the village. Oral history had not preserved the early history of when and how this village became Catholic. It was known only that there had always been a two-steeple church building, and the village head had served as the priest in the church. All the villagers had called themselves Catholic and life “always” revolved loosely around the Catholic and the Chinese traditional calendar. The question of the church’s allegiance to the Vatican or the Chinese
Catholic church was left unspoken, but the diocese in Xi’an was public and therefore associated with the official Chinese Catholic Church (personal communication, 2003).

Figure 3. Church compound at the entrance to the village center.

Village families had been attending church a few times a week often walking long distances down precarious mountain goat paths. The Xiangcun Sisters after they had gone away to board at the middle school in the market town, a four-hour walk away from the village, continued to come home to attend church on weekends. Those Xiangcun Sisters who had managed to pass their senior secondary qualifying exams had to board at schools either in city S. or metropolitan Xi’an. Here they had little free time due to extremely heavy study loads and attended church on a much less regular basis. The village priest, however, made it his calling to keep updated on their well-being through his connections with the priests and nuns of the diocese (personal communication, 2016).
When the families or young girls migrated to work in various cities, they attended Catholic churches there. By 2015, hardly any working age members of families remained living in the villages; most of the able-bodied young women and men had migrated for work outside. The Xiangcun Sisters who migrated to the prefecture-level city S. attended its Catholic church once or several times a week depending on time availability. They built strong bonds with fellow villagers who had migrated before them which helped secure their well-being in the unfamiliar urban environment.

The Xiangcun Sisters who migrated all the way to the capital city Xi’an or beyond to major metropolitan areas, faced a more dispersed setting. Though having a choice of several churches, they would face a long bus ride from their urban village. Due to the long distances, traffic and their busy work schedule, the Xiangcun Sister in Xi’an attended church less frequently than their Sisters in city S., every two to three weeks. They had fewer encounters with their Catholic relatives and friends from their home village either in the city churches or in their daily lives, hence there was less helpful bonding available to them. Some of the Xiangcun Sisters didn't get to know any members or the priest in the church. They lived a more anonymous life in Xi’an, though they stayed in close phone contact with their agemates and relatives from the village.

*Urban Villages in the City*

The migration to an urban area presented many challenges requiring adjustment even acculturation of the Xiangcun Sisters. Their lives in the city largely
took place in so-called “urban villages,” which held a connotation of “inner city ghettos,” and consisted of temporary transitional-housing neighborhoods densely populated by rural migrant workers. Serious safety-concerns in their living quarters were commonplace, theft and sexual harassment and even rape were reported frequently in public media. The pace of life was hectic where it had been slow-moving in the village. Migrants from peripheral villages or suburbs continued to flood into these urban villages, adding to overcrowding and a palpable sense of unrest, a sense of a frontier town.

*Age at Migration*

The age of the Xiangcun Sisters is part of the setting of their lives in village or city. Around the age of 16 to 19, in the days of village life, they would enter the phase of marriage negotiation and moving onto becoming a member of another family. In the early 21st century, this life phase began with the end of schooling, whether before or at the end of the compulsory 9 years. Deep traditions associated with our human biology may change in specifics but not quickly in importance. Hence, we consider the Xiangcun Sisters’ age at migration part of their life setting, a significant context structuring their lives. The prospect of marriage was a given, it would occur either sooner or later, as an inevitable next step. Their parents assumed they would marry in the faith and many among the Xiangcun Sisters preferred to marry into a Catholic family; it signified a favored and familiar moral standard. Pang Ranran said, "it would be best to find a Catholic man, if not, he needs to become Catholic before we get
married. In that case, he can understand why I go to church and we will share more common understanding in life." Though it was more likely they would find eligible Catholic men in the cities, the parents of the Xiangcun Sisters favored Catholic men from their or neighboring villages with whose families they were familiar. Parents expected to and made use of their connections and resources to arrange such a marriage – but most of their daughters told us they still had some choice in the matter. Some Xiangcun sisters resisted for years by not visiting their parents’ home (Seeberg & Luo, 2012), others consented without problems. We did hear two stories of forced arrangements that ended in bitterness and one in the death of the husband (field notes 2015), but both Xiangcun Sisters regained their independence.

Next, we will describe how the Sisters saw the role that religion played in their lives using the dimensions of the theorized capability approach to this specific setting.

**Religion and Moral Education as Identity Formation**

Identity formation is a fundamental goal of adolescence (Erickson 1968). In order to construct a strong, positive, and stable self-identity, an intrinsic capability, then an adolescent must be able to incorporate a positively valued social identity as well. Vermeer (2010) claimed that religious education in schools has often served to promote the simultaneous development of both a positive personal and a social identity such as people need in modern society. We will explore how the informal and incidental religious education the Xiangcun Sisters received promoted their personal
and social identity development as they grew up in the village and then migrated to the cities. Changing their setting that drastically from a sleepy impoverished rural village to a fast-paced, unstable urban village added a greater difficulty and urgency to achieving a stable positive personal and social identity for the Xiangcun Sisters.

**Personal identity formation**

Many Xiangcun sisters spoke about how during years of Bible study and going to church, they absorbed their personal identity and values from the teachings of the Bible such as the importance of being “kind and nice,” “tolerant and considerate,” to “have a big heart,” and “forget bad things.” Luo Mengmeng took a practical lesson from these Bible teachings,

> If somebody’s words hurt me, I used to feel bad, even hated the person. After reading the Bible, I think it’s meaningless to feel that way. Even if I complain that I got hurt and became unhappy, the other person may not feel anything. Sometimes it’s good to forget something. I need to learn to be tolerant and understanding (2015 interview).

For the Xiangcun Sisters the religious teachings and doctrine set the moral standards for their behavior. "I connect the Bible with real life and I’ve learned to be a good person" (Pang Ranting, 2015 interview). Vermeer (2010) described religious education as informal and incidental learning of moral values. The Xiangcun Sisters demonstrated this process. They learned from their religious studies how to manage their sense of self, how to enhance their personal identity to be more consistent with
the norms of their community, and how to experience greater well-being. Thus we agreed with Huang's (2014) elaboration on Beijing Christian migrants that “their familiar faith … meant … ways of understanding, approaching, and experiencing God, and of course new understandings of self and the world” (p. 246).

Social identity formation in the City

Social identity "entails the transmission and internalization of core values of the dominant cultural and social system … It is necessary in order to create ... a minimum level of cultural-normative integration" (Vermeer, 2010, p. 110). When the Xiangcun Sister migrated to a city, they were either encapsulated in the school grounds or shunted into a segregated migrant worker labor market ("Most of my colleagues are migrants from other rural regions", shared by most of them) and urban village neighborhoods [chengzhong cun] shared with other rural migrants [waidi ren]. Migrants were residentially, economically, and socially marginalized by the urban middle class. Church, however, was one of the few physical spaces where they could mingle with urban residents. “You know I go to church. If I go there a few more times, I may get to know more people there and make friends with them” (Duan Yanting, 2015 interview).

Since all of the Xiangcun Sisters attended urban churches regularly, they were exposed to some core values of the urban cultural and social system in the safety of the church and in the process of socializing with urbanites within church, which contributed to the formation of social identity as Vermeer had posed. Their religious
agency achieved for them a minimum level of cultural-normative integration into modern city life.

**Personal Security**

A large body of literature (Li et al., 2004; Feng et al., 2005; Shi et al., 2012) documents that premarital sexual relations, sexual reproductive health risks and HIV-STD risk were encountered frequently by young rural-to-urban migrants in China. Massage centers or beauty parlors especially in urban villages secretly and illegally operated prostitution on the side (Cunguan, 2014; Liu, 2007; Xu, 2011). Many of the Xiangcun Sisters claimed that they disagreed with premarital sexual relations or prostitution because of their religious belief.

My family also asked me to protect myself, which means I shouldn’t live with my boyfriend before marriage. They are strict on this with me. You know, I am a Catholic, I believe in the tradition that a woman should not have sex with man before marriage” (Pang Jin, 2015 interview).

I worked as a cashier in a massage parlor. Later … I got to know … they switched me to be a receptionist and told me to solicit the sexual services to customers. It’s not appropriate for me as a Catholic to do this, so I quit the job (Pang Linsha, 2015 interview).
The Xiangcun Sisters were clear about what they had been taught in the church, that it was a sin to have sexual relationships before marriage. This helped them to protect themselves against such possibilities or threats in city-scapes.

**Manage Intimate Relationships**

Young migrant women world-wide are often the most vulnerable groups in the city due to their age, gender and isolation from families (Kristof & WuDunn, 2010; He et al., 2012; Guo et al., 2015). The Xiangcun Sisters learned how to handle healthy relationships with young men in church related activities. Lu Xiaofen learned from the priest, "Our Father in the church always teaches us to get along with guys in the proper way." She illustrated, "I know one lady in the church who had a “sugar daddy.” … I have been Catholic since childhood; my mom is a Catholic too. I knew definitely that I shouldn’t get involved in such kind of relationships (Lu Xiaofen, 2014 interview).

Pang Jin learned how to manage relationship from a dating event for single Catholics,

Last year my mom asked me to join an event for single people in a church in Xi’an. The event taught us how to get prepared for a relationship and how to manage it. I learned that when two people are in a relationship, one shouldn’t be very demanding but give the other enough personal space. One should be considerate while requesting the other to do something (Pang Jin, 2015 interview).
The Xiangcun Sisters were often without the proper guidance on managing intimate relationship since many were on their own and isolated from their families. They learned how to handle healthy relationships with young men in the church, which took on an in-loco-parentis role for the young.

**Religion and Socio-economic Facilities**

Moreover, church, as a social gathering place, also served as an informal source for social and job opportunities. Huang (2014) found that churches provide essential social connections for migrant workers to the city since members of the church share information about job opportunities and other information about how to manage city life. Some of the Xiangcun Sisters benefitted from social networking in the church.

My second internship was recommended by a friend in the church. My uncle is a priest in the Eastern Catholic Church in Xi’an. He knew one “auntie” whose husband worked in an architecture firm…. I went to the church a lot and met the auntie frequently. She liked me and always asked me what I was doing. I told her I wanted to find an internship and then she asked her husband to find me an intern position (Pang Junjun, 2015 interview); and he did.

Others had difficulties connecting with other people and the priests in the urban churches, perhaps due to their newness, relative infrequency of attendance or communication style. I am not familiar with people who go to my church. I chatted
with a few of them, maybe 4 or 5 people, but none of them can recall my name (Luo Mengmeng, 2015 interview).

Some of the Xiangcun Sisters recalled that they socialized with people in a variety of activities sponsored by churches, such as summer Bible camp, pilgrimage trips, which provided the Xiangcun Sisters with opportunities to interact with Catholics from different social and economic backgrounds who also potentially opened new occupational opportunities. All Catholics from different places came to Xi’an L. district to join in the camp. There were college students, high school students and middle school students (Lu Xiaofen, 2014 interview).

Pan Ranran had gone on pilgrimages organized by the church to places as far away as Hongkong, Macao, and Inner Mongolia. On the way she learned about the tourism industry which stimulated her interest in becoming a tour guide in the future. She gained some social capital as well when one of the drivers was willing to introduce her to the tourism company where he worked.

Pang Ranfei went on a pilgrimage trip to Songcheng where she said “people wore delicate make-up” which motivated her to work to become involved in the cosmetics industry in a bigger city.

The pilgrimage trips exposed the Xiangcun Sisters to multiple ways of living and inspired them to seek alternative career paths they valued. In this way, the activities sponsored by churches not only provide essential social connections for migrant
workers so that they can have better lives in the city, but also inspired them to pursue possible life styles.

**Church and Formal Schooling**

We have seen above how the Church sometimes served as a community and informal learning center where the Xiangcun Sisters were able to learn and consolidate religious values and how to apply them in their lives. We have no record of any of the Xiangcun Sisters having taken organized catechism instruction in the church in the village or in the city. Though it may seem obvious, religious content was not taught in formal schooling the curriculum of which is under strict central government control.

However, interactions between the church and the schools did occur, usually through the offices of individuals with connections in both spheres. Two of the Xiangcun Sisters, Dang Yanfei and Pang Junjun, received financial aid from the church in city S. and Xi’an respectively for their secondary⁷ and tertiary schooling respectively. Pang Junjun (2015 interview) explained,

> I went to a tertiary school in Xi'an. A non-profit foundation and the Catholic Church in Xi’an supported me with the tuition and partial living expenses. I covered the rest expense myself, which was not a big burden for me.

In her case our local contact Pang got her the scholarship support through his
association with the Xi’an diocese. He was employed by Catholic Relief Services, his sister was a nun in the diocese, and his elder brother as former head of the village often collaborated closely with the village priest.

For Dang Yanfen, the church in city S. provided accommodation in their buildings for Catholic students going to secondary schools in the city. Dang Yanfen was one of the students. She shared, “[living in the dormitory of] the Church is better than living in my home [housing conditions are better]. I live and eat for free in the church. The Fathers and Sisters take care of us very well” (2010 interview). Her uncle was an elder in the church administration of city S. and had made this arrangement for her.

The churches in Xi’an were helpful in another way looking the well-being of the children in the village. Every summer the village priest contacted Xi’an clergy to recruit some of their parishioners who were college students to volunteer in the village. Those volunteers conducted arts, music, and dance summer camps in the village for the younger “left-behind” children. The contact with the college students broadened the horizon of the village children and directly enhanced their well-being. Most importantly their visits opened up new vistas of possibilities and aspirations for advanced education for the remote village children.

Although we could not identify any connection between church attendance or expressions of religious faith and educational attainment level, it is clear some of the
Xiangcun sisters did benefit educationally from having relatives in the church hierarchy.

**Religion and Agency and Aspirations**

Kabeer (2000) elevated agency to a place of significant importance in women’s empowerment similar to Sen (2001; see above). Agency to her is composed of resources, be they human, social or material, which are used in ways deemed desirable by the individual. It is more complex than observable actions and encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose individuals bring to their action, including intangible cognitive processes such as reflection and analysis as well as instrumental observable actions to attempt to achieve something one has reason to value. When these values belong to the future, they are aspirations. Likewise, Appadurai (2004) argued that ideas of the future are embedded in culture as norms and that “aspiration is a ‘navigational capacity’ that provides a map of norms that leads to future success” (p. 69). It is therefore difficult to separate agency from aspirations, because without aspirations, agency would be meaningless, lacking motivation, purpose, and action. From the narratives of the Xiangcun Sisters, it was evident how religiosity, agency and aspirations were inextricably connected.

Pang Ranting connected the teachings of Bible with real life and aspired to be "a good person" (2015 interview). Duan Yanting intended to attend the urban church more frequently because she aspired to “get to know more people there and make
friends with them” (2015 interview). Pang Linsha deemed a task she was assigned at work as inappropriate “for me as a Catholic (prostitution is immoral and illegal), so I quit the job” (2015 interview). Pang Jin “learned” about how to handle intimate relationships at a church workshop in preparation for marriage (2015 interview). Pang Junjun wanted to get an internship when she was still in school and pursued a relationship with a well-connected “auntie” in church (2015). She and Dang Yanfen exerted agency to acquire and make good use of the financial support of their churches to achieve their educational aspirations.

We also found that active participation in church increased aspirations to be deeply religious and to act on that faith. Lu Xiaofen (2014 interview) reflected “after that summer’s camp, I am more determined about my faith. I want to strengthen others’ faith and organize charitable activities, such as helping elders who don’t have children, chat with them so they will not feel lonely.”

**Religion and Enhanced Well-being**

In this section, we discuss how the sense of being religious, their religiosity served as one of the dimensions directly interconnected with the well-being that the Xiangcun Sisters experienced.

Sabine Alkire (2006) argued that the intrinsic value of religion “may contribute directly to a person’s flourishing or contentedness, and comprise a dimension of human well-being” (p. 502). The Xiangcun Sisters’ spoke about the
value of religion to them in a similar manner, feeling "happy," "peaceful," "relaxed" in church, and "feeling good to read the Bible in church quietly," or, when Pang Xuxu for example felt "upset, burdensome, or irritated," she wanted to go to church to clear her mind. Pang Ranran shared, "I like going to church from the bottom of my heart. I like the environment, like the truth of the Bible." They genuinely enjoyed going to church and internalized the sense of the church, the sermons, and the Bible such that it constituted well-being per se. The religious doctrine served as a moral standard that guided them as strangers, living their Catholic faith in the often perilous urban environment. To the Xiangcun Sisters their religion was an intrinsic, very personal faith. Our findings confirmed Jianbo Huang’s (2014) claim that Protestant rural migrants had an emotional connection with church gatherings, prayer and personal experiences. The Xiangcun Sisters attended church regularly, regardless of inconvenience, had such an emotional connection.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the role of informal, incidental religious-moral learning in the Chinese Catholic Church in contributing to the young migrant women’s well-being as they broke into the urban migrant labor market. We found that religious education and capability development interconnected to contribute positively to their adjustment to city life. The informal and incidental religious education of the Xiangcun Sisters included learning from sermons and
church teachings, from Bible lessons, and other church related activities, which promoted their personal and social identity formation and enhanced their well-being. They had internalized the Catholic doctrine on virginity and chastity, which kept most of them out of trouble, protected them from sexually risky behavior, inappropriate intimate relationships, or involvement in prostitution. Attendance in urban Catholic Churches afforded them social connections which helped expand their occupational opportunities and contact with urban life. Two of the Xiangcun Sisters even had their secondary schooling financed by the Church through the intercession of well-connected relatives.

Both the religious context of their village of origin and the informal, incidental religious education contributed to the Xiangcun Sisters’ formation of agency and aspirations, and their achievement of relative well-being. In the stories of migration told by the Xiangcun Sisters, we see evidence of Sen’s (2001) point that “free and sustainable agency emerges as a major engine of [human] development” (p. 4).

Having the social and economic support and internalizing moral imperatives of the church community served as a resource and enhanced their capabilities in an interconnected spiral with acting (agency) on their aspirations advancing further capabilities. Sen’s evaluative paradigm that interconnected capabilities engage agency helped us to view the Xiangcun Sisters as powerful agents who pursue, achieve and accumulate capabilities as they convert intrinsic and instrumental resources. In the
process, the Xiangcun Sisters achieved well-being, demonstrating the process of empowerment as strangers in the city.

The experience of the Xiangcun Sisters is consistent with Huang’s (2014) findings that for “rural migrants who find themselves in a strange city, a support group becomes even more significant and attractive” (p. 244).

Despite recent government suppression of religious practices, using a participatory capability approach, the Xiangcun Sisters’ and other participants’ stories along with field work observations revealed the workings of faith and religious practices in the lives of young women migrants. We are curious to see whether using participatory approaches focused on capabilities and context rather than policy and structural barriers can reveal the strength and direction of religion in social change. It is entirely plausible that the agency promoting elements of religion and the practices of religious communities enhance a vector of change turned further toward social justice. That is, if Sen is right and we agree that he is, that the enhancement of freedom is the objective of a better life and of collective human development (Robeyns, 2016), then our conclusion that the Xiangcun Sisters have exercised agency based on their religious values and converted this resource into enhanced capabilities and achieved freedoms they value, points to the creation of social change in the direction of greater social justice.

Though this is but a small case study, we believe it indicates that religious belief can contribute to a more harmonious society, an aim of the Chinese government. For
the discourse of international development, drawing attention to the role of religion
exercised as “free and sustainable agency” can “emerge as a major engine of [human]
development” (Sen, 2001p. 4) and promote lifelong learning, goal 4 of the Sustainable
Development Goals.

7022 word text, 424 in endnotes, 700+ in references
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Endnotes


2 On May 20, 2015, President and Party General Secretary Xi Jinping at the CCP Party Central United Front Work Conference reiterated that members must “handle religious affairs … [on the] principle of independence, and actively guide religions to adapt to socialist society” (Xinhua Net, May 20, 2015), warning that foreign influences were attempting to turn Chinese domestic religious groups against the party and state. This signaled an ongoing clamp-down on religious expression, including the removal of crosses from churches (Guardian, May 20, 2015; Johnson, May 21, 2015), a three-year campaign including demolition of hundreds of churches (CECC 2015, p. 8), arrests of priests and pastors (Wong, February 26, 2016), and
suppression of non-state-licensed religions, such as “house-churches” (Johnson, September 25, 2016).

3 New rules about to be enacted threaten ‘those who provide conditions for illegal religious activities’ with fines and confiscation of property, …restrict contact with religious institutions overseas, … must not harm national security” (Johnson, 10-8-2016, A4, A9)

4 The government protects what it calls “normal religious activity, …not to use religion to engage in activities that … interfere with the educational system of the state … within government-sanctioned religious organizations and registered places of worship” (Constitution of China, Chapter 2, Article 36) but does not extend to informal moral education. That space is covered by required courses in moral education in public schools, called “thought and moral” [sixiang pinde] in primary, “government” [zhengzhi ke] in middle, and Marxism Studies [Makesi zhuyi zhexue] in higher education.

5 The exception was that two Xiangcun Sisters were housed in the church or otherwise supported by relatives in the church.

6 Huang (2014) found that in Beijing the many house churches often formed on the basis of regional affiliation [laoxiang]. We think the difference is explained by the big difference in the numbers of Protestant migrant workers and house churches in the yet larger city of Beijing than Catholic migrants in Xi’an and small number of
churches.

7 Senior secondary schooling is not compulsory and not supported by the state. Tuition is often as high as for higher education.