A Space of Her Own Making?

Women working for 'Religiously-Inspired Charitable Organisations' (RICOs) in their search for meaning in contemporary China

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

In the past two decades there has been increased scholarship on the role and work of 'Religiously Inspired Charitable Organisations' (RICOs) in contemporary China (Laliberte 2003; 2015; Fielder 2012; 2016; 2019; Carino 2015; 2016; 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019). RICOs are becoming a 'more active and vocal sector of society, both in China and abroad (Fielder 2019b). Their growing presence and increasing relevance make them a priority for study. Despite this, there have been few studies that examine women's motivations, participations and lived experiences in these organisations', even though they make up the majority of their workforces (Huang 2009; Huang et al. 2011; Carino 2017; Fielder 2019a). By analysing RICOs socially 'located' within the PRC, this thesis will make a unique contribution to understanding women's lives and work in RICOs in China today.

This ethnographic study centres on the narratives of thirty women across two RICOs – one Buddhist and one Protestant – living and working in the People's Republic of China (PRC). Undertaking a comparative study of different RICOs provides an original contribution to scholarship, with others focusing on women's experiences in one particular organisation (Huang 2003; 2008). This thesis will examine the relational ways in which RICOs create and provide women with 'vehicles for activism and the dissemination of meaning, identity and cultural codes' (Yavuz 2003: ix, as cited in Fielder 2019: 77). By conducting a spatial analysis of these organisations that is grounded in the 'everyday', it will provide new empirical insights into contemporary forms of female agency and religious subjectivity in China. This thesis will make an original theoretical contribution through its construction of a social capital framework of *bonds*, *binds* and *bridges.* Furthermore, it will analyse how the work of these individual women can be viewed as 'everyday activism' and as part of a want for wider social change in Chinese society (Jaschok & Shui 2011; Pink 2012; Palmer 2018; Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019a).

By centring the narratives of the women who are so often 'silenced' in scholarship, this thesis makes an original contribution that unveils their voices, needs, wants and practices. Their stories and experiences are not an 'add-on' as is the case in other scholarship on religiously inspired social welfare. As a result, this thesis makes a unique contribution to scholarship on the Chinese location where religion continues to be a relevant force in society, as well as gender social roles being reinterpreted, negotiated and enforced in the wake of great socioeconomic change. In doing so, I will argue that RICOs, and the women

who work for them, provide and create 'opportunity spaces' where meaning-making practices are developed and discursively embodied. It is through RICOs that alternative views of women's development can be harnessed and acted upon. Ultimately, I will argue that women are entering, reinterpreting, negotiating and innovating RICOs into *spaces of their own making* in China today.

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Acronyms

ACWF – All-China Women's Federation

CCP – Chinese Communist Party

FBO – Faith-Based Organisation

PRC – People's Republic of China

RICO – Religiously-Inspired Charitable Organisation

SARA – State Administration for Religious Affairs

UNFCW – United Nations Fourth Conference on Women

Preface

It was a cool spring day in 2017 when I rushed to the office of one of the RICOs. I was flustered from getting off at the wrong metro station and the unfamiliar winding streets of the city. It wouldn't be until over six months later that these streets would come to feel natural and comforting to me as I had traced similar steps across them week after week, month after month. Ms. Y[1] walked out of the building to greet me, putting on oversized sunglasses and running her hands through her impeccably styled hair. She had an air of sophisticated confidence and was at ease navigating the streets that had 'called her back to China' after having studied and worked abroad for years.

Later that afternoon, after she had shown me around two of the RICO's programmes, her professional air dropped slightly. She suddenly seemed tired, as if at once her face went a shade of grey and her mind seemed to drift elsewhere. I asked her gently how she was doing and she told me that one of her relatives was very ill. She spoke about how this was an added pressure to her already busy schedule as she felt she was expected to visit the hospital every evening after work. I told her how sorry I was to hear that and that it must be tough to juggle so much at once. I then fell silent because I felt she needed time to decide whether she wanted to tell me more.

> *'You know, one evening, I sat down and realised how empty I felt. I felt neither happy nor sad, just empty. […] I felt overwhelmed by the pressures of family, society and sometimes of work. I felt overwhelmed by my want to control everything – I felt empty.'*

Ms. Y's feelings of emptiness are shared by the majority of the women in this study, many reflecting on the arising conflicts that had propelled their search for meaning in their everyday. This search had led all of them to work for their current RICO. It was on this cool spring morning that I began to really ask what these spaces might mean for these women and how, in return, they might be shaping these organisations?

Would an understanding of these spaces and women's motivations and participation in them tell us more about the impacts of changing experiences of self, work and family in contemporary urban China? Could it provide insights into how Chinese women are negotiating gendered public discourses on the 'feminine ideal'? What could it tell us about the experiences of those that make up the majority of these organisations? And possibly,

[1] All names used as pseudonyms. My decision-making process for this and the choice of names is discussed later in this chapter in the Methodology section.

could it even tell us what role women are playing in the wider socioeconomic development of contemporary China as these organisations continue to grow in size, relevance and influence? It was these questions that I scribbled furiously in my journal as I sat on the train after our meeting. And it was these questions that I would come back to repeatedly as I wrote this thesis.

Therefore, it is their voices, their time and their work that propelled this thesis forward and without them, none of it would have been possible. This thesis is dedicated to them. It is dedicated to their stories, their experiences, their worries, their hopes and their determination. I will forever be grateful to them for taking the time to share these with me and I can only hope that this thesis does justice to the time we spent together.

1. Introduction

This thesis will investigate the motivations, participation and lived experiences of women working for 'Religiously-Inspired Charitable Organisations' (RICOs)[2] in contemporary China. It will examine the relational ways in which RICOs create and provide 'opportunity spaces' for the women who work in them (Fielder 2019a: 77; Yavuz 2003). By exploring the ways in which these women also shape, develop and drive forward these spaces, this thesis will demonstrate the various ways this relational spatial dynamic informs their individual searches for meaning in contemporary urban China; a setting where religion is in resurgence (Yang, M.M.H 2008; Stark & Liu 2011; Goossaert & Palmer 2011) and gender social roles have been redefined in the wake of great socioeconomic change (Honig & Hershatter 1988; Evans 1997; Yang, M.M.H 1999b; Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018; Xie, K. 2019).

Through their narratives, this thesis will highlight the views, voices and work done by the women who make up the majority of these organisations' workforces, but who are not normally the focus of scholarship that examines these types of organisations (Wickeri 1989; Carino 2015; 2016; 2017; Wu, K. 2015; Wielander 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Wu, K. 2019); understandings of religion and its expressions (Yang, F. 2005; 2012; Goossaert & Palmer 2011; Palmer et al. 2011); or those that examine women's social roles, status and changing experiences of work in contemporary urban China (Tsui & Rich 2002; Yang 2012; Zeng & Thorneman 2014; Cooke, F. & Xiao, Y. 2014; Hong-Fincher 2014; Zuo 2016; Xie 2019). This will be done by conducting a comparative examination of two main RICOs – one Buddhist and one Protestant – whilst also being informed by interviews and observations done with other RICOs in Huadong.[3] In doing so, this thesis will provide crucial insight into the nature of the women's participation, informing us about their own lived experiences in and through these spaces, as well as how they are understanding their sense of self and relationships to others. It will, therefore, provide a needed contribution to the disciplines of gender and religious studies in China, as well as the scholarship that seeks to better understand the role and impact of RICOs in contemporary China. In doing so, this thesis will address current gaps in scholarship[4] and provide new insights into the

[2] My decision to use the term RICO instead of the widely used 'FBO' is explored in more detail later in this chapter and relates to the specific socio-political context that these organisations emerged from and have developed in (Fielder 2015; 2019a).
[3] The decision to keep the organisations and locations anonymous is discussed in Chapter Two – Methodology and Methods.
[4] See Section 1.1 of this chapter.

motivations, lived experiences and religious subjectivities of women working for RICOs in contemporary Chinese society. This will be done using a spatial theoretical lens that provides a gendered reading of these organisations whose growing relevance, size and influence makes them a vital point of study if we are to understand China's continuing socioeconomic development and women's role in these processes.

This thesis has three main research questions that developed not only in response to the gaps in the relevant scholarship, but also in relation to my theoretical lens. This centres on bringing together 'gender', 'space' and the 'everyday' in order to examine whether or not RICOs provide women with 'vehicles for activism and the dissemination of meaning, identity and cultural codes' (Yavuz 2003: ix, as cited in Fielder 2019a: 77) in contemporary China.

The three interlinked research questions are as follows:

1. Why are women choosing to work for RICOs in contemporary China? And in what ways does this work take place?
2. To what extent do RICOs provide spaces of agency for women working for them?
3. How does the above reflect upon wider debates on religion, gender and religiously inspired social welfare in contemporary China?

I will now discuss scholarship on women and religiously-inspired philanthropy in China, alongside important sociohistorical contextualisation, in order to fully explore the current gaps in scholarship that this thesis seeks to redress, as well as to highlight the innovative and creative discourses and theories that I will interact with through this thesis.

1.1. Women and 'Religiously Inspired Charitable Organisations' (RICOs) in China: Identifying Gaps

When examining the diverse literatures that could offer perspectives on women's participation in RICOs in China, there remains 'silences' created by feminist scholarship because it does not include the voices or experiences of religious women in China (Jaschok 2003: 659; Jaschok & Shui 2011). This is coupled with gaps in current scholarship on RICOs that, whilst acknowledging women's pivotal roles in these types of organisation and what their participation might offer them does not, primarily focus on women's narratives or their lived experiences of these spaces (Carino 2014; 2016; Wu 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019a). This speaks to a lack of interaction between the academic fields of religion and gender, both internationally and in China specifically (see King 2004; Jia, Kang & Yao 2014; Kang, X. 2014; 2017: 1-2). Therefore, it is imperative

to explore why and how this has happened and what this means for the study of women's participation in RICOs in contemporary China.

1.1.1. Fractured Conversations: Gender and Religion in China

The most recent wave of women's studies in China developed in the mid-1980s from within an emerging urban-based women's movement (Chow et al. 2004: 163; Wesoky 2002; Zhang 1995). This movement was characterised by its focus on the problems women were facing due to China's rapid socioeconomic transformations. It differed from earlier movements in women's studies in China as it was constituted and 'strongly advocated' by women, rather than male academics (Chow et al. 2014: 163).[5] However, the development of a gender perspective in Chinese academia saw a unique turning point directly after the United Nations Fourth Conference on Women (UNFCW), and associated NGO Forum, that took place in Beijing in 1995. The UNFCW prompted academic exchange between those working in and outside China.[6] It is regarded as the moment when the concept of 'gender' was officially introduced into Chinese academia (Lin, C 1997; Xu, F. 2009: 203), as well as driving forward 'gender training' in development discourse rolled out in rural areas of China in the early 2000s (Gao 1999; Tan & Li 1995).[7] The conference also saw the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) adopt the term 'gender' within its publications – '*China's Women's News*' and '*Collection of Women's Studies*' (Chow et al. 2004: 180).

This introduction of gender – conceptualised as a sociocultural construction – created a growth of new scholarship using this concept as part of their academic approach and

[5] Chow et al. (2004: 163) note that even though large public discussion on issues regarding women in China began in the mid-1980s, it was the New Cultural Movement of the May Fourth Era (1915-1925) that is considered to be the 'first wave' of studies on women in contemporary China. This movement was characterised by 'anti-imperialist, anti-Confucian, nationalist' sentiments that aimed to rejuvenate the nation and brought 'women's issues' into central focus for both public and academic discourse. They argue that this was aided by the 'introduction of Western ideologies, including Marxism, socialism, feminism and anarchism' (ibid).

[6] There were other key 'driving forces' that prompted this gender focus including the 'Engendering China' conference that took place at Harvard University in 1992 where women's studies scholars from China contributed to an academic conference held outside of the country (Gilmartin et al. 1994; Chow et al. 2004: 179). The second was the Tianjin International Conference on 'Chinese Women and Development – Status, Health and Employment' that took place in 1993 and was jointly organised by the Chinese Society for Women's Studies (founded in 1989 in the USA) and the Tianjin Normal University's Centre for Women's Studies (Chow et al. 2004: 179).

[7] The UNFCW also marked the introduction of development concepts regarding 'women's empowerment' and 'sustainable human-centred development' from 'global feminisms' scholarship and recent shifts made in wider discourse regarding gender and women's socioeconomic progress (Chow et al. 2004: 180; see also Tomalin 2013: 150-155).

repositioning current work to negate 'the narrowly focused discourse on femininity' (Chow et al. 2004: 181; Lin et al. 1998; Liu 2001; Brownell & Wasserstrom 2002). This included academic work that linked together considerations of gender and development theory in order to 'dispel the myth of equating economic growth with women's liberation' that had come to characterise what was understood as 'women's equality' during the Mao era (Chow el al. 2004: 181).[8] However, this was not an uncritical exchange, with various scholars noting that literal translations of the terms 'gender' and 'feminism' into Mandarin did not work or offer anything truly new to the debate (Wang, Z 1998; Wang, J 2000a; 2000b; Zhang 2001; Shih 2002; Chow et al. 2004; Spakowski 2011; 2018). Furthermore, Shih (2002: 99-110) argued that scholarship that was being developed from within the Western imaginary was being 'placed upon' Chinese women with no 'analysis of the complexity of local situations'. Li Xiaojiang's (as cited in Shih 2002: 99-110) work supports this, remarking that Western feminism characterised Chinese women's development in terms of 'statism', rather than providing imperative contextualisation of their lives and prioritising their personal narratives in their analysis. This thesis seeks to address this potential shortfall when examining women's socially lived realities in contemporary China by placing their narratives and experiences at the centre of my analysis, as well as paying careful attention to the 'complexity' of the local when doing this.[9]

Out of this critical engagement between Western and Chinese feminists, both inside and outside academia, came profound and seminal works that still hold relevance to those seeking to understand the lives of contemporary Chinese women, the spaces that they occupy and what it means to understand 'feminism' and 'feminist research' in China (Spakowski 1994; 2011; 2018; Hsiung et al. 2001; Barlow 2001; Judd 2002; Chow et al. 2004; Chen, L. 2008; 2016; Xu, F. 2009; Hong-Fincher 2013; 2014; Yu, Z. 2015). One of the key works published in English in the wake of China's Reform Era is Honig & Hershatter's (1988) work '*Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s'* that provides an in-depth study of women's daily lives during these rapid socioeconomic changes. It explores Chinese women's voices on topics such as sexuality, family and marriage. Another key work is Evan's (1997) '*Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant*

[8] The slogan of the Mao era of 'women holding half the sky' is argued to have 'created a myth of sameness between the genders' and to have paved over gendered inequalities that existed during this period (Chow et al. 2004: 178).

[9] Judd (2002: 7) highlights how 'most Western feminist observers' unintentionally 'orientalised' the situation of Chinese women and their movements for social change, 'allowing them to appear as passive figures' who were powerless in the face of 'exaggerated state power'.

Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender Since 1949' that offers insight into how sex and sexuality was constructed and discussed in various forms of published materials since the inception of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and provides vital background to current public discourses on gender, women and sexuality in China.[10]

Yet, whilst the above feminist scholarship has played a pivotal role in Chinese studies in its varied focuses and disciplines, certain scholars have noted a continued lack of focus on the voices and experiences of religious women within these particular discourses (Jaschok 2003; Jaschok & Shui 2011: 12).[11] Instead the focus has been on the 'organising actions' of women in various other (secular) spaces and organisations (Hsiung et al. 2001; Shui 2001; Yang 1999), especially in relation to the structural and organising capacity of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF).[12] This 'neglect' of religion has occurred in core works that provide extensive literature surveys of women's development in China, such as Hershatter's (2007) *'Women in China's Long Twentieth Century',* which only briefly mentions Confucianism and Christianity. This is also true of *'Chinese Femininities; Chinese Masculinities'* by Brownell & Wasserstrom (2002) that sought to examine different phases of Chinese history using a 'gender lens' to shine light on the nuances that this could provide. However, the voices of religious women's experiences were not included.

These 'daunting silences' of religious women's lives, beliefs and practices – both in relation to RICOs, as well as other institutions and groups – has been argued to be a product of the secular and socialist bias held within Chinese feminist studies where a woman's emancipation can only be found outside of religion (Jaschok 2003: 659; also see Jaschok & Shui 2011). Similar arguments have been made by postcolonial religious feminists in other contexts who state that this bias still exists due to religion being seen as a 'tool of the patriarchy' that seeks to oppress women (Cavaliere 2012: 36; see also

[10] She would continue to explore these gendered public discourses in later work examining particular images of femininity (2000) and what this meant in relation to changing ideas of the 'ideal wife' in China (2002).

[11] Discourses written and published in English.

[12] In the 1950s, the ACWF served as an instrumental tool in achieving legislative and societal change for women. It was set up as having the dual objectives of communicating Party policy top-down to women, as well as representing women by bringing concerns up from the grassroots (Milwertz 2002: 21). However, during the Cultural Revolution, the organisation became 'de-legitimated', seen as 'bourgeois' and an instrument of the elite (Howell 2003: 193). Despite some provincial branches beginning to operate again in the 1970s, it wasn't until the consolidation of reformist power in 1978 that the ACWF became fully operational again (Ibid; Davin 1976: 57). It re-established itself as the main mass vehicle through which the needs of women could be heard, allowing it to build a staff and membership of over eighty thousand by the end of 2000 (Howell 2003: 193).

Fox 2001; Juschka 2001; Mahmood 2012). Despite a growth in feminist scholarship on women's agency and religious traditions both in regard to China (Jaschok & Shui 2000; 2011 and Jaschok 2003: 656), as well as internationally (Berkley 1998; Brink and Mencher 1997; Bradley 2010; Mahmood 2012; Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska 2013), there remain disagreements on how women's agency is constituted, enacted and sought after within patriarchal structures, especially when considered in relation to religion.[13]

The same argument that religious women's voices and experiences are neglected in gender studies in China is also made about the academic discipline of religion in China. Jaschok & Shui (2011: 12) argue that women are 'scarcely visible' within literatures written 'in Western languages' despite women making up the majority of religious adherents, causing a lack of exploration on how this might impact upon their personal and communal lives in China. This 'neglect' is echoed in the writing of Jia, Kang & Yao (2014: 13) who state that there needs to be further examination of the 'creative transformations' that occur in women's belief and practice of religious traditions. This statement that also rings true when discussing the impact of the party-state's bifurcation of 'religion' and 'superstition' in religious policy and regulation on female religiosity, especially in a time of acknowledged religious revival (ibid: 13; Jaschok 2003; Jaschok 2015).

This is not to say that there has not been critical work done on women's religiosity and lived experiences in contemporary China. Huang, Valussi and Palmer (2011: 108-121) explore the intersections of gender, sexuality and religion in relation to popular Chinese deities, as well as gendered understandings of body, roles and values. They also begin to explore the role of women in the revival religion in China since the 1980s, including references to large charitable organisations whose members are primarily women (ibid: 117-120). This is complemented by Julia Huang's work on the Buddhist Compassion Tzu-Chi Foundation where she examines the gendered charisma of the organisation's female leader Master Cheng Yen (2008; 2009). This builds on her earlier work that explored women's reactions to their leader, including the use of testimonies and 'weeping' (2003).

A foundational work in this field is Jaschok and Shui's (2011) work titled '*Women, Religion and Space in China'* that provides crucial insight into the narratives of women from Islamic, Daoist and Catholic traditions, tracing the long heritage of female religious

[13] This is discussed further in Section 1.2.4, where I will engage with theoretical considerations surrounding the notion of 'agency' and how it will be explored within this thesis.

sites in Chinese social history.[14] In this study, they argue that whilst ancestral worship and social structures were dominated by patriarchal and patrilineal practices, often only giving women the options of wife and mother in family life, organised religion would instead offer not just an escape from these defined roles, but also agency to cross over the 'spatial segregation' that was often drawn between what was possible for men and what was possible for women (Jaschok & Shui, 2011: 9). They argue that women in these religious traditions are associated with space (ibid). In doing so, Chinese women have historically chosen to disrupt the spatial assigning of the 'hearth' as a female, womb-centred identity towards a 'temple' life spent in female religious communities and places of worship (ibid).

Despite this literature, when we turn our attention to the scholarship that examines the rise and development of various forms of religious(ly-inspired) charity in contemporary Chinese society (Weller et al. 2017), and the types of organisations engaged in it (Laliberte 2013; 2015; Wu, K. 2015; Weller et al. 2017; Wu, K. 2019; Fielder 2019), there remains little focus on women's motivations for choosing to work for RICOs over other organisations of similar size and aims of social justice. Whilst recent studies on RICOs (Carino 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019a: 96) acknowledge that women make up the majority of staff in RICOs and begin to offer arguments for why this might be, there remains little systematic examination of this acknowledgement. This includes a lack of focus on the nature of their participation and what the possible implications of this might be. Whilst there have been studies that examine specific RICOs and women's involvement in China (see Huang, 2003; 2008; 2009 and Huang et al. 2011), and which provide important insights for this thesis, there remains a gap in scholarship on the nature and role of women's work for RICOs, comparatively, in contemporary China.[15]

Therefore, the next two sections will provide necessary contextualisation for why and how RICOs developed in contemporary China. As part of this I will include key events

[14] This work developed out of their previous work on female-led mosques in China. Their publication of *'The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own'* (2000) combines theoretical questions surrounding women's religiosity and agency (as will be explored more later in this chapter using Jaschok & Shui's work); as well as detailed historical overviews of what these spaces provided for women, including education, community, choice and narratives surrounding conversion.

[15] Cavaliere's (2012; 2015) work on women's faith-based volunteering in Japan provides a comparative examination of women's explorations of identity, as well as the nature of their roles. Her work provided this thesis with an understanding of how to undertake a comparative research study, whilst recognising the clear differences between the two contexts. This also includes our theoretical differences in how we have approached the topic.

and policies that simultaneously acted as a catalyst for their emergence and growth, whilst also seeking to carefully manage and control the space(s) in which it took place. By defining what I mean by the term 'RICO' and the contested spaces they have often operated within, I will highlight the importance of 'space' in understanding women's experiences of this type of organisation in contemporary China.

1.1.2. The Changing Role of Religion in Chinese Society

Whilst the party-state in China currently legally recognises five religions – Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism/Christianity and Catholicism – there is a plethora of 'other faiths, popular practices, and unofficial expression of the five recognised religions' in China's landscape (Vermander et al. 2018: 4).[16] The complex and continually developing understanding of what is meant by the term 'religion' in contemporary China is, arguably, due to ambiguity and shifts that have occurred in relation to the 'volatility' of its relationship with the party-state and how its legal governance has resulted in various reactions of religious institutions, organisations, groups and followers (Jaschok 2003: 664-665).[17] Therefore, the importance of official religious policy in the PRC in changing the social role of religion in Chinese society since 1949 cannot be because it is 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' (Carino 2016: 1; Fielder 2019: 78).

Since the 1980s, there have been key shifts in the changing social role of religion in China, as well as how academic discourse has understood what this means and what it could imply for the socioeconomic development of Chinese society (Ashiwa & Wank 2009).

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[16] A pivotal work on the meaning of 'religion' in Chinese society was Yang, C. K's (1961) work, '*Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors'*. He drew a key distinction between 'diffused religion' and 'institutional religion' that provided empirical evidence to 'unmask' a common assumption that Chinese culture was irreligious in nature (Yang, F. 2012: 34).

[17] The modern term used for religion in Chinese (*zongjiao*) is only around a hundred years old and arrived as a way to translate the English, and other European understandings of the term, one that 'fit only uneasily in the Chinese social world' (Weller et al. 2017: 6). This arrival was characterised by various forms of state secularisation processes, as well as colonial influences whose aim was to eradicate religion from both politics and Chinese social life (ibid; see also Goossaert 2005: 15). By relegating religion to the private sphere of the 'spiritual', this also meant that 'religion' became a category that was conceived around the Protestant understanding of religion as belief instead of rituals, to be found in sacred texts and to be seen through congregations (Weller et al. 2017: 6; see also Goossaert & Palmer 2011; Goossaert 2005: 14). This required pivotal institutional changes to Buddhism and Daoism to fit this categorisation and eliminated Confucianism, temple-based and ancestor worship from it, relegating them to be conceived as 'backward', 'outmoded' and 'superstitious' (Weller et al. 2017: 6).

The beginning of the reform era saw a decreasing hostility towards religion in political spheres that provided the ability for it to be included more readily in academia, with Marxist approaches to religion beginning to be reviewed. This came after decades of repressive state power towards religion and the often 'violent' changes that state policy took towards religious groups (Jaschok 2003: 659). This recognition of religion as a continuing element of Chinese society can be seen in the publication of 'Document 19'[18] in 1982 asking there to be an approach of compatibility between socialist ideology and religion (Ashiwa 2009: 65).

There was also rapid growth in religious activity, such as the rebuilding of religious sites and the rise in religious festivals (see also Dean 1993; Feuchtwang 2000; DuBois 2005; Huang & Yang 2005; Chau 2005; Stark & Liu 2011; Goossaert & Palmer 2011). For some, this was a reaction to changes in party-state religious policy that 'released' people's hidden want for religion (Overmeyer 2003). Others took the stance that the revival of religion at this time spoke to an emerging civil society enabled by a more liberal party-state and the changing religious policy (Madsen 1998). Since then, the ongoing growth in 'religious space' in China in the past twenty years has seen continued scholarly discussion on the various ways this has manifested and why it remains relevant in contemporary society (Yang M.M-H. 2008; Stark & Liu 2011; Yang F., & Lang 2011; Laliberte 2011; 2012; Madsen 2010; 2011; Goossaert & Palmer 2011; Yang F. 2014).

However, this growth in religious activity prompted fears by the party-state of possible 'foreign infiltration' and initiated the third identified shift towards clearer management of the religious sphere in China. This included both the development of a more systematic approach to laws and policy regarding religion, as well as Jiang Zemin's implementation of a 'two-pronged approach to religious management' (Fielder 2019a: 78; see also Ashiwa & Wank 2009).[19] This approach sought religion to 'adapt' to socialism and would be matched with the party-state's promise to 'rule by law' (Leung 2005: 908). This period created a 'contested space' surrounding religious activity, influencing how many saw its relationship to what could be considered the 'public sphere' or 'civil society' at this time (Fielder 2012: 31-33; Fielder 2015).

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[18] Titled: *'On the Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during Our Country's Socialist Period'*

[19] A key turning point in this drive for systematic management came after the Falun Gong movement which is pinpointed by several scholars as an event that speeded up this process and caused a 'crisis' in the relationship between religion and party-state legitimacy (Ashiwa & Wank 2009; DuBois 2010).

The start of the 2000s was a unique turning point for the social role of religion in Chinese society. It was acknowledged that religion would be a 'long-term phenomenon' that could contribute to the development of Chinese society (Fielder 2019a: 78; see also Leung 2005: 910), giving the 'green light' for religious organisations to 'start social services directly and engage in relief work' (Carino 2014: 2). Fielder (2019a: 78-79) notes that this was not without problems firstly due to 'ongoing sensitivities' on what religion's role should be in the public sphere. And secondly because there was little 'legislative framework guiding the development of the sector'. [20]

Then in 2003, Hu Jintao declared the central policy of 'building a harmonious society' and shortly after, at the 2004 National Congress of the CCP, 'citizen-led organisations' were called upon to contribute to the 'harmonious development of a socialist civilisation' (Fielder 2019a: 79). Weller et al. (2018) note how on one side the introduction of this central 'harmonious society' policy 'actively campaigned to funnel political merit through all sectors of society', calling on them to contribute to the wider good of Chinese society. However, they also note that this meant that a lot of social organisations reacted defensively to this call, 'performing political merit-making' in order to keep their legitimacy in the eyes of the state (ibid: 64).[21] Yet, despite being seen as a 'top-down' political process, they also note that it 'unexpectedly [allowed more] room for different social organisations [and how they found] ways for innovation' (ibid). The call from different government officials that asked religious organisations to contribute to the 'public good' through education projects and poverty alleviation helped groups manoeuvre into spaces that were previously closed to them (ibid). Another reaction to

[20] Prior to the 1980s, the CCP emphasised the importance of the state's role in the non-market institutions of society, such as 'the family and other very personal networks, […] and intermediate social institutions such as religious groups or NGOs' (Weller et al. 2017: 7-8). The disengagement between the family meeting individuals' welfare needs was strong, with the state being affirmed as the provider of areas such as secure employment and health care. During the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), acts of communal child-care and preparation of food dismantled the family even more and the Confucian values that upheld the importance of familial ties and roles were attacked (Weller et al. 2017: 8).

[21] Instead of supporting the 'state failure' hypothesis, Weller et al. (2018) propose a reciprocal relationship between religious philanthropies and the party-state termed 'political merit-making' (p. 59). Drawing from the Buddhist concept of 'merit-making', they conceive this concept as referring to the cultivation of various relationships that religious organisations make with the state to achieve 'more legitimacy, political support, autonomy, or even ways of influencing policy-making' (ibid). This process is reciprocal, they argue, because that the state in return receives a 'certain level of legitimacy or endorsement in this process' (ibid). Furthermore, they state that the level of involvement religious groups can have in social welfare is dependent on how they navigate and negotiate the political landscape, 'regardless of whether they participate in politics in an explicit manner or not' (ibid).

this 'call' was the publication of the '*Regulations on Religious Affairs'* (2005) that expanded the scope of religious activities to include the provision of social welfare services, despite scholars noting that this regulatory expansion did not include detailed guidance on what this meant and how it could be done (Fielder 2019: 79; see also Tong 2006: 30).[22] The proceeding years saw the Party's politburo support this 'call' for religious communities to be actively involved in charity (Fielder 2019a: 79; see also Weller et al. 2017: 3). However, it wasn't until 2012 that new policy was released, titled '*Opinions about Encouraging and Standardising the Participation of Religious Communities in Charitable Activities*'. The '*Opinions*' provided legal recognition for religious charities and marked a 'new direction' in the party-state's policy whereby charity work could be undertaken by religious organisations in the same way as their 'secular counterparts' (Fielder 2019a: 79; see also Wang 2017).

This increase in the religious charitable sector has seen the rise of a plethora of academic scholarship seeking to understand its emergence, the work conducted by the various forms of organisations within it, as well as defining the space(s) they operate in (see Laliberté 2003; 2015; Chau 2006; Weller 2006; Fan 2006; Madsen 2007; Qin 2008; Huang 2009; Laliberté et al. 2011; Yao and He 2012; Chodorow 2012; McCarthy 2013; Carino 2015; 2016; 2017; Wu, K 2015; 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2012; 2016; 2019a). For Weller et al. (2017: 9) the start of the market reforms and the vast economic growth that resulted from it caused a societal shift where an environment of philanthropy was made possible 'by increasing disposable incomes', as well as people being able to spend time volunteering. They characterise this type of philanthropy as 'industrialised' due to it taking place on a large scale, often with an international membership where the 'production and distribution of philanthropic goods were increasingly rationalised and bureaucratised' (ibid: 3). Furthermore, they argue that it is 'disembodied' from localised social life and networks; instead relying on a new 'sense of self' that is 'self-governing' and 'rooted in transnational and cosmopolitan notions of universal goodness' (ibid). This is alongside other scholarship that speaks of the individualisation processes that have occurred in China since 1949 (Yan 2009) and the emergence of various forms of 'self' since the reform era including arguments for the 'enterprising'; 'self-controlling' and 'desiring' selves (Rofel 2007; Yan 2010; Hoffman 2010).

[22] Section 5 of the policy discusses how religious property was to be regulated and section 6 discusses new legal responsibilities of religious groups in Chinese society (Weller et al. 2017: 64).

Within these processes, Weller et al. (2017: 153-171) also examine the continued role that 'social capital' plays in the development and growth of religious organisations in the charitable sector. As a concept, many scholars have noted the difficulties in defining 'social capital' because of its elusive nature (Dasgupta 2000; Durlauf 2000; Manski 2000). However, it remains a popular and influential concept in the social sciences (Darlauf & Fafchamps 2004: 3).[23] The majority of this literature originates from Western societies with definitions focusing on civic norms and social networks between individuals that promote 'economic development, social order, mass participation, and political stability (e.g., Coleman 1988; 1990; Putnam et al. 1993; Putnam 2000; Lin 1999; 2001).[24] When examining the Chinese context, scholars have explored what 'modern' forms of social capital are and what its 'social and communal impact' might be (Chen & Lu 2007: 425). This has often been done by examining the differences between 'traditional' and 'modern' forms of social capital in China. Chen & Lu (ibid) note that the separation between the two is normally 'discerned along two dimensions: objective associations and subjective values' (see Zhao 2002; Fang 2002; Maio 2005).[25] These arguments are often supported by studies arguing that the reform-era 'brought about desirable conditions for the emergence of modern social capital' (Chen & Lu 2007: 426;

[23] Darlauf & Fafchamps (2004: 3) note that social capital could be seen as a *praxis,* rather than a concept, especially when considered from a historical perspective, because it allowed a range of fields to cross disciplinary boundaries and enabled different researchers to explore what the term means to them, irrespective of their discipline.

[24] Whilst Putnam's theorisation of social capital is still largely referred to within social sciences, other theorists have made significant contributions to this area such as Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Lin (1999; 2001). Bourdieu's (1986) earlier work on social capital defined it as a beneficial outcome to an individual's membership in social networks (Lu et al. 2018: 742). Coleman (1988) underlined the pivotal role of the family in social capital, whilst Lin (2001: 24-25) examined social capital as a resource that is 'assessed and used by actors for actions.' Other common definitions include Fukuyama (1997) who argued that 'only certain shared norms and values should be regarded as social capital' (Darlauf & Fafchamps 2004: 4), because the values and norms arising from within these social organisations 'may be the wrong ones […] [and] must substantively include virtues such as truth-telling, the meeting of obligations and reciprocity' (Fukuyama 1997: 378-379). Ostrom (2000: 176) defined it as 'shared knowledge, understandings, norms, rules and expectations' that guide and pattern the interactions of individuals within groups that are centred on a particular 'recurrent activity'. Bowles and Gintis (2002: 2) echo the aforementioned definitions by stating that social capital refers to 'a willingness to live by the norms of one's community and to punish those who do not'.

[25] 'Traditional' forms of social capital are based on 'objective associations' including formal organisations such as the Communist Youth League, All-China Federation of Trade Unions, as well as the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) where 'members are obligated to obey their leaders' (Chen & Lu 2007: 426). However, 'modern' forms are 'objective associations' with 'voluntary, informal organisations' where membership (and their leaders) can develop "horizontal' relationships and share common interests' (ibid). This promotes 'subject values' that generate trust and fosters relationships between individuals who might otherwise be strangers – forms of social capital that, arguably, emulates the definitions used in Western settings (ibid).

see Zhou 2000; Fang 2002). This includes changes to the understanding of 'work' and 'family' during the Mao-era, particularly in urban settings, and the gendered consequences following from it, which will be discussed in further detail in Section 1.1.6 (Cook & Dong 2011; Zuo 2016; Hong-Fincher 2013; 2014; 2018; Xie 2019). Xu et al. (2010: 260) note that ties into local communities – such as those through charitable organisations – can provide people in China with the 'social […] support they once drew from family and employment units.'

There has also been an increased recognition within recent scholarship of the way in which religious organisations working in the charitable sector are able to harness old and new forms of social capital in contemporary China (Weller et al. 2017: 131-172; see Fielder 2019a). Anthropological studies have examined modern manifestations of '*guanxi'* ('social relationships') and how it remains a crucial element of Chinese society (Yan 1996; Kipnis 1997). Furthermore, Chau (2019: 4) argues that the 'religious realm is one of the most crucial arenas' where the concept of '*guanxi'* is 'played out' in contemporary China.

Various scholars have also described the 'space(s)' that the religious charitable sector inhabits and negotiates when conducting philanthropic activities in contemporary China as 'grey' (Yang, F. 2012; Wu, K. 2015; Weller et al. 2017: 70). Yang, F.'s (2012) 'grey market' is populated by religious groups that have 'ambiguous' legal status and is distinct from two other 'religious markets' The 'red market' consists of 'official permitted religions' and the 'black market' is made up of those who are 'official banned'.[26] Wu (2015: 130) presents the term 'grey zone' to understand how religious groups engage in social service while navigating in relation to how they navigate various levels of Chinese government. By 'grey zone' Wu (ibid) means the 'ambivalent political space' that is found 'in-between what is legal and what is illegal', a spectrum of what is fully approved and what is not fully censored. This 'grey zone' becomes a 'space of action' that is relationally situated to the state but one the state does not have complete control over. Wu (ibid) argues that his 'grey zone' is not equivalent to Yang, F's (2012) 'grey market'. This is because, Wu argues, it should be seen as 'an elastic, flexible space' where all religious

[26] See Chau (2019: 170-175) for his discussion on the formal 'religious spheres' in China and how this interacts with the 'sociopolitical space of the nation' (ibid: 173). Chau (ibid: 171) defines a 'sphere' as 'a relatively fuzzy, semi-formal domain comprising certain publicly acknowledged actors accompanied by related institutions and activities'. It also includes 'social actors who, consciously or unconsciously, construct and help maintain the sphere so that they can gain from their membership in, or association with, the sphere (ibid).

groups operate because even those who are legally 'official' will often cut across into the 'grey zone' if necessary for a particular project or cause. In contrast, Weller et al. (2017: 70-85) identify the 'grey area' as the space between what is legal and illegal in regard to 'religious issues in China'. It is within this 'grey area', Weller et al (ibid) argue, that religious organisations can engage in charitable work through a process of what they term 'political merit-making', meaning that the party-state plays a fundamental role in 'determining the content, form and parameters for such organisations' (ibid: 83). The specific context and varying influences on the space(s) that these organisations have emerged from, and currently operate in, mean it is imperative to define what exactly is meant by 'religiously-inspired charitable organisations' (RICOs) and why this term was chosen in this thesis over more common terms such as 'faith-based organisations' (FBOs).

1.1.3. Defining 'Religiously-Inspired Charitable Organisations (RICOs)

There remains much ambiguity around the term 'faith-based organisation' (Tomalin 2013: 205-229), with scholars seeking to create various 'typologies' (Clarke & Ware 2015) and others searching for what makes them distinctive to their 'secular peers' (Clarke 2006: 845; see also Deneulin & Rakodi 2011; Deacon & Tomalin 2015; Occhipinti 2015). It is argued that their distinctive elements are their ability mobilise adherents on a large scale (Clarke 2006: 845), to contribute to the advancement of civil society (Clarke & Jennings 2008), as well as to access and conduct programmes in hard-to-reach communities and provide adherents with increased social capital (Fielder 2019a: 76; see also Hamrin 2003: 1-2; Clarke & Ware 2015). Others have also argued that people can understand their place in the world, 'seek answers' and develop their identity and subjectivities in relation to these spaces (Bradley 2010: 42-43).

Alongside this scholarship, there is a growing literature that seeks to define and understand these forms of organisations in the Chinese context (Laliberte 2011; 2013; 2015; McCarthy 2013; Carino 2014; 2016; 2017; Fielder 2012; 2015; 2019; Weller et al. 2017). Many adopt the term 'FBO' from international scholarship using it to examine the operations and programs of organisations such as the Buddhist Compassion Tzu-Chi Foundation and The Amity Foundation (Hamrin 2003; Laliberte 2014; 2015; Carino 2014; 2016; 2017).[27] This is also true for McCarthy's (2013: 49) study who argues that

[27] Hamrin (2003) defines 'religious organisations' in the PRC as those who undertake 'traditional' practices such as 'worship and prayer, religious sacraments, the teaching of the laity and training of clergy, proselytising and publication of sacred texts and other religious materials' (2003: 1).

FBOs in China are not just an 'offshoot' of religion, but rather that their work is an expression of beliefs. There is the ability for the individual to experience the 'sacred' and the organisation assists those looking to create a sense of religious community. In order to do this, they must stress their 'good citizenship' and 'commitment to building a modern, well-off society', which can be achieved both through an understanding of their religious values, but also by involving officials and state agencies (ibid: 50-55).

However, in her recent study, Fielder (2019a: 77) coins the term 'Religiously Inspired Charitable Organisations' in order to place these forms of organisations back within the five legal religious traditions in China, whilst keeping a distinct identity and distinguishing them from the FBO sector outside of China. She uses 'inspired' rather than 'based' to highlight the fact that these organisations can be historically religiously-inspired and/or have little formal basis within that religious tradition today (ibid).[28] Furthermore, in doing so, it allows for the term to be 'less restrictive as it does not imply that members have their own personal 'faith'' (ibid). By using 'charitable organisation', Fielder is incorporating the charitable work done by the organisation, even if their legal registration status does not mirror this. She argues that this 'resonates with the way in which the field is seen by practitioners, policy makers, end-users and volunteers in China' (ibid). However, she does note the problem of using the term 'organisation' when some are not able to register as such. However, alternative terms – such as 'initiative' – would not take into consideration the 'sense of permanency' that these groups wish to gain (ibid).

By recognising the specific sociohistorical processes that have taken place in China's recent history in relation to religion and charity, Fielder's (2019a) term - 'RICO' - offers a way to define the organisations studied in this thesis. Her definition encapsulates the way in which the Protestant RICO originally emerged in Chinese society and has been able to grow both in size and influence in the past few decades. It also takes into account the way in which the Buddhist RICO came to operate in the PRC and the influence of the party-state played in this process. In regard to the RICOs in this study, her definition is vital because it takes into consideration the need to see them as 'religiously-inspired' in

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The work of these organisations is restricted to what she terms the 'religious sector' in China and is controlled by the party and the government, who oversee the 'religious work' of the five legal religions (ibid). In comparison, FBOs, for Hamrin (2003: 1-2), are organisations that are 'non-profit associations that do not do "religious work" narrowly defined', but rather offer service delivery in the social welfare sector including education, health and humanitarian aid (ibid).

[28] Her earlier examinations of these types of organisations also highlight the issues surrounding using 'FBO' and the importance of recognising the specific sociohistorical context which these types of organisations emerged from (Fielder 2012; 2015).

order to explore the experiences of all the women working for them who may, or may not, self-identify as 'religious'. It also reflects how they are officially registered in the PRC, as well as their ongoing role as 'mediators between networks of 'industrialised philanthropy' (Fielder 2019a: 79; Weller et al. 2017: 2) in contemporary Chinese society.

It now becomes necessary for this thesis to examine the scholarship that provides context on *why* women are choosing to work for RICOs in contemporary China. This includes previous studies that have examined women's participation in the PRC's religious charitable sector, as well as drawing from studies done in other contexts such as Japan (Cavaliere 2012; 2015). In doing so, this thesis will be able to build on the work done by previous studies, whilst offering new insights into how RICOs provide women with 'vehicles for activism and the dissemination of meaning, identity and cultural codes' (Yavuz 2003: ix, as cited in Fielder 2019a: 77) in contemporary China.

1.1.4. Understanding Women's Participation in RICOs

In order to understand and reflect upon the lived experiences of the women in this study and the narratives that they shared with me, it is imperative to examine key scholarship that discuss women's changing experiences of self, work and family in contemporary urban China; experiences that are shaped by gendered public discourses and social ideals and values of what it means to be a Chinese woman (Hooper 1994; Yang, M.M.H 1999b; Bishop, Luo & Wang 2005; Chen 2005; Dong et al. 2006; Giles et al. 2006; Du & Dong 2010; Hong-Fincher 2013; 2014; 2018; Xie, K. 2017; 2019).

Studies that examine the implications for women when China moved from a planned to a market economy and how this impacted upon the urban labour market (Harrel 2000; Entwistle & Henderson 2000; Cook & Dong 2011: 950; Zuo 2016), help inform our understanding of the gendered consequences that came with the decentralisation of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and the dismantling of 'work units' (Cook & Dong 2011; Zuo 2016: 80).[29] This scholarship often focuses on the link between work and family for women living in urban China during the reform era, asking what these changes meant for our understanding of social reproduction and unpaid care work in contemporary Chinese society. It raises the question: 'what are the implications of work-family conflicts for the well-being of women and their families?' (Cook & Dong 2011: 948). Zuo (2016: 80), for instance, argues that a gendered consequence of halting welfare provisions was that the

[29] The 'work-unit' system provided state-set and controlled labour and economic resources that were aimed to providing a basic level of livelihood for urban families, including job security (Zuo 2016: 32).

family became a site for 'producing life rather than market efficiency' and was therefore regulated back into the private (inner) sphere of people's daily lives; a fracture that is argued to have caused 'work-family conflict' to arise. This is seen in Cook & Xiao's (2014: 38) study where women felt that senior managers did not 'take a sympathetic view about work-life conflicts.'

Another national agenda that impacted upon urban women's experiences of work and family was the role of the state in family planning and the introduction of the one-child policy with its various gendered consequences noted by academic scholarship (Zuo 2016; Hong-Fincher 2013; 2014). One unintended positive consequence of the one-child policy was that girls born into urban areas of China received unparalleled 'educational investment' because it was not prioritised to male children as was the preference in earlier generations (Xie, K. 2019: 60; see also Hizi 2018; Zhang 2009; Fong 2006; Tsui & Rich 2002). The later introduction of the two-child policy in 2016 has been viewed as a drive to re-establish 'traditional family values substantiated by Confucian discourse' (Xie, K. 2019: 61; see also Hird 2017; Hong-Fincher 2018). This is coupled with the unquestioned assumption that heterosexual marriage is not a choice, but an obligation (Evans 2002; McMillian 2006; Xie, K. 2019). Evans (2007) argues that the prevailing conception of what constitutes being a 'woman' in China is the importance of her reproductive role. In addition, the dual role of worker-mother has also long been endorsed by party-state policies and public discourse and places an even heavier burden on women effectively 'juggle' both spheres of their daily lives (Xie, K. 2019: 61; see also Pimental 2006; Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018; Hizi 2018: 302).

Despite employment law in China making gender discrimination illegal in the workplace,[30] scholars have noted that there are inadequate safeguarding processes, prejudices towards women of a child-bearing age, as well as a male dominated work culture (Xie, K. 2019; see also Hizi 2018: 302-303). Scholars have argued that the 'interests of the market and of the family are intrinsically oppositional to each other' (Zuo 2016: 160; see also Brenner 2000; Coontz 1988). This means that the increases in 'work-family' have 'exacerbated the problems of women suffering from role strain, role conflict, and anxiety, whether they are stay-at-home moms, those attempting to combine work with family, or work/career-orientated women' (Zuo 2016: 158).

[30] 'Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interest, Labour Law and Employment Promotion Act' (1992)

Discourses exploring women's changing experiences of work and family in contemporary urban China rarely cross over with scholarship on the work of religiously inspired charitable work. Within these studies the way that 'work' is conceptualised often leaves out 'volunteering', downplaying its importance within forms of production and the economic, cultural and social capital these hold (Elias & Rai 2019). There has also been the view that women's involvement in volunteering reinforces wider conservative ideologies of women's role and status in society and the type of 'work' they are best suited to; an ideology often supported by gendered public and official discourses (Brown & Ferguson 1995; Makie 2000; Cavaliere 2012; 2015). However, recent literature has sought to include 'volunteering' within frameworks of 'everyday feminist political economy' (Elias & Rai 2019) in order to position it as an 'actor-driven activity' that provides women with various forms of capital and resources (Ueno 2007; 2011; Cavaliere 2012; 2015).[31]

Another element that is important in understanding how Chinese women perceive their sense of selves, roles and position in contemporary Chinese society, are the gendered public discourses that have developed since the 1980s. Sun & Chen (2015: 1094) identify two trends in the literature exploring public discourse on gender since the beginning of the Reform Era. The first demonstrates how changing formations of sexuality and gender have occurred alongside the commodification of women's bodies (ibid; see also Yang, M.M.H 1999b; Hong-Fincher 2014; Xie, K. 2019); and the second speaks to the development from the 'state-dominated Marxist political discourse' of Chinese women's liberation and equality, to one that is market-orientated and based on 'market efficiency and individual ability' (Sun & Chen 2015: 1994). It has been argued by some that the 'refeminisation' of women that occurred in reform era public discourse has allowed for Chinese women to develop a 'gender consciousness' and 'recover their feminine identity' (Sun & Chen 2015; Li 1988). It combats the 'gender sameness' that perpetuated public discourse in the Mao era and that has been critiqued for causing 'gender neglect' when it came to women's specific needs and unequal care labour division (Evans 1997; Yang 1999; Zuo 2016; Xie, K. 2019).

For others, such as Yang M.M.H (1999: 10-11), the changes that occurred during the Reform era marked a shift from a 'totalitarian state formation' where the social body was fully engulfed within the body of the state, to one where the social body could be modified and various forms of cultural production could take place. This presents an image of

[31] This is of particular importance for the Buddhist RICO in this study.

contemporary urban China as one where gender constructions have become 'disembedded' from their localities and instead have become informed by mass media and culture. This has also caused fractures with 'traditional moorings' of ritual and kinship, (Yang M.M.H 1999: 19-20; see also Giddens 1991; Hooper 1994: 73).[32]

These discussions link to the argument made that the rapid socioeconomic changes since the beginning of the reform era have seen the 'rise of the individual self' within Chinese society (Hizi 2018: 299; see also Yan, Y. 2009; 2010; Weller et al. 2017). The shifting forms of 'individualisation' that have occurred has meant that several stages of 'disembedding' and 're-embedding' have created an individual that has, in Yan, Y's (2010: 509-510) words, simultaneously become an 'independent unit of social reproduction and policy making', whilst also still a part of the party-state's collective objective of 'the modernisation of China'. These shifts have meant that there has been 'increased self-responsibility' placed upon the Chinese individual to achieve their personal accomplishments, including their emotional well-being (Hizi 2018: 299; see also Rofel 2007; Anagnost et al. 2013; Hansen & Pang 2008; Yan, Y. 2003).[33] However, what makes these processes particular to China is that the party-state institutionally remains responsible for the 'achievement of Chinese individuals' pursuit of happiness', as well as the nation's socioeconomic development (Yan, Y. 2010: 510).[34] Some have argued that

[32] Yang, M.M-H (1999:49) notes that the fashion and makeup industries are crucial in the new Chinese economy and fuel the consumer culture that permeates the media and the social lives of contemporary Chinese women. Furthermore, there are now training schools where women can learn to be 'feminine', realising an essentialist female identity and role that teach them the skills needed to be a good wife and mother (ibid). This new consumer culture has driven forward a gender division based on fundamental differences between the sexes. Mulvey (1986: 199) notes that within this (then) newly emerging structure, 'woman […] stands […] as signifier to the male other'. Alongside this rapid return to diverging, essentialised gender roles came the ascendancy of the male gaze in the 1980s when an influx of consumer culture from Hong Kong, Japan and the United States positioned women as the visual, expressive objects that would bring back 'male desire' (Yang, M.M-H 1999: 50-51). Furthermore, the post-Mao era has seen the rise of the 'new masculinisation of men' where notions of what it means to be a 'man' centre on physical, political and economic power (ibid: 52; see also Louie 2014; 2016; Ambrogio 2017).

[33] Rofel (2007) defines this as the 'desiring self' where individual desires are placed ahead of responsibilities and obligations to others. Hsu et al. (2017) argue that emotion is one part of overall well-being in China. They point out that there also needs to be a feeling of 'engagement' in their activities and/or work, as well as 'a sense of accomplishment' in their overall careers.

[34] This focus on the party-state being responsible for the 'happiness' of its citizens is a particular focus of the ideological campaign the 'China Dream', officially launched by President Xi in 2012 (Xing Li 2015: 506). Xing Li (2015) argues that a core component of the Chinese Dream is that the rejuvenation of the nation would mean prosperity where Chinese individuals can have a successful life, realising individual dreams as well as those of China. See Xing Li (2015: 506) for more details on the other components, as well as how it is different to the 'American Dream' ideology. Ane Bislev (2015: 587) also provides a detailed overview of how the Chinese Dream is a 'link in an unbroken chain of political slogans', and how there has been diversity in its

this has caused 'a shift in moral values' where the collective, family-orientated ethical system[35] has been replaced by this emphasis on individual development (Sun, Y: 2017: 772-773; see also Yan 2010; Kleinman et al. 2011).[36] Zhang (2009: 204) states that this created a 'new logic of intergenerational exchange' where children 'treat' their parents depending on how well they have been treat, impacting on the 'scope and the amount of generosity' shown towards one another.

However, there have been various studies recognising the contemporary manifestations in people's daily lives of traditional Chinese values such as filial piety and its impacts on understandings of kinship, showing that they still have prominence in Chinese society (Lee and Xiao 1998; Sun 2002; Qi 2015; Zhang, Y. 2015). In particular, this has been shown to still hold influence in Chinese families where a 'sense of obligation' endures even though it is 'often constrained by the demands of life in modern China (Zhang, Y 2016: 2). It has been argued in discussions on women's attitudes towards, and their practice of, filial piety since the reform era that there remains a focus on providing care for 'elders', as well as the importance to be seen to demonstrate filial piety in order to cultivate morality (Zhang, Y 2016: 2).[37] This is supported by Hansen's (2015: 150) study that argues that when it comes to family roles, individuals are bound by 'an unquestionable "fate"'.

Throughout this first part of the chapter, I have provided an overview of the literature that not only seeks to examine the rise of religion in contemporary Chinese society, but also its changing social role in relation to a newly emerging charitable sector in the reform era. I also presented vital contextualisation for women's changing experiences of family and work in contemporary China. In doing so, I was also able to examine key sociocultural ideals that impact upon women's daily lives and their experience of what it means to be a 'woman' in Chinese society. By interacting with these discourses, I was able to identify current gaps in scholarship and, where pertinent, highlight the reasons why this has occurred. However, it also provided an overview of current innovative

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interpretation often causing many to wonder what the Chinese Dream is and what it exactly means – something that often works to its political and social advantage.

[35] Moore (2005: 361) argues that despite the 'broad characterisation' of China being a 'collective' culture can be somewhat misleading, it does 'contain a grain of truth'.

[36] Yan Yunxiang (2003: 162-189) detailed how villagers in north-eastern China had dismissed the value of unconditional 'filial piety' founded upon 'the sacredness of parental authority and the superiority of parents' (ibid: 177).

[37] Whilst Zhang, Y's (2016) study examines young Chinese women's experiences and attitudes towards filial piety, the study does not examine the gendered dynamics of care, especially in relation to caring for elders and how this may conflict with other responsibilities such as childcare.

scholarship taking place in these diverse fields with the intention to thread them together when reflecting on women's participation in RICOs in contemporary China.

1.2. The Religiously Inspired Charitable Organisations (RICOs) in this Study

It is now pertinent to socially locate the RICOs in this study in terms of their core values, teachings and work, as well as their relationship vis-à-vis the Chinese state. Both the RICOs in this study are viewed by development actors – both within the PRC and internationally - as pioneers within the charitable sector in China, emerging as part of the new wave of organisations permitted to work on social welfare projects during the Opening and Reform Era (1980s-).[38] However, each RICO has distinct characteristics, teachings and forms of work that they specialise in.

In Section 1.1.3, I discussed *why* I was defining the organisations as 'RICOs' rather than other commonly used terms, such as faith-based organisation or religious non-governmental organisation. In particular, it was the way in which they are both formally registered with the Chinese state despite being 'religiously-inspired' in their organisational history and/or seen as having a 'religious foundation' by their staff. Both the Protestant and Buddhist RICO are registered as non-governmental organisations (social organisations) and both received this official registration earlier than other similar organisations.[39] Whilst the two RICOs were originally founded with a grassroots focus – and these roots are still considered to be at the heart of their success – they have grown in the PRC because of their relationships with various levels of the Chinese state. Their formal registration provides them with legitimacy in the eyes of the state to carry out social welfare projects and be viewed as examples of 'best practice' that can be replicated by the party-state. Whilst this legitimacy may provide them with greater access in certain areas, it does mean having restrictions when it comes to their religious identity. This includes, for example, conducting social welfare projects without proselytising the teachings of the religious tradition that they are 'inspired' by or advocating for any potentially sensitive development issues. There are other trade-offs that the RICOs have to manage in order to be able to conduct their work in the PRC. This includes being in line with the current development agenda of the CCP, whilst also juggling the wants of

[38] See Chapter 4 for discussion on how this factored into the women's motivations for joining these particular organisations.

[39] 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 as far as possible. See Chapter 3 for further discussion of this.

international partners and donors. In terms of international funding, both RICOs had to shift their focus to domestic donors when the new 'Overseas NGO Law' adopted in 2016 and that came into effect in 2017. Both RICOs were successful in this endeavour, although the Protestant RICO achieved a quicker and more substantial turn due to their strong grassroots links within the PRC.[40]

The forms of social welfare work undertaken by each RICO has clear similarities, with a focus on social delivery in times of disaster – such as earthquakes and floods. The Protestant RICO has a strong emphasis on education and social enterprise projects, whilst the Buddhist RICO often centres its work on health and environmentalism in the PRC. Both conduct with the elderly in different formats, with the Protestant RICO more established in this area. Both RICOs are viewed as examples of 'best practice' by other charitable organisations both in the PRC and internationally. This view is also shared by the party-state and often means that both RICOs are able to provide training and consultation for other organisations and the government. The international linkages that both RICOs have made them particularly useful and interesting in this sense for the CCP, as it provides a channelling of resources and experience from elsewhere that can be 'localised' and replicated in the PRC. All of the above leads to both RICOs having organisational identities that are multidimensional, employed different to varying national (party-state) and international audiences whilst also maintaining the trust of the different local communities they work with. Their formal registration enables them to navigate the 'grey zone' between religion and social welfare in the PRC (Wu 2015). This comes with the advantages of not having to adhere to the strict regulations placed on official religious sites/organisations in the PRC but also means that each RICO must continually navigate the balance between being potentially antagonistic and complementary in relation to the party-state (Kuah-Pearce 2014: 40). However, whilst the RICOs share this commonality, they also have distinct teachings that have formed the basis of their work and organisational culture/identity.

The emergence and significant growth of the Buddhist RICO was part of a movement towards 'Buddhism for the human realm' (*renjiao fojiao*) that began at the start of the twentieth century in the PRC, as well as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Malaysia.[41] This

[40] The Protestant RICO pre-dates the Buddhist RICO in the PRC and also achieved formal registration before them.

[41] For a full discussion of the development of Buddhism in contemporary China please see Fisher (2012). For a concise overview of the shifts in Buddhism in twentieth century China, please see Wang (2013: 1-3).

movement of 'socially engaged Buddhism' – or commonly termed as *renjiao fojiao* in China – stemmed from the teachings of Masters Taixu and Yinshun.[42] The focus of this movement was to 'integrate Buddhist teaching into everyday life' that focuses on the individual living in accordance to Buddhist values and teachings (Kuah-Pearce 2014: 27). The central concern is for compassion and embedding this into their daily social actions. There is also a focus on the notion of suffering (*shouku*), pain (*tongku*), karma (*yebao*) and demonstrating gratitude (*ganen*). The manifestation of suffering is a product of karma and happens because of ignorance (*wuzhi*) on the part of the individual, such as feelings of 'bitterness', 'selfishness' and 'self-indulgence' (ibid: 30). Furthermore, those within this movement – including the Buddhist RICO in this study – moved away from a scriptural focus and towards the importance of social actions (ibid: 29-30). In the words of Kuah-Pearce (2014: 30), the 'concepts or abstracts […] need to be routinised, in order that the teachings become useful to the individuals and the recipients'. The teachings followed by full-time staff and members of the Buddhist RICO are their founder's interpretations of teachings rooted in the Mahayana tradition with a focus on the Lotus Sutra. They are interpreted to be relevant to the daily lives of the RICOs members and to be easily employed in their daily social actions. This is done with the goal of becoming a 'this-worldly living bodhisattva' (ibid) and to 'build a Pure Land on Earth' (Liao 2011: 3).

The Protestant RICO emerged from a movement that centred on the principles of ecumenical sharing and to provide a theological grounding to the promotion of human cooperation and growth. The RICO was created from a collection of Chinese Christians that wanted to have active participation in the social development of China and the creation of a 'good society' (Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019a). The theology that the Protestant RICO is religiously inspired by centres on the core message that God is 'love' and upholding the central value of compassion. Their mission centres on the need for interfaith cooperation and to deliver faith through their social actions. The religiously inspired roots of the Protestant RICO are often packaged through the central teaching of 'love' and is viewed as the core component of their organisational culture. This central tenant was used in order to promote a non-denominational approach to Chinese Christian involvement in social welfare. This focus on 'love' is a direct parallel between the

[42] The movement of 'socially engaged Buddhism' more broadly emerged during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is 'characterised by Buddhists engaging in a nonviolent way on a popular, and often mass, level with the social, political, economic and/or environmental issues facing them in their countries' (King, 2012: 196).

Protestant and Buddhist RICO in terms of their core organisational mission and how this message is shared to various audiences. Their missions of 'spreading love' coincides with the state's endeavour to construct a 'socialist morality' (Weller & Wu 2017: 60).[43] In doing so, it provides both RICOs with the ability to 'justify themselves in the state's terms' whilst also maintaining a 'moral commitment' to their religious nature (ibid). This section provides an essential overview to the core teachings, work and relationship that each RICO has with the Chinese state. This context is needed in order to understand *why* I have chosen the analytical framework I will outline in Chapter 2, as well as the themes that emerged throughout the data discussion in Chapters 4-6. However, the level of detail provided was determined based on the ethical considerations outlined in Chapter 3.

1.3. Overview of Thesis

This chapter has provided an introduction that has not only outlined necessary sociohistorical contextualisation for this study but has also begun to identify the gaps in current scholarship that this thesis seeks to close. Taking this into account, in **Chapter Two**, I have then provided an assessment of the selected theories that provide a framework for this research study, including an examination of what is meant by 'space' and how, by its very nature, it should be understood as dynamic, relational and gendered (Massey 1991; Knott 2005; Kong & Woods 2017; Elias & Rai 2018). In doing so, it allowed me to draw upon Yavuz's theory of 'Opportunity Spaces' that Fielder (2019) uses to frame the emergence and work of RICOs in contemporary China. This lens provides me with the ability to spatially explore how women are conceptualising their search for meaning in their everyday and what can be understood and conceived as 'agency' in these spaces and its relationship to structure, activism and the need to recognise its formation beyond the progressive liberal project of the Western imaginary (Mahmood 2012). By grounding the narratives of the women in the theory of the

[43] Weller & Wu (2017: 60) note that despite 'love' being an important value during the Cultural Revolution, it should only be in relation to class, and 'not extend to people like capitalists'. However, the 1980s saw the 'official Socialist morality' soften in its dominant focus on class, with nationalist slogans now becoming universal in their approach, such as 'love the country and love the people' (ibid). Weller & Wu (2017: 60) include the introduction of a 'religious variation' that sprung up in 1993 in the 'Regulations for the Buddhist Association of China' of 'love the country and love the religion', reflected in the 'Regulations for the China Christian Council' in 1996. This slogan is now 'repeated dutifully' by all of the five legal religions whenever there is an official religious event, but with Weller & Wu (2017: 60) commenting that this does not demonstrate a 'fundamental change in religious attitudes' as much as it demonstrates a 'change in the party-state's ever-widening use of love discourse.'

'everyday', I will be able to examine not just how their searches for meaning take place without ignoring the gendered structures and experiences of these women's daily lives.

Informed by the previous scholarship and my chosen theoretical framework, **Chapter Three** will consider the methodological approach and research methods employed for this thesis. By taking a critical and reflexive stance on my own positionality throughout the different stages of it, I am able to consider the ethical implications of conducting research on women, religion and social change.

Chapter Four – *Women in RICOs and their Narratives of Conflict* – is the first of four chapters where I will present, discuss and begin to analyse the women's narratives using the framework outlined in the previous chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the ways in which the women in this study narrate their initial motivations for working with their chosen RICO. This produced a focus on their perceived 'lack of purpose' and the 'arising conflicts' that came about because of this. This was felt due to a 'feminine ideal' that caused increased social role stress and anxiety, as well as from experiences of gender discrimination in the workplace and a lack of meaning derived from the nature of previous work undertaken. This discussion of their narratives leads into the first of four spatial analyses of how RICOs offer 'retreat' for women from these arising conflicts in relation to their feelings of a 'lack of purpose'.

In **Chapter Five** – *Women, Care and Interconnection in RICOs* - I will explore how women's religious subjectivities are shaped and formed *in* and *through* a process of interconnection. This will be done by paying particular attention to the women's embodied practice of 'care' in their work. These discussions will be informed by the narratives of arising conflict shared in the previous chapter, specifically those that spoke of feelings of failure in relation to their expressions of filial piety.

Chapter Six - *A Feminine Culture? RICOs as Bonds, Binds and Bridges* - I will investigate how women in this study narrate the organisational culture of their RICOs. I will examine these experiences through a framework of 'bonds', 'binds' and 'bridges' (Lin 2001; Chen & LU 2007; Weller et al. 2017). This will allow me to discuss how women are *bonded* to the shared values and common identity that their RICO provides, as well as the ways in which it *binds* them together with those from different social groups, whilst gaining access to channels of power (Chau 2019: 4-5; Weller et al. 2017). Furthermore, by discussing the women's experiences of female leadership and mentorship it will examine how the RICOs act as *bridges* for the women. This will lead into a critical analysis of how RICOs can be viewed as '*capacity*', where a narrated

'feminine culture' seeks to erase the divide between the inner and outer spheres of women's lives that play out in their everyday and as such, have gendered consequences for them. In doing so, I will argue that RICOs, and the women working for them, relationally provide a discursive space that develops values, trust and networks based on mutual support and belonging (Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019).

In **Chapter Seven** - *Women in RICOs and Everyday Activism* - the focus will be on the 'everyday activism' displayed by the women working for RICOs and the ongoing 'cognitive praxis' they are involved in that seeks to develop new forms of knowledge and practice in development (Ping-Chun et al. 2001; Fielder 2019). This will be done through a discussion of some of the different spaces where this 'everyday activism' takes place in the two RICOs by switching scales between very localised micro-expressions to more national and international programs. In the final spatial analyses of RICOs, I will argue that they provide women with the ability to '*organise*' for social change, whilst conceptualising what this means to them.

The **Conclusion** will analyse a central component of my theoretical framework which positions RICOs as 'Opportunity Spaces' for women in contemporary China (Fielder 2019; Yavuz 2003). This has been done throughout the previous chapters with each one discussing a particular aspect of these spaces as 'vehicles for activism and the dissemination of meaning, identity and cultural codes' (Yavuz 2003: ix; Fielder 2019: 77). This analysis will raise pertinent questions for how we conceptualise women's agency and religious subjectivity in contemporary China, as well as how women experience work, develop their sense of self and create meaning in a changing urban environment. I will then provide an overview of the research conclusions from this thesis and their possible implications for the field. I will conclude by examining how these key findings provide areas for future research.

By conducting a spatial analysis of these organisations that is grounded in the 'everyday' and the narratives of the women in this study, I will provide insights into specific forms of female agency in contemporary Chinese society with a view to analysing how the work of these individual women can be viewed as religiously-inspired activism and as part of a wider social movement for change in Chinese society (Jaschok & Shui 2011; Pink 2012; Palmer 2018; Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019). This will be done by providing a 'gendered reading' of RICOs as 'Opportunity Spaces' as drawn from the work of Fielder (2019) and Yavuz (2003). This will allow me to fill some of the gaps identified in the wider literature (both those discussed above and those in the forthcoming chapters) and

help tell the story of these spaces and whether or not they are created by women's own making in China today (Yang, M.M-H 1999; Jaschok & Shui 2011).

1.4. Research Scope and Limitations

As outlined in the beginning, and continuously discussed throughout this chapter, the scope of this research lays in its ability to contribute to scholarship on RICOs who, despite rapidly growing in size and influence, have been largely ignored by the literatures examining gender, religion and charity in contemporary China. It is at these intersections that this thesis provides insight into crucial developments in how women understand the nature of their participation in these organisations, including their sense of identity and belonging. It will inform us about how women are relationally shaping RICOs with an aim for social change in Chinese society, and abroad.

The decision to do a comparative study between a Buddhist and Protestant RICO was taken to provide the scope to analyse patterns of why and how women are working for this type of organisation and what this means for understanding and reflecting upon women's agency, social capital and their search for meaning in contemporary China. However, due to access issues briefly discussed earlier in this section, as well as the small-scale nature of this study, I do not seek to make any overall claims of generalisability. Rather, I am to provide new and necessary information that will inform the gaps found at the intersecting academic disciplines of gender, religion and development.

2. Theoretical Lens: Space and the Everyday

To frame my analysis in the proceeding chapters, I will outline and consider the theories I have chosen to bring together. This will require me to discuss the building blocks of my framework – space and the everyday. These areas represent not just vast academic fields of study that span across different disciplines, but also include several different theoretical approaches within them. Therefore, I will examine where this thesis is situated within these wider discussions and draw out the specific theories that play a role in constructing my theoretical lens. This will involve clarifying and conceptualising what I mean by the terms 'gender' and 'religion' when understood *in* and *through* specific theories of space (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994; Knott 2005; Kong & Woods 2017; Vermander 2018). This will allow me to pay attention to the embodied and everyday experiences of the women in this thesis, as well as being able to focus on sites (in this case, RICOs) that are not 'explicitly religious' (Knott 2005a: 2).

In this chapter I will outline *why* I chose to focus on theories of space and the everyday in order to construct the analytical lens for this thesis. I will pay attention to how the shifts within key scholarship has called for greater attention to be paid to the 'spatial'. This is coupled with my motivation to not 'focus explicitly or exclusively on sites which proclaim themselves to be religion […] nor to establish what is sacred or holy about such places' (Knott 2005a: 2). In doing so, I have constructed and implemented a spatial analysis that allows me to 'take seriously the active role of space itself' (Knott 2005a: 121:122). This is both in terms of how it shapes the everyday experiences of the women working for RICOs, but also the ways in which various socio-cultural, political and economic factors relationally impact and are 'enveloped' in and through RICOs (ibid).

Within this chapter, I will present the 'closures' that I have chosen in order for this spatial analysis to be presented, acknowledging *why* I have chosen these specific closures.[44] This includes framing RICOs as 'Opportunity Spaces' as a distinct dimension of my analysis. Doing this provides essential parameters through which to conduct my spatial analysis, whilst paying attention to the particular sociocultural and economic factors that the RICOs emerged from and still operate within. I will then go on to outline the core

[44] Knott (2005a: 128) notes how the use of the term 'space' (similar to religion) has 'no single fixed meaning' and therefore there is a need to 'incorporate' and 'reject' certain closures in order 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 irradicate the 'openness' that a spatial analysis provides for a research when examining religion or other social categories such as gender, ethnicity and class (ibid).

properties and aspects of my spatial analysis, paying particular attention to the theories I have decided to draw upon and where I have diverged from them. This is particularly true when constructing the framework through which I will analyse forms and expressions of social capital. I will then outline how 'agency' and 'work' will be understood within this thesis, including the boundaries that they will be analysed within. By providing a clear outline of my theoretical lens, I will be able to examine not just *why* women are choosing to work for RICOs, but also *how*, and in what *spaces*, this is taking place.

2.1. Why Space and the Everyday?

The focus on the relationship between religious studies and spatial studies has received greater attention in the past two decades with scholars from across the humanities calling for further collaboration between these two fields of study (Kong 2001; Knott 2005; Hopkins et al. 2013; Jaschok & Shui 2011; Kong & Woods 2016). This arrived at a time when the study of religion was being assessed based on the belief that we were 'on a precipice of [its] revival and renewal' (Hopkins et al. 2013: 3). This argument was shared by scholars studying the Chinese context whose attention to the '(re)emergence' of religion was discussed earlier in this chapter (Stark & Liu 2011; Goossaert & Palmer 2011). Part of my earlier review of the literature's conceptualisation of 'religion' identified a rise in scholars approaching the question from a spatial standpoint, both in rural (Yang, 2001) and urban environments (Wu 2015; Kirby 2017; Vermander et al. 2018). This is also true for scholarship that focuses on women's religious experiences in contemporary China (Shui 2001; Jaschok 2003; Jaschok & Shui 2011). Other scholars have also applied a spatial lens in order to understand how religion permeates different spaces of Chinese society, including how it is controlled and regulated by the party-state (Ashiwa 2009).[45] Building on Knott's (2005) assertion that the 'religious' in space should be studied by disturbing the 'categories of "religious" and "secular" and their presumed meanings and affiliations', Hopkins et al. (2013: 7-8) argue that this can be done by 're-examining the consequences, character, and co-production of religiosities'. This allows for a more in-depth reading of 'religion' beyond that of its 'public face' and instead allows us to focus on the 'intimate practices of faith' and how they are 'deeply social and

[45] Ashiwa (2009: 44) applies Lefebvre's (1991) theorisations of space to examine how the physical space of religion in Chinese society has been 'contested' through repeated destruction and re-building. 'Institutional space', for him, is where religion is governed by law and regulations as defined by the state as well as officially registered religious organisations (ibid). On the other hand, in 'semiotic space' the 'meanings and discourse of religion' take place 'through the practice of rituals and religious activities' (ibid).

socialising' in nature. This ultimately recognises the 'labour and effort that goes into constructing religious meaning' (ibid). In the words of Kong & Woods (2017: 165), 'religion […] is always in the process of becoming' and cannot ever be considered static. Conceptualised in this way, religion is expressed in space(s) and the 'competing claims, meanings and identities' of those in it. By rejecting the construction of 'religion' found in modernist and secularist discourses, we can see how it is 'mobile, diffuse and compelling' in our everyday lives (ibid), serving as a fastener that directs the individual 'in time and space' (Tweed 2006: 262).

The literature on gender and women's development in China also demonstrates a focus on the spatial, with many scholars paying particular attention to the socioeconomic and cultural changes that have shaped the 'public' and 'private' in contemporary China (Yang M.M.H 1999; Jaschok & Shui 2001; 2011; Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018). Furthermore, certain scholars' have argued that Chinese women's 'entrance', 'defiance' or 'complete rejection' of these spatialised spheres of society is central to understanding their status in contemporary Chinese society (Yang M.M.H 1999; Jaschok & Shui 2001; 2011). For example, Yang M.M.H (1999: 2) argues that 'far from comfortably embodying space, women in modernity have been multiply displaced and enclosed' and there is a need for them to 'mobilise the space they have lost'. This is not unique to those focusing on gender in China, with many scholars examining how the 'spatial' shapes and influences the lives of women globally (Massey 1994; Giselle 2013; Klingorová & Gökarıksel 2018). In their study of women's embodied practices and everyday experiences of sacred space in Czechia, Klingorová & Gökarıksel (2018: 38) argue that 'religion is deeply ingrained in and by habitual geographies' and that 'sacred space' is created in women's lives. For these authors, any static or 'rigid' understanding of distinctions made between the secular and the sacred are eradicated when exploring the experiences of women's 'everyday'. It was in light of these literatures that I made the decision to construct my own spatial analytical lens that would pay particular attention to the 'everyday' of the women in this study and what this could uncover by exploring beyond the 'official'.

2.2. Conducting A Spatial Analysis: Key Terms, Dimensions and Properties

It cannot be assumed what spatial terminology means when it 'remains contested' nor that its conceptualisation is clear and the same for all (Knott 2005a: 14). Therefore, in this section, I will be outlining what I mean by each term I am employing, as well as recognising that they are not 'neutral once used discursively' (ibid: 126). This will include conceptualising what I mean by 'space', including its 'dimensions, properties and

aspects' – a typology developed by Knott (2005a; 2005b) – that will help form the basis of what I mean by my spatial analysis and how this will be employed when analysing my data. By bringing these together, I endeavour to create an approach that, much like Knott's (2005b: 176) is 'analytical and interpretive'. Furthermore, it is utilised within this study as a 'series of analyses' that seeks to 'take seriously issues of embodiment […], representation, production and reproduction, simultaneity, power […] and history' that will inform our understanding of women's experiences of RICOs and the relational ways that they shape their organisations (ibid: 176-177). This does not replace the data collection methods that are explored in Chapter Three, but rather this spatial analysis is of value when examining the data that these collection methods produced. Furthermore, it is not just about having one particular 'point' of study, but rather an awareness of how this dimension – in this case, RICOs – are 'derived', 'produced', 'embodied' and 'acted upon' (Knott 2005b: 176). Much like Knott (2005b: 176) argues, it is not 'necessary to apply all the elements' of a particular spatial theory on every case study. Therefore, I have focused in on what elements are vital for this spatial analysis and what will provide 'new and unexpected insights' into the motivations, experiences and religious subjectivity of women who work for RICOs in contemporary China.

2.2.1. Defining Key Terms

My research questions, as well as the construction and employment of this spatial analysis, seek to examine the expressions and formations of religion and agency created by, and within, RICOs as 'opportunity spaces' for women in contemporary China. However, as stated above, the concepts often employed in spatial studies are 'contested' and it is vital to make sure that my use of them are clearly defined to demonstrate how they will be employed within this thesis.

'Space' as a concept provides the opportunity to discuss and examine certain aspects of the human experience, our social relationships and the 'world around us' (Knott 2005b: 157). I understand 'space' as a 'social construct' that is made up of 'vast intricacies' and 'incredible complexities' of the 'everyday', whether or not the networks of social relations range from highly localised expressions to global scales and flows (Massey 1994: 155-156; Knott 2005a; Kong & Woods 2017). We cannot consider 'space' to be 'flat' or 'static' because the social relations that form it 'are themselves dynamic by their very nature' (ibid).[46] We also cannot see 'space' as 'merely a container' within which

[46] Lefebvre's (1991) work titled '*The Production of Space'* argues that space is not static and cannot be viewed as independent from everyday life. Rather, space is to be understood as being

activities occur, nor as a 'backdrop against which they are played out' (Knott 2005: 129). If we did, we would ignore its 'dimensions, properties and aspects' (ibid).[47] Nobody is 'outside or beyond' space nor are they completely free from struggles over it 'given that all human action is both constitutive of and enacted through space' (Kong & Woods 2017: 4; see also Said 1991).

Another concept often used within a spatial analysis is 'place', which Knott (2005a: 29-30) defines as the 'parts of dynamic and relational space' that 'are conceived in social, mental, and physical terms'. For Knott (ibid: 30), this aids the researcher to examine 'certain domains (places)' to elicit insights into how religion is 'located'.[48] When initially developing my spatial analysis, I thought I would use 'place' in much the same way as Knott (2005a). However, interestingly, I came upon Giselle's (2013: 168) argument that 'space' and 'place' could be used interchangeably as making a distinction in previous literature has led to critiques of being 'gendered' (see also Rose 1993; McDowell 1999). By this she means that 'space' has often been conceptualised as 'abstract yet dynamic' and therefore viewed as 'implicitly "male"', whereas 'place' has been seen as 'local, passive and associated with nature' and therefore, 'female' (ibid). In her want to not uphold these 'falsely dualistic distinctions' she uses the concepts as 'interrelated spheres' that relate and impact upon each other and 'cannot easily be teased out' (ibid). Therefore, when discussing certain physical spaces created by RICOs in Chapters 4-6, and reproduced by the women within them, I have stuck with the term 'space' instead of 'place' which also takes into consideration other theorisations of women's religious subjectivity and use of space in China (Jaschok & Shui 2001; 2011).[49]

Finally, there is a need to conceptualise what is meant by 'location' within a spatial analysis, especially as mine fundamentally draws upon Knott's (2005a; 2005b) work whose aim is to 'locate religion'. For Knott (2005a: 1) this includes an examination of

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'embedded in the social' (Giselle 2013: 168) and this means it can be disrupted and reimagined by actors which cause the emergence of new spatial practices and positions (Lefebvre 1991). Therefore, space is 'produced' and allows for us to conceptualise it beyond it being 'there', but rather as 'enacted or performed [...], embodied and imagined' (Giselle 2013: 168). Yet, the 'spatial practice' discussed by Lefebvre is not considered innately 'religious' or 'secular' but rather that religious meaning could be contributed to it where a sense of the 'sacred' or a 'religiously meaningful space' can be imbued by ritualised practice (Knott 2005: 39). This is discussed further in relation to how it applies in this spatial analysis in Section 2.3.2.

[47] The dimensions, properties and aspects of my spatial analysis are outlined in Section 2.2.2 and all sub-sections in Section 2.3.

[48] Knott (2005a: 30) argues that her spatial analysis allows her to 'see more clearly what religion is and how it relates to other aspects of the physical world, society, and culture'.

[49] Jaschok & Shui's (2011) theory of space is discussed in Section 2.2.2.

'geographical places, material objects, […] perhaps social institutions', as well as 'cultural spaces' and 'ideological positions. This calls for a spatial analysis of the 'dynamic relations' between the social, mental and physical (ibid: 2). This will, Knott (2005a: 3) argues, allow us to investigate where religion is located and let us ask 'what do we learn about the nature and place of religion when investigating its location?'[50] In a similar way, I seek to 'locate' and provide insights into 'religion' and the 'religious subjectivity' developed specifically by women working for RICOs in contemporary China. I also wish to 'locate' forms and expressions of agency in and through the space(s) RICOs create and so expand the analysis to include this. In order to do this, I need to examine the dimensions, properties and aspects of my spatial analysis.

2.2.2. Dimensions: Framing RICOs as 'Opportunity Spaces'

I am using Knott's (2005a; 2005a) typology of 'dimensions, properties and aspects' of space to help construct my spatial analysis. However, there are clear divergences from her theorisation, which I will highlight in the proceeding sections of this chapter. This will be alongside a justification of what I have chosen and, importantly, the implications of this for my analysis. Firstly, by 'dimensions', Knott (2005b: 159) meant a 'unified view of space' where physical, mental and social space are 'brought together' so that the concept of 'space' is not restricted purely to 'geometric coordinates and the physical domain'. Furthermore, Knott (2005b: 160) argues that 'space is not something other than or further to the physical, mental and social dimensions that constitute it. It is their dynamic summation'.

As discussed in Section 1.2, the RICOs in this study have been navigating the careful balance between being (potentially) antagonistic and complementary in relation to the party-state since their formation (Kuah-Pearce 2014: 40). Their ability to maintain this balance has provided them the ability to have governmental support, whilst also providing spaces where their members can create, shape and develop development practice that they see as achieving a 'good society' for all (Fielder 2019a). This balance means they have been able to emerge as 'opportunity spaces' in contemporary Chinese society in ways that other types of organisations have not managed, such as official religious sites. By having RICOs as 'opportunity spaces' in this spatial analysis, it conceptualises the organisations as a forum where 'demands for political, social and economic inclusion', where different 'conception[s] of the "good life"' have been, and continue to be, negotiated with the

[50] Knott's (2005a; 2005b) work on the 'location of religion' focuses on the 'secular West', which means that considerations are made for making my spatial analysis specific to the Chinese context.

modernity projects undertaken in recent Chinese history, including the actions and ideology of the nation-state (Yavuz 2003: 20-21). In much the same way as Yavuz (2003) discusses the emergence of 'opportunity spaces' within Turkey during its recent decades of economic prosperity, I would argue that the Opening-Up and Reform Era (1980-) in China was conducive to the creation of 'opportunity spaces' (Fielder 2019a). I would also draw from Yavuz's (2003: 20-22) argument that these newly created 'opportunity spaces' allowed those within it to develop their 'own distinct voice' and form a 'new socio-political consciousness'. This includes the religious in contemporary China who sought to carve out 'new possibilities' that could offer them the ability to 'knit a shared moral fabric' that diverged from the dominant narratives of the modern nation-state (Yavuz 2003: 8).

Yavuz (2003: 24) defines 'opportunity spaces' as a 'forum of social interaction that creates new possibilities for augmenting networks of shared meaning and associational life'. He develops this further by outlining that these should not be understood as 'simply mobilising structures' because they are created through social relations and 'expressive space' rather than just through [in]formal organisational systems (ibid). These spaces are not just a culmination of both 'individual and collective actions' but also where the 'boundary between public and private is constantly [being] redrawn' (Yavuz 2003: 24-25). Whilst Yavuz (2003: 24) identifies the 'market' as a central 'opportunity space', it his conceptualisation of them as 'spaces [that] allow one to pick and choose in defining personal identity' and where individuals can 'change the meaning of everyday life' that is pertinent here for how I am conceptualising RICOs. This framing of RICOs is inspired by Fielder's (2019a) recent work on religious authority and recognition in contemporary China. Fielder (ibid: 81) argues that the various changes taken by government in relation to religion and social welfare, as discussed in Section 1.1.2, created an 'opportunity space' where RICOs could 'engage in a cause they were personally passionate about'. Fielder (2019a: 96) outlines how the emergence of 'opportunity spaces' in China was caused by 'the lack of clear regulatory framework', as well as their ability to 'straddle' the secular-sacred divide. Furthermore, she states that RICOs 'bring together a range of actors […] from diverse backgrounds' where there can be an ongoing 'translation of transnational discourses into the local context' and vice versa (ibid). It is the 'contradictory nature' of the recent socioeconomic context in China that has, in Fielder's (2019a: 97), and my own view, provided RICOs with the ability to *be* and *create* opportunity spaces that are 'discursive spaces of sociability where practices can be displayed, exchanged and

negotiated'. Furthermore, having RICOs conceptualised as 'opportunity spaces' as the core dimension of my spatial analysis provides distinct parameters to be drawn, whilst also recognising that it allows for the 'physical, mental and social' to be brought together and conceived as 'dynamic' (Knott 2005b: 159).

Whilst Fielder (2019a) acknowledges the role that RICOs as 'opportunity spaces' can create for women; it is not the main focus of her argument. I will build from her argument, recognising the merits that Yavuz's (2003) theory of 'opportunity spaces' provides when examining the emergence and ongoing work of RICOs in contemporary China. However, by centring women, I seek to use my spatial analysis to uncover whether RICOs are indeed 'opportunity spaces' for them and, if so, what does this mean for the women working for them. This echoes the earlier discussed work of Yang M.M.H (1999: 2) who argues that women were 'displaced and enclosed' by the modernising processes of the Opening-Up and Reform-Era (1980s-) in China and calls for them to 'mobilise' and 'repossess the space[s] that they have lost': what if RICOs are those spaces?

It is with this in mind, that I would want to pay attention to Jaschok & Shui's (2011) theory of 'complementary space' (*duiying*). In their study of female religious traditions in China they develop the concept of 'complementary social space' in the hope of recognising the distinct impact of the sociohistorical context upon Chinese women's involvement in religion. They argue that it offers recognition of 'women's capacity for creative circumvention' that offers them religious justification to reject social norms such as marriage. Furthermore, they argue, it 'signifies neither subversion of, nor subservience to, the body politic' (ibid). Their theorisation of space as 'complementary/interdependent' emphasises, in much the same way as the theories considered above, that space is relational by its very nature but is 'always subject to expression of the individual agency' of the women who seek to inhabit it and who have previously gone 'against the grain' of what has been expected of them by wider Chinese society (ibid). Their understanding of 'complementary social space' recognises the 'fluid negotiations' that Chinese women have employed with political actors throughout history. They link this to yin and yang correlative cosmology to conceptualise the 'soft' and 'hard' skilful means through which women 'bargain' (ibid; see also Raphals 1998: 139-167; Black 1989).[51] This particular conceptualisation of social space provides further depth to the core dimension of this spatial analysis – namely 'opportunity spaces'. It does this by taking into consideration

[51] This links to a core aspect of this spatial analysis – spatial practice – which will be discussed in further detail in 2.3.2.

the ways in which women may experience RICOs, using an indigenous concept that speaks to the history of the Chinese context.

2.2.1. Properties

To take into account the 'complexity' and 'dynamism' of space (Massey 1994: 155-156; Knott 2005a: 21), it becomes important to outline what I mean by its 'properties', which for my spatial analysis will follow those used within Knott (2005a; 2005b)'s spatial methodology – configuration, simultaneity and extension/power. However, I will also add in the use of 'scale' as a property of space that aids our examination of the impact of its extension/power. The first 'property' of space that is included in this spatial analysis is configuration'. Understanding 'configuration' as one property of space allows this spatial analysis to take into consideration that RICOs do not occur independently of others (Knott 2005a: 22), including official religious sites or secular charitable organisations. Instead, they are 'particular forms of cultural expression' that are 'fully social' and therefore, subject to the various forces such as the political, cultural and economic (ibid). By having 'configuration' as a key property of space – and therefore, a part of this spatial analysis – allows me to raise similar questions as Knott (2005a: 22) such as, 'what is [RICOs] place in the configuration […] of human life?' (ibid). For this thesis, that means being able to examine not only *why* women chose to work for RICOs over other religious or social welfare spaces, but also be able to pay attention to the impact and influence 'various forces' have on RICOs.[52]

The next property of space for this spatial analysis is 'simultaneity' which defines what makes 'social relations spatial' (Knott 2005a: 23). For Knott (ibid), and for this spatial analysis, it means understanding space as a weaving of configured social relations. It is here that Knott (2005a: 23) draws upon Lefebvre's (1991) work to argue that simultaneity means that 'space is always, now and formerly, a present space, given as an immediate whole, complete with its associations and connections in their actuality'. However, this does not mean that we are to take this to mean 'only the simultaneous occurrence of events' but rather that its value lies in awareness of the 'interconnectedness of events' and the relationality between people, objects and the domains that make up a space (Knott 2005a: 23). For Knott (2005a: 23), in her use of simultaneity, this means that 'spaces of

[52] Including 'configuration' also means being able to bring together analytical themes that would other be separated in order to 'demonstrate their interconnectedness and co-ordinated nature' (Shields 1991: 31 as cited in Knott 2005a: 22). In the case of this thesis, it is the bringing together the investigation of gender, religion and agency.

religion' are 'overlapping, co-existent and parallel' with others (both religious and secular), whilst also being constituted of 'multiple' and 'contested' social relations. It means being able to consider how 'a particular place […] enfolds its social, physical and cultural history within it' (Knott 2005b: 161). For my spatial analysis, this means that I am able to consider the relationality between the different women's narratives and life experiences. It also provides the ability to examine how the spaces created by the RICOs interact with others in order to relationally shape the women's religious subjectivity. It also means being able to see each space [domain] that the women work in as one that has a 'contested' history where multiple ideologies play a role in how it is established and how the women 'bargain' and 'navigate' them.

The next property of space included in this analysis is the way in which the 'extension' and 'compression' of space influences and shapes our understandings of power and how it is 'caught up' in spaces (Knott 2005a: 25). The process of globalisation and the 'opening up' of markets, migration and technology means that there have been certain 'social consequences' that have caused both the extension of space, as well as its compression (ibid).[53] What is of particular relevance to this spatial analysis is the consequences of this 'extension' upon social relations and bodies. It is the reactionary 'compression' of space that raises the importance of other factors such as gender (Knott 2005a: 25; Massey 1994). It is the 'compression' of space that can cause conflict in the everyday. Paying attention to the extension and compression of space is useful for two reasons: 1) it recognises the ways in which the RICOs now operate, having grown during the process of globalisation and 2) recognises the potential 'harms' that this has done to the women in this study and whether or not their motivations to engage with RICOs is a reaction to this.[54] In order to do this, the final property to be added to this spatial analysis is the use of 'scale'. This will mean being able to analyse not just the consequences of the other properties – namely, extension/compression – but also pay close attention to the other aspects that will be discussed in Section 2.3.

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[53] Knott's (2005a: 25) argument is developed from the work of Giddens (1991) who coined the term 'distanciation' meaning the 'condition under which time and space are organised so as to connect presence and absence'. She also draws upon Harvey (1989) who argues that the compression of time-space that has occurred during globalisation has caused 'alterations' that have caused the 'collapsing of spatial barriers' (Knott 2005a: 25).

[54] Knott (2005a: 25) links the property of 'power' to extension/compression. Whilst recognising that this can be a key property of space, particularly when studying social differences, it is beyond the scope of this thesis. It is, however, an area for future study whereby this particular spatial analysis could be more narrowly focused to 'scrutinise' and 'expose' the gendered power dynamics within RICOs (ibid). This would be benefitted from the participation of both men and women working for RICOs.

'Scale' has a complicated history in geography. Ferber and Harris (2013: 184) note that it fosters 'controversy in nearly every sub-discipline of the field', whilst also remarking that ignoring its use in the geography of religion has meant that an opportunity has been missed to advance 'an important component of cultural geography'. They are not arguing that scholars have ignored it altogether, but rather that it has been employed only implicitly by geographers of religion and only when using large-scale studies, particularly on church attendance (ibid). This has meant that, often, studies in the geography of religion have sidestepped what Van Dijik (2011: 141) terms 'a subjective understanding of geographic notions of scale and scalar repositioning'. This argument is developed by Hirai (2009: 105 as cited in Levitt & Torre 2018: 339) who notices that approaches to religion using scale in the past have ignored the importance of 'memory, history and spirituality' with wider national survey narratives providing a different picture to how individuals make meaning in their everyday lives (see Alderman and Hoelscher 2004).

However, this is changing with scholars such as Tweed (2006) presenting theories of religion that are 'scalar in [their] very nature' (ibid). Tweed (2006) presents a scaled theory of religion by arguing that religion situates 'individuals and communities in time and space' through the body, the home, the homeland and the cosmos (Ferber & Harris, 2013: 185). He argues that religions are 'about finding a place and moving across space', signalling that they should be understood as 'complex processes' rather than a manifested object of study (Tweed 2006: 59). Kong & Woods' (2017: 59) highlight that, 'when exploring any spatial activity, a change in scale necessitates a reframing of spatial dynamics and understanding'. They recognise that any religious group will be continuously negotiating different scales of understanding, agency and activity, and also acknowledge the impact of globalisation which has caused the de-territorialisation of 'religious understanding and praxis' (ibid: 60). The inclusion of 'scale' as a property of space provides the ability to examine how women are engaging in an ongoing 'cognitive praxis' that seeks new and creative forms of development practice within RICOs as 'opportunity spaces' (Hsiung et al. 2001). It will also enable me to examine how the subjectivities of the women working for RICOs manifests at various levels, in the search for understanding how 'macrostructures' can be transformed through 'micro-interactions' (Yavuz 2003: 25).

2.3. Core Aspects of this Spatial Analysis

Within a spatial analysis, it is also imperative to define what core aspects of space are being conceptualised and used. Each aspect offers 'value' in the process of studying

RICOs, especially when paying particular attention to religion, gender and agency (Knott 2005a; 2005b). When discussing 'aspects of space' and what this means for my spatial analysis, I follow the initial work of Lefebvre (1991: 33-40) and its later development by Knott (2005a; 2005b) to mean how 'space is perceived, conceived and lived by people' (Knott 2005b: 163).[55] By conceptualising the core aspects of this spatial lens, I will be able to analyse how RICOs are 'perceived, conceived and lived' by the women who work for them.

2.3.1. Spatial Practice

Whilst Lefebvre (1991) outlined three particular aspects in his theorisation of space as a concept, I am focused on just one of these, in particular, that will add further understanding to my analysis – *spatial practice*. I understand spatial practice to mean the 'ways people generate, use and perceive space' (Stewart 1995: 610). My understanding is informed by Knott's (2005a: 39-40) elaboration of Lefebvre's (1991) argument, where she argues that spatial practice 'embraces the activities of production and reproduction' and is an aspect of spatial analysis that pays attention to 'everyday experience' and 'ordinary practices' (ibid). Furthermore, her recognition that spatial practice is not 'intrinsically religious or secular' but rather that 'religious meaning or purpose may be attributed to it' is essential when examining the women's narratives of their work and experiences within and through their RICO. It takes into consideration the women within the RICOs who do not identify as religious but may take part in domains that are imbued with religious meaning by others within the RICO. It also pays attention to the 'everyday' where the women's lived experiences, particularly those of their religious subjectivity, often play out. Echoing Elias & Rai (2019: 208), 'space […] is composed of the gendered social practices that occur across and within it'. This also means it is imperative to consider spatial practice 'vis-à-vis the body' as 'different bodies experience and use space in different ways' (Giselle 2013: 168). This includes the way that space is 'conceived (in language), represented (e.g., in the built environment), and ultimately reproduced for human identity and becoming' (Knott 2005a: 17). When conducting a spatial analysis of RICOs, an understanding of 'spatial practice' (vis-à-vis the body) will mean that attention is paid to how the women interact within the different spaces created for them by the work they are doing for the RICO. It will also mean when analysing the different types of data

[55] Lefebvre (1991) and Knott (2005) note that 'aspects of space' should not be considered as 'historical stages', but rather as 'ever-present spatial possibilities' (Knott 2005b: 165).

that attention needs to be paid to the 'ordinary' as well as what may immediately jump out to me as an observer.

2.3.2. The Sacred and the 'Quasi-Secular'

My focus on the everyday spaces that women embody and shape through their work for RICOs, calls for a need to look at religion beyond 'official sacred sites' (Klingorová & Gökarıksel 2018: 39). Just as Klingorová and Gökarıksel (2018: 49-51) argue, my spatial analysis will recognise that women's experiences of religion 'exceed the sites of the officially sacred and take many forms' where they 'actively create the sacred' through their recognition and emotional reactions to everyday space that would otherwise go unnoticed (ibid: 50). This is of particular relevance because of the sociohistorical context of how 'sacred sites' have been established, viewed and regulated in contemporary China, especially when it comes to what is defined as 'official' or not. In the words of Vermander et al., (2018: 42-43) 'the state has remapped "sacred" spaces, buildings and practices' from the Republican era (1912-1949) onwards. This has impacted how sacredness has been expressed in China, often 'defined by the political ethos' (ibid). In doing so, I hope to draw attention the 'everyday production of sacred space' through and within RICOs and the women who work for them.

As part of this, there was a need to draw upon the work of Kong & Woods (2016: 116-117) who defined an aspect of space as 'quasi-secular'. By this, they mean the 'ostensibly secular spaces that are appropriated by religious groups in order to achieve a religious objective and outcome' (ibid). Their aim is to reveal the necessary conditions needed for groups to occupy these spaces and 'become established on the soil of a given society' (Hervieu-Leger 2002: 99 as cited in Kong & Woods 2016: 119). For me, it provides the ability to examine the secular (physical) spaces used by the RICOs (and as defined by the state) in order to see if and/or how the sacred, and women's religious subjectivity, could be expressed in them. Kong & Woods (2016: 119) also argue that spaces that are 'quasi-secular' are 'implicitly more accessible than religious spaces', which offers this spatial analysis the prospect of exploring whether this holds truth when it comes to the lives and work of women in RICOs and, in particular, *why* they came to their organisation over others – both religious and secular.

2.3.3. Social Capital: Bonds, *Binds* and Bridges

In conducting a spatial analysis of RICOs, it provides the ability to consider how RICOs utilise differing forms of social capital, and how this is relationally shaped by the women

who work for them because, much like Knott (2005a: 127) argues, 'capital amasses' in space.[56] Many have argued that the rapid socioeconomic changes and urban development that has occurred since 1949 in the PRC has not been 'successful in nurture[ing] social capital in general' (Zhai & Ng M.K 2013: 16). As discussed in Section 1.1, the structure of Chinese society pre-1980 had a large influence on family and work structures, that shaped 'human relationships and the tendency of people to participate in urban affairs', including the *danwei* system (ibid; see also Xie & Costa 1993). There was an identified shift from social capital being evolved from political ideology to the 'realisation of self-interest' in the past four decades, especially within the PRC's urban cities (Zhai & Ng M. K 2013: 16; see also Yue, Wang & Wang 2002). It has also been argued that differing religious communities, groups and organisations are providing innovative forms of social capital in contemporary China (Weller et al. 2017; Zhai & Ng 2012). Therefore, when considering how social capital may be examined and understood within RICOs, it was important to take note of the impact these rapid socioeconomic changes have had on everyday lives and social relations, particularly for women in China. However, this will also be done whilst recognising the continuing relevance of indigenous concepts surrounding social relationships – namely, *guanxi* – in China today.

Social capital has become one of the 'most powerful and popular metaphors' within social science research, with a variety of literature arguing that it is central to understanding differences between and within groups, especially in relation to the social relations that comprise these (Darlauf & Fafchamps 2004: 1). When it comes to defining what we mean by 'social capital', there remains recognised ambiguity (ibid: 3).[57] Thus, making it imperative that a substantive definition is made here for how it will be understood and used within this research study.[58] My starting point was the central, and heavily influential, work of Putnam (2000). The utilisation of his work by scholars in various fields is in part due to his 'straightforward conceptualisation' of social capital, defining it as 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and

[56] Knott (2005a: 6) makes reference to social, cultural and financial capital in her argument.
[57] Portes (1998: 2) notes that 'despite its current popularity, the term does not embody any idea new to sociologists.' The argument that 'participation in groups can have positive consequences' is a core idea found in the work of Durkheim and Marx, alike.
[58] Som (2014: 27) outlines that there are four groups in which the theories of social capital can be 'meaningfully' sorted into: 1) social capital as a resource for the individual (including scholars such as Bourdieu 1986, Glaeser et al. 2002 and Lin 2001); 2) social capital as a 'characteristic of the social structure' (Som 2014: 27), including scholars such has Dasgupta 1998: 4); 3) identification of social capital is done through social norms, such as Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 1993); and finally, 4) theories that focus on the 'achievement-enhancing nature of social capital' (Som 2014: 27; see Coleman 1984 for an example of this fourth group).

trustworthiness that arise from them' (ibid: 19). Furthermore, a central component of his definition is the concept of 'reciprocity' because 'individuals in a social organisation work together for the common good', with the intention that it is done by one for another and will be 'repaid' in some form in the future (Julien 2015: 259).[59] The social capital created by and within a social organisation is, therefore, not 'the private property of any one individual, but rather is a collective, public good' (ibid). Whilst this provides, and will remain central to, the initial building blocks for the eventual framework I develop in this section, there were concerns over how certain elements were conceptualised within this initial work by Putnam (2000). Bunn & Wood (2012: 638) shine a light on the two key problems with this definition that are pertinent to my conceptualisation of social capital. The first is how networks and norms are conflated with one another, with the assumption made that 'the latter spontaneously emerge[s] from the former' (ibid). Bunn & Wood's (ibid) argument that a distinction has to be drawn between networks and norms is important for this research study in order to take into consideration how the women's networks arise from norms that were already held before joining their chosen RICO, as well as how their pre-existing networks are altered and strengthened based on the actions, in connection to norms, undertaken within their RICO.[60]

The second problem with Putnam's definition is that it '*quantifies* social relations' where social capital is a property '*held* by an individual, group, community or society', which can be measured at any given time (Bunn & Wood 2012: 638). Crossley's (2008: 48) theory, however, differs from Putnam's by arguing that social capital is 'a property of social relations' that comprises of 'facilitative functions' supplied from social networks (Bunn & Wood 2012: 638). It allows us to view social capital as being unfolded in social relations, rather than something that is 'deposited in a repository' (ibid). Consideration of both the above problems with Putnam's theory are important for this study as there is a need to analyse the *bridging* social capital of RICOs, which calls for understanding both '*how* and *of what* social networks are made and remade' (Bunn & Wood 2012: 638). Much like Bunn & Wood (2012: 649) assert, this framework is not focused upon the 'social integration' that Putnam's interpretation calls for, but rather the relevance and

[59] Julien (2015: 59) notes how this aspect of Putnam's theory is reliant on this point being made in Coleman's (1988) work on social capital, which focuses on its functions and as a resource that an individual can draw from (see also Leonard 2004).

[60] This critique will be revisited when discussing the conceptualisation of 'bridging' in this thesis because the ways in which networks 'bridge' (across groups) can be argued to be a 'result of either pre-existing or strategically pursued norms' (Bunn & Wood 2012: 638). This means that consideration has to been taken as to whether this should be viewed as 'cultural capital' instead of social (ibid).

interpretation of social relations with recognition that 'social capital only makes sense when it is seen as a dimension of everyday relationships' (see also Silverman 2001: 243).[61]

Therefore, I will be examining different *types* of social capital – bonding (Wuthnow 2002), bridging (Portes and Landolt 1996), and linking (Szreter & Woolcock 2004). I have drawn from classical understandings of these different types, but will outline what each means for this study, as well as how I have formulated '*binds*' instead of 'links'. My examination of all three types takes into consideration the potential for women working for RICOS to access various 'resources' and 'options' in order to develop their own individual social capital (Rivera 2018: 40-41). Much like other scholars (Aldrich 2012; Nickels 2014; Rivera 2018), I argue that it is also the commitment to a particular goal by all within an organisation that creates the ability for all of these types to be maximised. This does not mean, however, to say that all individuals have access to the same level of social capital within the same organisation. By employing a spatial analysis that centres women's experiences and practices in the everyday, this thesis will be able to examine *how* and *why* RICOs may offer access to these potential forms over, say, other secular or 'officially religious' groups and organisations.

The first type of social capital that I will be including in my analytical framework is *bonding*, which refers to the substance of social relationships (Lockhart 2005) and often occurs amongst 'homogenous populations' where core values bond people together (Leonard 2004: 929; see also Putnam 2000).[62] However, Aldrich et al. (2016) argue that *bonding* social capital can occur between those who have common socioeconomic, educational and religious backgrounds. This type of social capital will provide a lens through which to answer the first research question of this thesis that focuses on *why* women are choosing to work for RICOs in China. Is there something about the 'substance' of the relationships they build within, and through, the organisation that shapes their motivation and work?

The next form of social capital used within the framework developed for my spatial analysis is *bridging.* This type 'creates relationships over social divisions, such as those based on race or class' and allows individuals to gain access and resources from 'beyond

[61] I would recognise here that the 'social integration' focus of Putnam's theory would also offer insights for an analysis of RICOs role in the creation of a 'good society' and the political concerns that arise from this.

[62] The development of these 'bonds' are shaped by 'trust and solidarity' that could potentially cause individuals to be held back because of demands from within the homogenous group (ibid).

their usual social groups' (Lockhart 2005: 46). Scholars have argued that the need for *bridging* stems from *bonding* social ties not stretching 'vertically out of low-income communities' (ibid; see also Thompson & Warren 2001). There is, therefore, a need for *bridging* to take place in order to overcome certain structural constraints, such as living below the poverty line. The focus for this thesis on *bridging* is to examine what kinds of relationships are developed within and through the RICOs for the women who work for them. Both RICOs in this study have strong local, national and international ties to specific individuals, groups and organisations (both non-governmental and governmental); exploring this type of social capital in the framework would mean being able to analyse the women's access to these relationships, as well as the implications of this access for them. However, it is also to notice the potential of *bridging* within the RICO as organisational structure as well, with the potential of different forms of social capital being developed through one-to-one staff interactions. For example, Lockhart (2005) points to the role of 'mentor' as a relationship that harnesses both *bonding* and *bridging*.

Different scholars (Putnam 2000; Woolcock & Narayan 2000) have argued that a third form of social capital should be conceptualised as 'linking', defined as the 'institutional arrangements that promote the exchange of power, wealth, and status among different social groups' (Som 2014: 32). The importance in 'linking' being the ability to interact 'across power or authority social structures' (ibid). Whilst this third form of social capital presents an interesting pathway into examining how both the RICOs and the women who work for them interact with the party-state in China, it does not take into consideration the *ways* in which this mutual obligation is produced across social relationships. It misses vital elements of the distinct practice and understanding of *'guanxi'* in China. This would have meant ignoring the 'importance of trust, obligations and reciprocity in Chinese social interactions' and how, and why, this impacts the women who work for RICOs (Huang & Aaltio 2014: 25; see also Xiao & Tsui 2007). Broadly *guanxi* is understood to be 'relationships between individuals or social connections based on mutual interest and benefit' with the want to produce the 'right' kind of *guanxi*, especially within the pursuit of a successful career (Huang & Aaltio 2014: 25; see also Bian 1994, Yang 1994). *Guanxi* is argued to be founded upon, but not limited to, three types of base. Firstly, this includes 'common social identities' such as an individual's birthplace, place of education and their workplace (Chen X.P and Chen C.C 2004), highlighting the importance of 'specific social institutions that have clear social and even physical boundaries' (Huang & Aaltio 2014:

25). The second base focuses on a 'common third party' that can be called upon to garner help or make new connections, whilst the third is what Chen X.P and Chen C.C (2004) term the 'anticipatory base' where the creation of new connections through *intention*, including the 'promise to engage in future exchanges, collaborations or joint ventures' (Huang & Aaltio 2014: 25). Both these bases help our above discussion of *bonding* and *bridging* and how this may come about in practice in China. However, it also helps pinpoint to the different in how 'links' – or in this case, *binds* – are created.

Another layer in conceptualising what is meant by *guanxi* for this framework is Hwang's (1987) argument that there are three varying types of social relationships – instrumental, expressive and mixed ties.[63] The 'mixed tie' is a blend of the other two and is, arguably, what is expressed through Chinese *guanxi*, e.g., a mix of a ties created from 'expectations of fair exchanges' (instrumental) and those formed from 'plenty of personal feelings and emotion' (Xu & Li 2015: 834). The relevance for this theoretical lens is women's experiences of RICOs as organisations and *how* and *why* these take place. Various studies on women's experiences of professional networks and organisational culture, point to women experiencing exclusion and discrimination in male-dominated workplaces including what has been commonly termed the 'glass ceiling' both in China and globally (Cooke et al. 2015; Zuo 2016). The gendered experience of *guanxi*, particularly in the workplace, is highlighted by Huang & Aaltio (2014: 36) who argue that the 'insider-orientated' nature of Chinese culture impacts women's ability to harness and develop it to the same level as men (see also Fang & Faure 2011).[64] Generally, studies on *guanxi* from a gender perspective focus on whether differences emerged between genders 'regarding the practice of guanxi' and end up reinforcing certain biological essentialist ideas of gender (Xu & Li 2015: 833).[65] A few of these studies argue that there are no gender differences in the practice of *guanxi*, with men and women holding the same capabilities as one another (Farh et al. 1998; Hussain et al. 2010). However, as Xu & Li

[63] By 'instrumental' Hwang (1987) means the 'relationship between people who possess expectations of fair exchanges'; whereas the 'expressive' type means those between family and friends and involved 'plenty of personal feelings and emotions' (Xu & Li 2015: 306).

[64] By 'insider-orientated', Huang & Aaltio (2014: 36) mean that interactions with others normally only take place with 'people they know, and they have been introduced to' and not those they have no connection/introduction to.

[65] I support Xu & Li's (2015: 833) call for a move beyond a focus on purely this because of the 'essentialist binary thinking' that can emerge from it. In doing so, there is ability to examine how 'gender is lived/performed' (ibid). However, in coming from (in their words) a 'post-structural feminist perspective' their viewpoint fails to recognise the everyday conflicts and struggles that emerge from the patriarchal struggles that inform women's lives and experiences (ibid).

(2015: 835) point out, this is amongst participants who were already in leadership positions in contemporary workspaces who were mainly from a high socioeconomic class.

Other studies, focused primarily on middle-class and educated women, found substantial differences in the practice of *guanxi* because of gender with a particular focus on what men and women understand *guanxi* to be for them, *how* they employ it and, interestingly, the attitudes surrounding its use. For instance, a key difference found in the literature was women using *guanxi* for 'small things' such as sourcing items not currently in stock or getting extra time off work (Xu & Li 2015: 836; see also Yang 1994; Zhang 2006). This differs to men who would employ *guanxi* for larger requests such as 'securing employment and seeking profitable business opportunities' (Xu & Li 2015: 836). This disparity is argued to be because of how women evaluate *what* they should use *guanxi* for, with men's uses promoted 'crude instrumentalism and aggressive tactics' that women in these studies did not feel they possessed nor wanted to be seen to be doing (Yang 1994: 82; see also Xu & Li 2015: 836). The time and effort required to develop and maintain *guanxi* was also identified as a barrier, especially those founded outside the home and the immediate family (Yang 1994; Zhang 2006). This is not surprising given the gendered social expectations and discourse surrounding women's roles and status in contemporary Chinese society as a 'good' wife and mother, as examined in Section 1.1.4 (see also Lee 2002; Zhan 1996).

Another obstacle to women's practice of *guanxi* stems from the perception that Chinese women who hold 'large guanxi networks', and/or regularly engage in using them, are seen as having 'bad reputations' (Xu & Li 2015: 835-837; see also Yang 1994; Zhang 2006). Of note, however, is in McLaren's (2004) study that demonstrated that there was a shift in Chinese women's perception of using *guanxi*, with them beginning to see it as a 'necessary quality' for women to have in contemporary Chinese society (Xu & Li 2015: 837). Yet, the argument remained that China is 'a male-dominated society […] where men possess more power and social resources' and, therefore, being the main 'benefactors in a guanxi network' (ibid: 842).

Having an understanding of the importance of *guanxi* in how social relationships are established and developed, means that there needs to be a shift in how *links* are conceptualised in this study, especially to take into consideration gendered norms that have shaped the practice of it. The practice of *guanxi* is seen as an 'emotional' and *binding* practice that stems from the heart of social relationships in China (Kipnis 1993; Chau

2019). Much like scholarship that this section stemmed from, such as Putnam (2000) and others who seek to understand the potential of religion and religious organisations to utilise and develop social capital (Rivera 2018; Bielefeld & Cleveland 2013; Bunn & Wood 2012; Lockhart 2005), Chau (2019: 3-4) argues that 'relationality' is inherent to how we can understand elements of Chinese society, including religion and social relationships. He goes on to argue that the 'religious realm is one of the most crucial arenas where *guanxi* is played out' (ibid: 4). It is combining this understanding with the above discussion on the gendered experience of *guanxi* that makes it necessary to transform what is normally termed *links* into the concept of 'binding/binds' social capital. My argument is that this will take into account not just the integral practice of *guanxi* and the mixed ties within it - with particular attention to the 'emotion' involved – but also, the potential for conceptualising the 'sacred' as a 'boundary [that] both "separates" different domains […] and "binds" them together' (Knott 2005b: 172-173). This conceptualisation of *binds* within the social capital framework that I have constructed will mean being able to analyse not just *how* social capital is accessed, developed and utilised by the women who work for RICOs, but also offer the potential of exploring what the implications of this might be on how the 'religious' is understood in contemporary China. It is also an original contribution that this thesis makes to the study of social capital in China, particularly when examining the lives and work of women.

2.3.4. The Question of Agency

The second research question of this thesis asks whether or not RICOs create *spaces* of agency for the women who work for them. It was, therefore, necessary to formulate how 'agency' as a concept, and aspect of my spatial analysis of RICOs, would be conceptualised. When referring to Knott's (2005a: 129) theorisation of space, she argues that space can't 'exhibit agency itself', but rather that space shapes the agency experienced by those who participate within it. For Knott, this is a fundamental aspect of what makes space 'active' (ibid). I then turned my attention to how Yavuz (2003: 20-21) understood agency as a concept within and through 'opportunity spaces'. He argues that viewing society as a human construction that is governed by a diverse range of influences, highlights the 'unending tensions between human understanding and multiple, yet conditioned, constructions of reality' (ibid). In doing so, 'human agency' becomes the 'fuel' for the construction of individual subjectivity which is reflexively created through social relations (ibid). Therefore, his focus is on the relationships between individual and society – or agency and structure – and how we can understand the way in which social

structures are created in the individual and vice versa (ibid). However, his theorisation of agency does not fully consider what the gendered implications of 'opportunity spaces' might be or the ongoing debate between secular and religious feminism(s) on the question of agency. Mahmood (2012: 5-6) highlights the dominance of feminist scholarship since the 1970s that primarily drew upon the social sciences in order to examine 'operations of human agency within the structures of subordination' to understand how women might 'resist' a dominant patriarchal system by 'subverting' its practices and values. She highlights that a key aim within this literature has been to answer: 'how do women contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it?' (ibid).

It will be important to bear in mind Abu-Lughod's (1990: 47) point that we should try to understand 'women's resistance' without 'misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience'. This *need* by feminist scholarship to find instances of 'explicit female agency' when examining the lives of religious women means that 'disruptions' to male authority are sought out even when the actions of the women may speak more to 're-scribing' what are considered to be 'instruments of their own oppression' (Mahmood 2012: 8). Therefore, my theorisation of 'agency' will take into consideration the arguments offered by religious feminists in their postcolonial deconstruction of the presumptions of previous feminist scholarship that led them to search for 'hopeful confirmations of the failure – or partial failure – of systems of oppression' when analysing women's resistance (Mahmood: 2012: 8-9; Abu-Lughod 1990: 53).

In order to do this, it is also important for me to challenge what we mean by 'resistance' in order to be able to reflect upon 'a whole range of human actions, including those which may be socially, ethically, or politically indifferent to the goal of opposing hegemonic norms' (Mahmood 2012: 9). In doing so, it will allow me to recognise that 'the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself' is socioculturally specific to the context being looked at, especially in terms of how we understand what 'change' is and the ways in which is it enacted (ibid). Furthermore, this develops a conceptualisation of agency that includes acts of 'passivity and docility' that would have otherwise been dismissed because of the progressivist assumptions often underlying theories of agency. Instead it allows us to see these as potential forms of agency characterised and understood within

the socioculturally specific 'discourses and structures of subordination' that manifest the conditions surrounding agency (ibid: 14-15).[66]

Therefore, 'agentival capacity' relates not only to 'those acts that resist norms but also the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms' (ibid). This means that my standpoint, in the same vein as Mahmood's (2012: 153), finds itself needing to 'uncouple' itself from 'politically prescriptive project[s] of feminism'. A task that at the beginning of this research did not come naturally, as I – a cis-white woman born in the UK and educated in the Western imaginary of the social sciences – had often worked and understood my own 'resistance' within these prescribed terms. Yet, this questioning of how I was conceptualising gender and agency was essential, not just because of the questions and gaps raised by the literature examining religion and women's everyday realities in contemporary urban China, but also because of the voices of the women themselves and how they reflected upon their work, their religiosities[67], and everyday lived realities.[68]

By considering agency from this standpoint, I will be able not to fall into the trap of neglecting 'other modalities of agency whose means and effect are not captured within the logic of subversion and resignification of hegemonic terms of discourse' (Mahmood 2012: 153).[69] My hope is therefore to take up the endeavour proposed by postcolonial feminist scholars such as Mahmood (2012: 155) who seek to 'envision valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a liberal progressive imaginary'.[70] What

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[66] Mahmood's (2012) conceptualisation of agency draws from Foucault's (1980; 1983) notion of power 'understood as a strategic force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses.' It recognises that the subject 'does not precede power relations' but is rather produced through them, where 'subordination' is also 'the means by which she become[s] a self-conscious identity' (Mahmood 2012: 17; see also Butler 1993; 1997). She is also informed by Butler's (1993; 1997) theory of how the 'gendered subject is enacted', performatively constructed and reinforced by heterosexual norms (Mahmood 2012: 19; Butler 1997: 14). Butler's focus on agency when these norms are subverted means that, despite her claims to the contrary, 'norms are thrown into question or are subject to resignification' and asks us 'deepen the analysis of subject formation' by not understanding agency primarily through resistance and subversion (Mahmood 2012: 21-23).

[67] Or non-identification, as was the case with some women in this study.

[68] In section 2.5, I will discuss in more detail the need for me to examine my own positionality in this thesis, including how it influenced my continually reflexive examination of the women's narratives and my theoretical decisions taken in order to do this authentically.

[69] Despite Mahmood (2012) discussing Muslim women's experiences in Egypt, her theorisation of agency has been utilised by scholars examining the Chinese context (Jaschok & Shui 2000; 2011).

[70] Her use of 'veiling' as an embodied exploration of Egyptian Muslim women and its relationship to the 'virtue' and 'norm' of female modesty provides an in-depth and invoking ethnography showing that agency cannot be understood when 'the norm of modesty is subverted or enacted,

Mahmood's (2012: 34) work offers to this research study is not that she seeks to provide a particular theorisation of agency, but rather that she calls for our explorations to 'keep the meaning of agency open and allow it to emerge' by investigating the relationships between 'people, things and oneself' (Asad 2003: 78 as cited in Mahmood 2012: 34).

Therefore, within this study, the analysis of agency will be done within the dimensions of RICOs as 'opportunity spaces' and the domains this creates for and by the women who work for them. Analysing agency within these parameters does not close off the meaning of agency because of the commitment made in the above discussion, as well as how space has been conceptualised above. The construction of this spatial analysis means that close attention will be paid to the *everyday* of the women who participated in this research. By paying close attention to the women's narratives, spatial practice and work in their RICO, this study will be able to open up to the possibilities of agency formations beyond the 'resistance-subordination' binary often produced in feminist scholarship. Having the 'closure' of the RICO as a focus of this spatial analysis only enhances the ability to focus in on the various modalities of agency that women could be expressing.

2.3.5. Women's Work? Social Reproduction *as* the Everyday

The final necessary aspect for consideration in my spatial analysis is examining what I mean by 'work' within this study and why this is important in relation to discussions on women's roles in RICOs. By including specific theories of 'social reproduction' in my conceptualisation of 'work', I will take into account the varying forms of work that are done by the women in the Buddhist and Protestant RICO, irrespective of whether it is paid or not. This is imperative for the women in the Buddhist RICO who conceived of themselves as 'conscientious workers' whereas other literature on similar organisations, and women participating in them, define them as 'volunteers' (Cavaliere 2012; 2015). In doing so, I will not only be able to explore gendered conflicts that may emerge when the demands of these various spheres of women's lives impact one another, but also recognise the importance of the various forms of work that takes place in both RICOs.

Therefore, I need to start with how I will be defining what I mean by 'social reproduction'. Elias & Rai (2019: 203) define social reproduction as 'a concept that encapsulates all of those activities involved in the production of life'. This conceptualisation includes 'biological reproduction, the work of caring for and maintaining households and intimate relationships, the reproduction of labour and the reproduction of community itself –

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but [also] in the radically different ways in which the norm is supposed to be lived and inhabited' (Elias & Rai 2019: 23-24).

including forms of social provisioning and voluntary work' (ibid). In doing so, they seek the bring together previous work on social reproduction (Waring 1988; Rai et al 2014; Mitchell et al. 2016: 1-26; Picchio 2005) and on the everyday (Felski 1999; Davies 2016) in order to more fully understand lived experiences in contemporary society. The aim of their conceptualisation of social reproduction *as* the everyday is to develop our understanding of the 'links between production and social reproduction – how these discursively mark [their] 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).

A separation of social reproduction and production would only provide 'partial accounts of the everyday' (ibid: 203). By ignoring the practice of 'social reproduction' in the constitution of the everyday lives and experiences of the women in this project, I would be ignoring how they are often a 'site of struggle' (ibid: 206; Elson 1998). This struggle not only appears in highly individual and localised expressions, but also in the politics and policies that form how 'work' is 'organised, regulated, recognised, and/or valued' and what 'unrecognition' of social reproduction means for society (Elias & Rai 2019: 206).[71] This is paramount for this spatial analysis because it means being able to take into consideration all aspects of the women's *everyday* in this study and how this may cause conflicts, especially when it comes to social norms on work and family life. Paying close attention to social reproduction *as* the everyday provides the ability to analyse the 'work' that is done by the women in this study – particularly within the Buddhist RICO – that may not be conceived that way by others. It will mean I will be able to see whether conflicts arise before, during or after their membership to the RICO they work for. It also deepens our conception of 'space' more generally for this analysis, as one that is 'gendered terrain' where women can be included or excluded from the different domains and social relationships that make up everyday life.

Although the women in this study all live in urban Chinese cities, are highly educated and most of them speak English fluently as their second language, it is important to note that the use of 'women' is diverse because my participants are of varied ages, life stages and

[71] Similarly, to Elias and Rai (2019: 207), I argue that social reproduction, similar to market-based production, 'is emplaced within social space whose boundaries are fluid and relational, in a continuum of time and rhythm' that invites structural and individual harm. Everyday life is experienced in these relational spaces that 'include and exclude, connect, and marginalise' embodied practices and are, therefore, an intrinsically a 'gendered terrain' (ibid; see Massey 1994).

marital status. Furthermore, the intersections that impact their everyday lives are 'many and complex' and ultimately 'shape their identity as women, just as gender characteristics shape other identities' (Parkers & Dale 2014: 166). Therefore, women's experiences *through* and *in* RICOs are marked by 'gendered terrain' in which their individual expressions of self and religiosity are relationally shaped by the space(s) created by their participation in these types of organisations in contemporary China (Elias & Rai 2019: 207; see also Massey 1994). The purpose of constructing this spatial analysis was so that all of the above could be taken into consideration when examining the narratives, practice and work of the women in this study. By starting from classical theories within the different disciplines I have drawn upon – religious, spatial, geography, feminist political economy – I was able to see how a spatial analysis was not just a 'lens' that could be constructed, but also a methodology through which this analysis took place. I was able to build on these classical theories in order to take into consideration the sociocultural and historical realities of the Chinese context and the lives of the women in this study. This chapter has provided an overview of what this spatial analysis compromises of and how it will be employed during the data analysis process. This process formed the structures of Chapter 4-6 and the implications of these findings are examined closely in Section 8.1.

3. Methodology and Methods

The gap in scholarship when it comes to religious women's voices in studies of gender, religion and RICOs in contemporary China was a main concern that informed my methodology, the research methods I employed and the reflexive process of my own position, as well as my ethical duty and concern for participants. This gap in scholarship also fueled my desire to do an ethnographic study that explored the lived experiences of Chinese women working for RICOs and how they are relationally developing these spaces for themselves, others and wider society.

3.1. Selection and Access

When undertaking any form of research, it is imperative to understand how your worldview will influence your position in the research and, importantly, where it will sit epistemically (Grbich 2007: 17). Before entering my doctoral studies, I had always been driven by my personal feminist goals when it came to research and how I reflected upon my position in the research process. This had often been grounded in what Mahmood (2012) calls the 'progressive liberal project' where women's emancipation from patriarchal structures and forms of power were always at the forefront of how I did research, how I taught my students, as well as how I lived out my politics in the 'everyday' (Pink 2012).[72] However, in much the same way that Starkey (2014: 104) discusses in her doctoral research, my feminist position was confronted not just during my fieldwork by my participants, but also before and after by the wider debates in work that discuss religious women's lives, their agency and their often 'silenced voices' within secular feminism constructed in the Western imaginary (Jaschok 2003; Jaschok & Shui 2011; Mahmood 2012; Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska 2013). This also echoed concerns made by other scholars working on women's development in contemporary Chinese society, with Judd (2002) stating that she struggles to call herself a feminist because of the 'trouble' not just the term, but also the movement caused when it came into contact with academics, development practitioners and NGOs during the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995.[73]

[72] Prior to doing my full-time PhD, I was a secondary-school teacher of Religion, Philosophy and Ethics. Since starting my PhD I have taught and been responsible for the delivery of the Religions and Global Development module in the Theology & Religious Studies department at the University of Leeds.

[73] Spakowski's (2011) study is a particularly useful overview of how the 'travelling theories' of 'gender' and 'feminism' caused what she terms 'trouble' in the Chinese context, not just because of the conflict caused when these terms are translated from English into Mandarin, but also when taking into consideration the specific shifts and trends in women's development since the early

For me, Davids & Willemse's (2014: 2) question of 'what kind of knowledge do we want to produce and be part of?' still rings true, and whilst knowing that my position on what it means to conduct feminist research in China has developed in dialogue with the literature, my participants and colleagues, I felt able to commit to the *process* of doing a feminist ethnographic study because I am not claiming to 'produce an objective or truthful account of reality' but rather 'offer versions' of my participants' experiences, as well as my own, in order to highlight the 'negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced' (Pink 2007: 22).

All of the participants in this study are female, with a mix of marital and family statuses (see appendix 1.1). None of the women have more than one child, although a couple expressed the want to have more due to the recent changes to the policy regarding reproductive health in China.[74] When it came to education levels all but one of the women attended further education at bachelor level, with some going onto postgraduate studies and two of the women having doctorates (see appendix 1.1).[75] In terms of age, the women in this study ranged from mid-twenties to mid-sixties. In the Buddhist RICO, this included quite a few women who were retired but engaged in work for the organisation. For the Protestant RICO, Ms. F was the only woman I spoke to who had retired from the organisation, although would still work as an advisory to certain development projects. This generational difference amongst the participants provided interesting insights due to the drastic socioeconomic changes that have occurred in China since the Opening-Up and Reform Era (1980s-). In particular, this was reflected in their experiences of work and family.[76] In terms of socioeconomic status, the majority of the women in this study come under the popularised term of the 'rising middle class' that has dominated the rhetoric of the dramatic socioeconomic progress China has experienced since the 1980s (Li 2010).

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twentieth century. Spakowski's (2018) follow up study also documents how the 'trouble' caused from the travelling theory of 'feminism' from the West has caused an academic shift in Chinese women's studies towards 'Critical Socialist Feminism' that takes into account the socialist history of women's development in China, using it as a theory of emancipation that deliberately pays tribute to this history whilst also recognising the 'gender neglect' that occurred during the Socialist-Reform Era (1949-1979). Furthermore, Yang (1999: 36-37) argues that China demonstrates a clear example of a postcolonial situation where a feminist approach must recognise 'not only the legacy of Western domination but also the effects on gender systems made by the nationalist resistance to the West'.

[74] The Two-Child Universal Policy replaced the One-Child Policy in 2015.

[75] There was one woman in the Buddhist RICO mentioned in Section 5.2.2 who did not attend University.

[76] Where relevant, these generational influences are discussed in Chapter 4 when examining the women's 'narratives of conflict'. Literature discussing the sociohistorical changes to work and family since 1949 were discussed in Section 1.1.

All of the women in this study currently reside in urban cities in Huadong. The decision to focus on this particular set of women – educated, middle-class, professional with the majority fluent in English as a second (or third) language – was due in part to consideration given to my beginner fluency when constructing my research design. However, it also reflects the social location of women who make up the majority of staff in both RICOs.[77] This is both reflected in the literature (Weller et al. 2017), as well as directly to me by individual women in the organisations.

When it came to being introduced to each RICO, I always made sure to present myself and my role as a researcher in the same way. I would verbally share that I was a doctoral researcher from the University of Leeds and was conducting a research study on women's lives, experiences and work in RICOs in the PRC. I made sure to provide a verbal overview of the project for each gatekeeper that provided initial access to the organisation. They then informed women in the organisation of my project and sought their permission to take part. However, as I will discuss below, my access to each RICO was an ongoing process that I did not take for granted, and so I would provide a verbal overview of the research study and who I was at the start of each interview. I would also leave space throughout my time with the women for them to ask questions about the research study. For the group interview that took place in the Protestant RICO, I prepared the verbal overview of my role as researcher and the study itself in Mandarin and delivered this at the beginning, even though there was a translator and some of the women spoke English as their second language.

In terms of my initial introductions to both RICOs, these were established through social connections. For the Buddhist RICO, I was introduced at first always via a gatekeeper who had been contacted through my networks in the UK.[78] However, once I had visited the offices in the PRC initially, I was encouraged to come as often as I wanted, without the need for a particular Sister to be there. I did this more and more especially as I gained more confidence over time, and as my relationships with particular Sisters developed and I got to know the schedule for certain activities such as recycling and the book reading group. This was somewhat similar to the Protestant RICO wherein particular contacts of my supervisor, and initial contact made whilst in the UK led to certain women acting as

[77] 'Staff' here covers volunteers in the Buddhist RICO as discussed in Section 2.3.5

[78] My initial contact was met whilst attending one of the organisation's events in London. I met her on three other occasions in London after this first meeting, and after developing a relationship, and signing up to a mailing list organised by a friend of hers who is also part of the RICO, she helped me make contact with the RICO through her networks in the United States.

gatekeepers to others in the RICO who would organise one-to-one and group interviews for me at their offices. However, the difference in terms of the work being conducted at the Protestant RICO head office meant that I spent less time in the office itself and did not undertake any kind of 'work' there myself, nor did I arrive without a prearranged appointment.

One moment that sticks out when thinking about the ongoing process of how 'access' is granted was during fieldwork on my first visit to the Buddhist RICO. I was met by my main contact who acted as not only my gatekeeper, but also discussed with me her own experiences of working for the organisation. On this first meeting, she arrived in a flurry, apologising profusely for her slight lateness explaining that she had come straight from her full-time job. The moment that struck me was when we sat down with tea and she seemed somewhat distracted and withdrawn.

At first, I wasn't sure why this was and thought that it may be to do with potential nerves of not knowing me. However, after a few minutes I realised she had mentioned 'her duties' several times and that there were certain things that she was tasked with completing this afternoon as part of her role at the RICO. Gently, I asked her if she needed any help with her duties before we sat down to talk. Her face and demeanour towards me instantly changed, with a smile appearing and her hand touching mine as she said that she would appreciate that. As we cleaned the kitchen and the toilets, she spoke of her own experiences of coming to the RICO and the initial stifled atmosphere between us had lifted with her asking me questions about my research and what I hoped to achieve during my time there. Once we had finished her 'duties' for that day, she organised my first group interview with other women where she acted as translator. The other women in the group asked her to tell me how much they appreciated what I had done that evening, with one woman noting that it takes a specific 'kind of person' to clean toilets, that they were grateful that I was this 'kind of person' and with me noticing that the woman who was speaking was the one I had seen taking a photo of me cleaning the toilets out the corner of my eye.

I share this experience here because my participation in these small acts of cleaning provided an entry into the workings of that branch in a way that might not have been possible otherwise. It made a clear difference to how I was received and the women's willingness to be part of this research study. This was demonstrated to me again when

meeting with other Sisters working in other places in Huadong for the RICO, and they spoke to me of how they had heard of my 'help' in the other office.[79]

3.2. Interviews

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty women who were working for, or had worked for, either of the two RICOs at the time of my fieldwork in 2017. I interviewed eight of the women on more than one occasion and spent considerable time with a few of the women in this study including outside the RICO offices, normally when they wished to show me or take me somewhere in the city. I also met the families of a couple of the women. Several of the women I met and spoke with on multiple occasions when participating in RICO activities such as recycling, book group, and visits to care homes for the Buddhist RICO and meals organised by the Protestant RICO. I have continued to have contact with the majority of the women either via email or WeChat but not for interviewing purposes.

The fieldwork element of this study took place during 2017, with visits timed according to the priorities of building relationships with the women as someone who was unknown to them beforehand, and personal health concerns that played a role in determining duration of visits and when they could be conducted.[80] Interviews took place in different locations: rooms within the RICO offices – both formal meeting rooms and those used for other purposes such as book reading and 'environmental protection', restaurants and cafes, domestic homes of the women, and via Skype on one occasion.[81] The location of the interview was always set by those I was meeting or gatekeepers from the RICOs.

All of my one-to-one interviews were done with women who are fluent in English, with most having studied abroad in majority English-speaking countries, as well as those who pursued courses in English in China in order to develop their language skills. The women whom I spent more than one occasion with (with the exception of the women in the book

[79] My participation in the work of the RICO is developed further later on in this chapter, with the ethical matters considered. However, it is pertinent here because of how I was 'granted' access to the RICO in a way that can be seen to have had a knock-on effect on the viability of the rest of my fieldwork with that particular RICO. This viability was not available with another RICO who, for this reason, I decided not to include in this study.

[80] I have a long-term health condition that impacts the immune system. Upon medical advice, I only travelled during cooler months avoiding July/August when temperatures would peak. I also didn't spend more than two months at a time before returning home because of medication and impact on my immune system. This was all considered as part of my ethical approval application to the Leeds Ethics Committee and shaped the process early on in the thesis process. I received permission from the Leeds Ethics Committee in 2016 before beginning fieldwork in 2017.

[81] The Skype interview was conducted with a participant from a satellite office of the Protestant RICO as a follow-up to our interview conducted in person during July 2017.

reading group) and including those whom I spent time with outside of the RICO offices, are also included in those above who speak fluent English as their second language. Whilst recognising that this raises concerns over the legitimacy of what was shared and the cycles of interpretation that have taken place on what these women in particular shared with me, it was vital to keeping trust of my participants having been advised by my gatekeepers in the RICOs that outside translators would not be suitable. I took this to mean that using one may impact my access to speaking with the women who did not have English as a second language.

Prior to leaving for fieldwork, I had undertaken nearly two years of language training at the University of Leeds through auditing undergraduate lectures, drill classes and oral lessons. I also did evening classes and one-to-one lessons with a tutor from the Leeds Confucius Institute. This gave me enough proficiency to engage with participants in Mandarin in certain instances. For example, I would employ Mandarin to deliver an overview of the research study and my role as a researcher to participants during my first interview with them.[82] I also composed a structured set of questions in Mandarin prior to the one group interview that took place with women from the Protestant RICO in order to make sure that I would be including specific translations of words.[83] This was important because the use of various terms is altered in meaning depending on its particular sociohistorical context, who is using and the audience it is aimed at.[84] Paying attention to relevant vocabulary before fieldwork meant that even when conversing with participants in English, I was still able to clarify the correct meaning by employing the relevant term in Mandarin.[85] For example, during an initial meeting with one participant she had used the term that can be translated as ‘feminism’ when describing my project. I had sensed a hesitancy from her to share more with me about certain aspects of her life, beyond her current role in her RICO and giving me generalised views on the status of women in the charitable sector in the PRC. Her using this term went some way to clarifying for me why this would be as it has very particular meaning linked with a feminist woman’s movement that is experiencing ongoing clashes with the nation-state (Hong-Fincher 2018). However, when I stated that I was interested in gender equality and used the ‘rights-based’

[82] As discussed in Section 3.1

[83] This applied to terms such as ‘gender’ (Spakowski 2011), ‘happiness’ (Wielander 2018), ‘values’ (Madsen 2017) and ‘civil society’ (Fielder 2015) for this interview.

[84] Specifically, terms such as ‘feminism’, ‘gender equality’ and ‘religion’. See Section 1.1 for more detail on how understandings of these have changed in contemporary Chinese history.

[85] This was also the case during sessions that was being translated for me, as I was able to pick up on what particular terms they had employed and then how it had been translated into English.

term in Mandarin, her body language changed towards me with a smile appearing on her face.

"Ah, gender equality! I believe in this!"

When directly translated into English, both the words we had used would mean 'gender equality'. However, the two have very different contexts and meanings in Mandarin and being able to know this meant I could navigate a potentially sensitive topic with participants. It also meant that I was able to notice how and why this participant (as well as other examples during the research study) would employ a particular term and how this shaped their views on the subject. This nuance was particularly vital in navigating what Spakowski (2011; 2018) terms the 'gender trouble' that occurs when discussions centred on women, gender and equality transfer back and forth between Mandarin and English. Whilst my beginner proficiency in Mandarin, and particular focus on certain vocabulary, provided me with these possibilities I often, personally, felt before fieldwork that this status would be a hindrance. However, it often opened up discussions with participants that may not have occurred otherwise. For example, interviews were mainly conducted in public, open or shared spaces such as buses, taxis, coffee shops and restaurants. The sensitive nature of some of what was discussed made me aware of the shared or open nature of the space we were in, but this did not seem to bother the woman I was with where no attempts to lower their voices or to move closer to me were made.

This had puzzled me somewhat, especially when considering the intimacy of the experience shared by Ms. Y that is included in the preface of this research study. We had been in a car at the time, driven by someone I knew was employed by the RICO she works for. Upon later reflection, and after conversations with supervisors when I was back in the UK between fieldwork visits, I came to realise that the driver did not speak English at all, and the coffee shops and restaurants I had other intimate conversations in were populated by what I can presume were non-English speakers. The places were always chosen by the participant and her bodily comfort in the situation read to me as an ability to speak freely. I do not wish to overstate the positives of conducting the interviews in English, especially since other scholars note that a researcher's language skills are often seen as the 'marker' that separates 'insiders from outsiders' (Saether 2006: 123). However, it did offer a certain freedom with which the women felt they were able to share what they were thinking.

A moment that sticks out in my mind is when I was having dinner with one participant and her family during which she spoke about her husband and son to me in front of them,

without consideration of the content of what she was saying. In this circumstance, it offered her a way to speak more freely in the situation as and when things happened. Yet, this 'comfort' experienced by participants when talking with me in English was not shared in the group interview settings where one woman was acting as a translator. This was not seen as much in the Buddhist RICO with women eager to share their stories, something that is encouraged by the organisation's leader. However, for the Protestant RICO, the one group interview conducted saw the body language and 'comfort' of the translator change when certain women in the interview spoke or depending on the question I was asking, with this being most pronounced when asking about beliefs and practices.

In the same way that Fielder (2012) did for her doctoral study, I did not audio record interviews or conversations, as I did not deem this 'common practice', especially with regards to a religious-inspired organisation that may interpreted this as 'surveillance' and therefore, risk my participants' 'feelings of safety' (ibid: 64). I was also not able to gather written consent before conducting interviews owing to the perceived sensitive nature of the thesis topic and the possible inference of its being a form of 'surveillance'. Therefore, the ongoing process and negotiation of verbal consent was conducted throughout fieldwork. On a few occasions, women would explain to me there and then certain things that they did not want to be shared in the final thesis but rather wanted me to use it just to inform my own understanding of their lives and their involvement in the organisation. I particularly sought to do this when I was talking with them in more informal settings and it was more of a 'natural conversation' rather than some of the formal interviews that I did in meeting rooms in the RICOs offices.

The very informal nature of a lot of the interviews that took place with the women whom I met on several occasions and spent a large amount of time with meant that questions were often part of a more natural conversation, and were specific to where the participant had taken the conversation and my own judgment on what they may or may not be ok with talking about. This did mean that there were times when, reflecting back, I could have done further questioning on particular topics or experiences, but at the time this did not feel natural nor like it would foster a trusting and safe space for the women to discuss their lives with me. However, I did construct an interview schematic before going on fieldwork that took into consideration the kind of questions I would like to explore whilst there, formatted in a mind map so that I could recall questions that reflected upon my key research questions and the desire to understand who the women are as much as is possible.

By not audio recording interviews and conversations, I would always schedule time needed directly afterwards to type up both my handwritten notes from my fieldwork diary and reflective accounts of what I had observed during the interview or any activity I had observed/participated in. I always carried my fieldwork diary with me, and where possible took detailed notes and doodles and wrote down key terms shared by participants.[86] I also made sure to note down and type up my reflections of the 'embodied' interactions that took place amongst the women, including those of the women who were translating for me during group interviews. This included paying attention beyond the spoken word by focusing on body language, facial expressions and apparent discomfort in translating certain experiences that the others had shared. These reflections were taken into consideration when going through the analysis process of the study and have been discussed further below, with particular attention paid to them when thinking and reflecting on what would be part of the inclusion criteria and the writing-up process. However, by paying attention to these 'silent' forms of interaction during the interview process, I was able to make important interpretations of how certain questions were received by the women and also how they related to one another in a group setting. [87]

3.2.1 Using Images

During the group interview conducted with women from the Protestant RICO, I employed the tool of 'photo elicitation' to aid discussion about their lives, experiences and work (Padgett et al. 2013). My hope was to make the 'invisible visible' by prompting memories, feelings and ideas through this visual element to what is normally a predominantly verbal-only environment (Bukowski & Buetow 2011: 739). Deciding upon this tool for a group interview setting was not just informed by my previous experience with the method of using images to promote discussion, but was also informed by the work of Pink (2006:

[86] Saether (2006: 54) notes how 'keeping a fieldwork diary ensures that the early experiences, which after some time seem prosaic and commonplace, do not disappear'. It meant that I was able to go back to initial thoughts or ideas after fieldwork and reflect on their relevance. It also provided me with a physical representation of my 'learning process' and how I had developed, experienced and understood what was going on around during each fieldwork stage (ibid).

[87] Thorgersen (2006: 120) discusses how language skills should be taken into consideration during the research design stage. This definitely played a role during my first year of doctoral studies as my original intention had been to speak with female 'users' of the RICO's programmes, rather than just female staff. However, this was discarded as a part of the research design in one part due to my own language abilities, but also due to the ethical impact that my beginner proficiency of Mandarin may have when thinking about the power dynamics between myself, the proposed female 'user' and the translator offered by the RICO (as discussed earlier in this chapter). Thorgersen (2006: 123) notes that having this 'close awareness of language use' in research design, and the importance placed on 'social moods' and other 'silent' forms of embodied interaction can mean that the 'subjective realities of our informants stand out more clearly'.

21) who argues that the visual – in this case, images – are intimately connected with our everyday lives, our identity, how we narrate our lives and those around us (see also Kharel 2015).[88] Pink (2001: 2-3) also argues that without understanding the theory behind using any kind of 'visual research methods', it is not possible to fully understand the ethnographic knowledge produced from them.[89] One term often used within visual ethnography is 'photo voice' (Padgett et al. 2013: 1435). However, I would argue that what I employed was more in line with 'photo elicitation' where an interview 'involves photographs […] for reasons particular to the study' (ibid; see also Harper 2002). This technique has seen rising interest, especially amongst studies where potentially sensitive topics are covered and/or interviews are being conducted with vulnerable individuals (Edmondson et al. 2018; Padgett et al. 2013).

With this in mind, prior to leaving for fieldwork, I printed and laminated images with the intention to use them during group interviews if the opportunity arose. The group interview that took place was with women who I was meeting for the first time and had been organised by my initial gatekeeper to the Protestant RICO. The images chosen were based on the key themes and questions I had identified in my interview schematic, such as home, belonging, connection and family. The majority were quite abstract to allow for individual interpretation in its meaning, whereas others were more specific such as a photo I had taken of a Buddhist monk on the streets of Beijing (see appendix 1.2). The images were a range of my own photos taken whilst on a visit to the PRC for an academic conference in 2016 and those found on the photo sharing site, Flickr.

My confidence with using this method stemmed from my experience as a secondary school teacher where I had been trained during my PGCE to teach concepts and promote discussion using images. This meant I felt at ease when conducting this group interview, despite it being my first time meeting the women. I initially just asked them to pick their favourite image and it meant the women were physically moving around the table, picking them up, touching and looking more intensely at each one. When the women sat back down, their faces had visibly relaxed with many of them smiling at me now or nudging

[88] Banks (2007) argues that there are two schools of thought in visual ethnography; one promoting the use of images within research methods to examine and understand society, and the other being the study of images as a source of data. Kharel (2015: 147-148) supports this but takes it further by stating that 'visual ethnography's scope is wide-ranging'.

[89] Pink (2001: 7) notes how the use of visual methods in ethnography have been 'shrouded in some controversy' with debates through the 1960s-1990s focusing on the validity of such methods within social science, with many arguing that it was 'too subjective, unrepresentative and unsystematic'.

their neighbour to show them their pick and enquiring about theirs. This also meant that when I was asking them *why* they had chosen that particular image, they would see that the rest of the group were being posed the same question. Using images within the group interview provided a safer and more relaxed environment for both participant and researcher, whilst also discursive on a level that would not have been achieved, I would argue, if done purely verbally.

3.3. Participating and Observing

The other main method of data collection that I conducted during fieldwork was participant-observation. I have previously discussed how my 'access' to the Buddhist RICO was facilitated by my participation in some of the work normally undertaken by the Sisters. However, my participation in some of the work of the RICOs also facilitated the development of my relationships with the women in this study throughout fieldwork, and also provided a necessary counterpoint to the interviews I conducted that I could reflect upon whilst in the field and afterwards.

During the different stages of my fieldwork, I attended and participated in a variety of events organised by the Buddhist RICO including assisting my participants on visits to care homes and hospitals or with weekly recycling programmes in different areas of the city depending on whether I was based in Shanghai or Nanjing. I also participated in a book reading group for the Buddhist RICO and assisted with sewing projects. My participation in the Protestant RICO was a lot less 'hands on' with interviews conducted at prearranged times and often in their head office. However, I was able to visit local projects in early spring of 2017 and to learn more about how they are run. It also gave me the opportunity to meet with women (although sometimes very briefly) who were working in these specific projects rather than in the main office.

My time spent during fieldwork involved me having to take different stances depending on the event or situation I was in, ranging from 'observer-as-participant' to 'participant-as-observer'. Employing an 'observer-participant' continuum allowed me to adapt to the environment I was in and balance the needs of my participants, of the organisation more generally and the research process (Knott 2005a: 246).[90]

[90] This continuum is often employed when there is a need to balance the requirements of the research communities and that of the researcher (Knott 2005a: 246). However, engaging in a continuum of 'observer-participant' also allows for the researcher to be 'respectful to the tradition', as well as 'gaining some insight into a life' guided by certain religious principles/teachings (Starkey 2014: 108). Starkey's (2014) doctoral study of women in British Buddhism examines this dynamic and offers an in-depth look at how employing this continuum

I also joined several WeChat groups during fieldwork that I was still able to observe once I had 'exited' the field. This also included being added as a confirmed contact by many of my participants which on the WeChat platform granted me access to their 'moment' feeds where you can post photos and updates. I would, during fieldwork, engage with these 'moments' through liking because it would help with the building of relationships and rapport with my participants. The majority of the time the 'moments' I engaged with were ones that related to their work with their RICO. I have been able to still observe these feeds since exiting the field and they provided useful information on the daily developments of the different RICOs' activities, projects and news, whilst also informing me of changes to my participants' lives. Some of the participants have messaged me via the WeChat app since arriving back in the UK and this has been a helpful way of keeping them informed of my progress in this research study.

3.4. Analysis, Coding and Writing-Up Process

My analysis of the data begun whilst in the field, a cyclical and reflexive process that happened when I typed up handwritten notes from interviews, and my own observations, paying attention to embodied interactions and the spaces these took place in. Whilst in the field, I spent time reflecting upon what the women were sharing with me, what I had experienced, been told and learnt that day. Despite the solitary nature of fieldwork, these reflections were not always done in isolation because women in the RICOs often allowed me to follow up on questions and ideas after our first initial meeting. I was also able to meet up, on several occasions, with an academic based in Huadong who has a collaborative partnership with scholars working on religious communities in urban Chinese cities. Whilst negotiating the ethical and privacy concerns that come with having these type of discussions, I found these occasions incredibly helpful in terms of furthering my thinking of what was occurring in the field, especially when I had started to fall foul of being 'overtaken' by the situation and all the new experiences.[91] The structuring of my fieldwork into three different phases also meant that I was able to return to the UK in-between where I could conduct initial analysis and coding of the data in dialogue with my supervisors.

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allows for deeper insight into how women perceive, negotiate and embody their commitment to their particular Buddhist tradition.

[91] This dialogue between myself and the Chinese female academic was facilitated by a scholar in Chinese studies who had worked with her on several occasions on different projects. For a discussion on how research exchanges and dialogues 'across cultures' can positively influence ethnographic research see Jaschok & Shui's (2000: 33-58), *"Outside Within": speaking to excursions across* cultures.'

After finishing fieldwork at the end of 2017, I was able to become 'intimately acquainted' (Starkey 2014: 112) with my data and decided that due to its respectively small size in terms of number of interviews done and the length of my own observations, I would conduct qualitative thematic coding by hand rather than using a form of computer data analysis (Robson 2011: 474-475). This involved a process of reading and re-reading transcripts and field notes, as well as keeping abreast of new literature being published in the field. I would initially spend time annotating each page with thoughts, ideas and start inductively finding themes within the data. Once I had identified a specific number of codes such as 'work', 'belonging', 'community', 'identity', 'conflict' and 'family', I then re-read the transcripts paying close attention to the individual women's narratives. This process included me typing up these individual narratives again, reinterpreting the data to provide more depth and include both what the participant shared in the interview, as well as my own observations.

This process identified how particular narratives of the women in this study provided a pathway into understanding and reflecting on the lived experiences of the other women I spoke and spent time with. I approached the narratives provided by the women in this study and my own observations as an 'interactive process of jointly constructing and interpreting experience' (Atkinson et al. 2011: 2). Therefore, my analysis of these narratives provided me with the ability to examine 'participant roles in constructing accounts and in negotiating perspectives and meanings' (ibid). The narratives became both text and *process* in this research study and a significant part of my analysis and writing-up process (ibid).

My use and analysis of narrative allowed me to continuously reflect upon and engage with the voices and lived experiences of the women in this study. I would also say that earlier versions of this thesis fell into the trap of becoming a 'story' in and of itself (Atkinson et al. 2011: 6). The experience of fieldwork and the relationships with my participants that involved reciprocal acts of trust, friendship and care meant that a process of self-narration in my data collection, analysis and writing-up process emerged. However, this comes with ethical dilemmas in terms of 'how the story is told' and how the participants are 'represented and credited' (Atkinson et al. 2011: 6; Van Maanen 1995). This means that I paid special attention to my positionality in the undertaking of this research study, before, during and after fieldwork and remained critically reflexive throughout the writing-up process. This was not without its challenges. I often felt caught during writing-up between trying to stay as authentic as possible to the voices and

narratives of the women in this study and the need to protect them ethically, whilst also being able to produce a thesis that would meet the rigorous doctoral requirements.[92] This caused several experiences of 'writers block' where I questioned my ability to accurately and authentically represent my participants and their lived experiences. This included how I dealt with confidentiality and the anonymity of my participants.

In earlier versions of this thesis I had included the names of the RICOs this thesis seeks to examine. I also included in-depth details of the various office locations, spaces and other significant places, along with life histories given by participants. However, with each new version I personally reflected upon the ethical implications of this and, in conversation with my advisors, became more aware of the intimate details I was sharing in the pages of this thesis. I also realised that, despite the large organisational structure of both RICOs, the women could be identifiable through the details I was including. This is still somewhat true as I do not think it is possible to create a complete balance between meaningful and insightful research and fully meeting ethical requirements by erasing all details of their lives and narratives. However, the writing-up process did give me insight into the real 'muddiness' of ethnographic research and trying to find this balance in what is the 'messiness' and complexities of human life.

I do not seek to claim that I have therefore achieved full anonymity of my participants, but rather that I have taken precautions to keep their identities confidential by using pseudonyms for all participants and referring to each RICO based on the tradition that it is 'religiously-inspired' by. I have also provided necessary social context for each RICO in Section 3.1 and despite making decisions on what to include (or not as the case may be), this does not mean that some could speculate on who the organisations or the women involved are. However, I believe I have taken the necessary ethical precautions to keep my participants safe, whilst also making a scholarly contribution to the identified gaps in the literature discussed in Chapter One. Further reflections on my positionality, reflexivity and ethical considerations in this study are discussed in the proceeding section to develop these thoughts further.

[92] Fielder (2012: 66) shares this similar conflict in her doctoral thesis on RICOs and their role in shaping civil society in China. The difficulties I faced during my writing-up process felt overwhelming at times and reading of someone's similar experiences helped me to realise that this is a normal part of the process of doing ethnographic research, especially in a context that may be deemed sensitive by participants and socio-political actors.

3.5. Researching Women and Religion: My Positionality in this Study

Throughout this discussion I have aimed to demonstrate how I have reflected on my positionality in this research. I have done so by examining how the Chinese location impacted upon my choice of methods, the tensions caused by own feminist ideals and training, challenges raised by my own participants, and how the use of narrative transformed as I moved through the writing process.

My main concern from the beginning of this project, right through to adding the final words before printing, was how to remain true and authentic to the narratives shared with me by the women in this study. This meant that, firstly, I needed to recognise the debates surrounding power when undertaking ethnographic research, especially when trust, mutual friendships and the sharing of intimacies occur. Secondly, I needed to make sure that the 'intersubjective process' of my fieldwork was made known in the results of the thesis (Davids & Willemse 2014: 1; Stacey 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990).[93] However, it was not always easy to negotiate this when I realised there was a tension between my own want to create a critical and meaningful piece of work, the needs and safety of my participants and the understanding that these are fully worked out in the 'messiness' of the research process.

[93] This question was also raised when I presented initial findings at conferences, where, for example, I was asked: "how are you ethically negotiating these relationships and the potential imbalance between what your participants shared with you versus what they got back?"

4. Women in RICOs and their Narratives of Conflict

The arising conflicts faced by Chinese women in the face of rapidly changing experiences of self, work and family in the past three decades have not gone unnoticed by academic scholarship (Yang 1999a; Tsui & Rich 2002; Evans 2007; Cook & Dong 2011; Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018; Zuo 2016; Xie, K. 2019). The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the women's initial motivations for joining their chosen RICO. In particular it will pay attention to the 'narratives of conflict' that all of the women had in common when answering the question: *why this RICO?*[94] This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I will present the specific 'conflict narrative' of Sister N from the Buddhist RICO whose story presents the main themes seen in all the other women's narratives irrespective of the RICO they work for. In the second section, titled 'Arising Conflicts', I will discuss the main theme drawn out from Sister N's narrative, namely a 'lack of purpose' felt in the women's daily lives. This will be done with reference to the two subthemes that emerged from her story. The first regards conflicts emerging from gendered expectations based on women's social roles as mothers, wives and daughters and how this often left them with feelings of failure in their practices of 'filial piety'. The second subtheme relates to the workplace and experiences of gender discrimination, a lack of meaning derived from the nature of the work itself, as well as a 'lack of work' faced by retired women who felt they had more to 'contribute'.

These two linked subthemes align with the wider literature exploring the 'work-family conflicts' that have arisen in the reform era and which have intensified the 'role strain, role conflict, and anxiety' felt by women in contemporary Chinese society (Zuo 2016). This is a result of trying 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 spatial fractures that take place when trying to meet the requirements of the workplace alongside renewed gendered social roles enforced by the value of filial piety supported by current party-state propaganda (Cook & Dong 2011; Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018; Xie, K. 2019). In doing so, I will situate this thesis in relation to the wider academic scholarship that considered women's changing experiences of self, work and family in contemporary urban China.

[94] The open-ended nature of this question meant that the individual experiences and stories of the women involved could be taken into account across both RICOs. I also found that it allowed women to speak more broadly to begin with – e.g., 'my RICO provides excellent education programmes' – before discussing it in relation to more personal stories. This gave them and myself time to become comfortable with one another and allowing them the space to decide whether they trusted me with certain information.

The final section of this chapter will be the first of four spatial analyses of RICOs in this thesis. By examining the women's 'narratives of conflict' through my theoretical lens, I will argue that RICOs provide 'retreat' for Chinese women in the face of these arising conflicts and enable agential negotiations that act as a form of 'complementary space' where their search for purpose can be facilitated without compromising the realities of their daily lives. In doing so I will begin to answer my first research question on *why* women are choosing to work for RICOs in contemporary China, paying particular attention to how they voiced their experiences and what this can tell us about these organisational spaces in relation to what they provide for Chinese women.

4.1. Sister N: 'a monster had eaten me whole'

As mentioned in Chapter Two, keeping the women's narratives at the centre of my analysis allowed them to become both text and *process* in this thesis and ensured that the findings of my research would accurately represent and credit those who shared their stories with me (Atkinson et al. 2011: 2-6). This meant that I wanted each discussion chapter to centre on one woman's narrative, with this providing a pathway into understanding the other women's experiences by seeking commonalities and differences that could provide insights into their experiences, wants and hopes for the organisations they are working for. This means that Chapters Three to Six all begin with the narratives of one specific participant from the two RICOs, constructed through the intersubjective process of interviews and my own observations. However, this is particularly important for this chapter where I seek to focus on how the women's 'narratives' construct certain explanations for their initial motivations in choosing the RICO they now work for. Therefore, this section will present Sister N's narrative of conflict in order to highlight the core themes of this chapter.

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, a slight woman with a warm smile and kind eyes. 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'*. Closely echoing Ms. Y's feelings of emptiness shared in the preface of this thesis, Sister N's narrative of how she had arrived at her current position stemmed from initial feelings of a lack of purpose in her daily life.

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 (Cook & 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 (Yan 2010; Rofel 2007) and the accompanying social acceptance from her family and friends. Unlike other women's experiences of previous work cultures, 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*'.[95] 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.[96]

[95] 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).

[96] Her initial experience of the Buddhist RICO is discussed in section 3.3 as well as in section 5.2.

Sister N's narration of her journey to her current role in the RICO 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).[97] 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. This rift means that 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.[98]

This external conflict caused by her parents and the particular expectations she felt that they held for her life have been made worse by her desire for full ordination in the tradition that inspires the Buddhist RICO.[99] 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 permeates its teachings and activities in order to create a more harmonious society. This contradicts scholarship that speaks of the changing 'moral

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[97] 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 shares 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.

[98] Reflecting back, I would have asked her why she thought her mother was reacting differently to her father, to see if her explanation would allude to the gendered idea, shared by others I spoke with, that women are more 'suited' to philanthropy due to its 'feminine characteristics'. However, at the time, I did not feel that I could push on certain things as they were painful and she did not know me that well, having only spoken and met with me twice.

[99] The Buddhist RICO is rooted in the *Mahāyāna* Buddhist tradition and uses teachings from the Lotus Sutra, but this is delivered through the teachings of its main leader whose work acts as 'translation' for members (see Harvey 2000).

landscape' in China, where the value of filial piety is sacrificed in the face of 'self-development' (Yan, F. 2005b: 431-439; see also Yan, Y. 2003; 2009; 2010). However, the revitalisation and renewed importance of 'traditional Chinese values' (Gow 2017), such as 'filial piety', has been widely noted by recent scholarship, especially in terms of its gendered consequences that cause increased social role stress and anxiety for Chinese women (Zuo 2016; Hong-Fincher 2013; 2014; 2018; Xie, K. 2019: 61-62). So, although Sister N downplayed the consequences of her parents' refusal, stating that she believed they would '*come around eventually*', it was a source of suffering for her in '*correcting the mistakes'* she had taken in this life and impacting the success she hoped to achieve in her next one.[100]

Whilst Sister N's experiences do not directly map onto those of the other women in this study, during the process of 'narrative analysis' (Atkinson et al. 2011: 2-6) her story presented the common theme of a 'lack of purpose' in her 'everyday'. By examining the other women's narratives closely, alongside Sister N's, it became clear that there were two common subthemes: the 'feminine ideal' and 'the workplace'. One subtheme would often come out more strongly than the other within a particular narrative, but this did not mean that the other subtheme did not emerge alongside. These 'arising conflicts' are investigated further in the next section in order to examine how they propelled participants' 'entry' into RICOs as a form of 'retreat'.

4.2. Arising Conflicts

In this section I will discuss the experiences, reasons and feelings expressed by the women in both RICOs for why they initially came to work for their chosen organisation.[101] Even though all of the women had very individual life experiences and were currently at different life stages, they all spoke of feeling a 'lack of purpose' in their everyday. This theme was far more prevalent with the women who I was able to meet on more than one occasion, but those who I couldn't still spoke of this being what 'came before' their search for their chosen RICO. In that sense, this chapter provides insights into the lives of the women before their work for the RICO began, sometimes before their search for their RICO even started. From here, there emerged two inter-related subthemes from the data: a 'feminine ideal' and the 'workplace'.

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[100] Her negotiation of this conflict and how this provides insight into understanding what the spaces created by RICOs mean for Chinese women is discussed in Section 4.3.

[101] Discussion on *how* their initial connections with their chosen RICO were made are explored in Section 5.2 in Chapter Five.

Women's 'narratives of conflict' in relation to family and work are told all over the world, whether it be other state-socialist societies (Funk 1993; Kotzeva 1999; Rudd 2000), countries in the Global South (Chow & Berheide 1994) or those in the Global North (Gersen & Jacobs 2007; Uchitelle 2008). However, the specific socioeconomic changes that have rapidly occurred in China in the past three decades, alongside the forms of official and public discourses discussing gender social roles and ideals, are what inform and shape the experiences of the Chinese women in this study (Zuo 2016; Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018; Xie, K. 2019).

4.2.1. A Feminine Ideal

As discussed in Chapter One, there has been a move by the party-state to strengthen the family as a source of social stability by 'reinforcing traditional family values' including filial piety (Xie, K. 2019: 77; Hong-Fincher 2018).[102] This has created gendered social ideals around reproduction and marriage that result in stigma for Chinese women who do not fit into this 'feminine ideal' that has been perpetuated by various public and official discourses since the beginning of the reform era (Hooper 1994; Yang 1999b; Cook & Dong 2011). An example of this is the term 'leftover women' used for those who are no longer 'ripe' for marriage and have placed career before filial obligations (Hong-Fincher 2014). Therefore, the women's strong feelings of expectation in relation to the 'feminine ideal' is not unsurprising and all their narratives spoke to this, albeit in varied ways. 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 – that:

> *'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 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 30 – an age where women are meant to have achieved certain goals in relation to marriage, family and the material

[102] Xie, K. (2019: 61-62) discusses the influence of the ACWF in delivering official discourses of the 'ideal Chinese woman' that centres on the view that women should be 'life support machines to a busy and successful husband' (McMillian 2006: 15 as cited in Xie, K. 2019: 61). This was further supported by recent campaigns by President Xi who stated to ACWF leaders in 2018 that the 'unique function of Chinese women in family and society' should be the main focus of the ACWF's service to the 'bigger picture' and women' (Xinhua Wang 2018; as cited in Xie, K. 2019: 61-62).

(Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018a; Xie, K. 2018; 2019).[103] For this participant, her experiences of trying to achieve the various 'stages' of this 'pre-set schedule' meant that her previous romantic relationships had all broken down. She had not seen her values reflected in that of her previous 'prospective partners', with them instead placing greater emphasis on owning property and having a wife who would give up her career once they had children (Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018a).[104] She has seen many of her female friends staying in unhappy marriages because of their children or for financial reasons and she completely rejects the idea of doing this herself. For her, this is not how 'true meaning' in life is found and she would rather remain unmarried, despite receiving certain levels of social stigma and questioning in relation to this.[105]

Despite some recent literature discussing an increased role of Chinese fathers in childcare (Li & Lamb 2013), there remains an unequal burden of care placed on Chinese women. Not only do they have to perform the 'undesirable' household tasks, but these are also dictated by a stricter routine regarding how often these should be done (Xie, K. 2019: 73-74). The expectations surrounding the practice of 'care' in relation to family was shared by nearly all of the women with many identifying these obligations as their 'filial duty'. This centred particularly on providing 'care' and, despite wanting to take pleasure in these relationships such as the arrival of a new child, many experienced feelings of failure and anxiety due to the increasing number of 'obligations' that were expected of them by both family members and extended social relationships.

During a group interview at the Protestant RICO I used a variety of images to help promote discussion with the women, all of whom, except one, I was meeting for the first time. I asked the women to choose two images that represented either how they had felt before joining the RICO, or that expressed how they were currently feeling. One of the women chose an image of a group of balloons flying up into a clear blue sky. When I asked why she had chosen this particular one, she replied:

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[103] 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; 2018a; Xie, K. 2017; 2019). Xie, K.'s (2019: 68) study offers a clear figure to display these expectations, taken from her interviews with 'privileged daughters' of the one-child generation.

[104] This has been a particular impact of the new 'two-child policy' introduced in 2016 by the CCP. There is increasing literature discussing women's reluctance to have more than one child because this would create a conflict between their work and rising costs of living and childcare (Hong-Fincher 2018b). This has propelled campaigns in official and public discourse to help promote 'family values' and how having a family brings increased happiness and cultural capital (Hird 2017; Hong-Fincher 2018b).

[105] This participant also reflected upon how Chinese men experienced these pressures when trying to become 'marriage material'.

> *'...as a new mum, I see me and my son on this adventure. Learning how to be a mum is an adventure and it is one where I can learn more and more and grow with him. I want to take good care of him so that he can find his own way and go adventuring alone one day.'*

The other image she had chosen was of a lotus flower floating on calm water. She told us that:

> *'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 chain that was linked together to make up the larger one, 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 of so much of her inner conflict. However, for her, this was not life:

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

Other women in the Protestant RICO shared these same feelings of anxiety and stress surrounding their relationships and the level of care and attention they needed to provide to each. Often, the one they identified as being 'last' in priority was taking care of themselves. Their 'desiring self' was often ignored in the face of their obligations and practices of care towards others (Rofel 2007). However, it was rare that the women in the Protestant RICO used the term 'filial piety' when discussing this with me. When the term was used it would be in reference to a problem of – or as something felt by - 'all Chinese women'. This was a point of comparison with those in the Buddhist RICO whose narratives of conflict arising from a 'feminine ideal' placed upon their caring relationships and expectations was narrated as a personal 'failure' to properly express filial piety in the correct 'quantity'. For many, their narratives of conflict and their need to find purpose

centred firmly on feelings of failure linked to their inadequate expressions of filial piety in one way or another.

This was particularly present in the narrative of Sister J, who worked part-time for one of the Buddhist RICO's local branches in Huadong. For Sister J, her 'failure in filial piety' was the exact moment when she knew she needed to 'find Buddhism' as an adult.[106] At a temple that is famous in the city, Sister J said: "*let me tell you a story"*. Despite the temple and surrounding grounds now being a famous and well-visited tourist site, this particular place in the city holds great significance for Sister J who told me:

'...this is a place of great happiness and great sadness for me.'

The grounds are a mixture of restaurants and tourist shops that surround the central temple which houses a shrine to Confucius. Tucked away around one corner is another one of these tourist shops. However, Sister J placed her hand on the shop wall telling me that this used to be owned by her grandparents' who ran a small photo developing business. She had spent many summers working here or running around the surrounding grounds. It was also the place where she first introduced her fiancé (now husband) to her grandparents, sharing dishes that are 'special to our region' with him for the first time.[107] For Sister J, the importance of this specific place was stored in her own mixed feelings surrounding family, the trigger to want to 'find Buddhism' again, as well as the practice of praying to her Buddhist Master outside the temple using the hand actions specific to the four key teachings of her RICO. It was here that she would tell me her narrative of conflict; where she would recount her feelings of failure in relation to her filial obligations, which resulted in the need to rectify it through her work in the Buddhist RICO. All of these emotions and her story were tied to this particular place; a place that also has a socio-religious history often played out in how it has been used, repurposed, closed and opened at various different points in the past century.[108]

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[106] As a child Sister J rebelled against her parents who she said practiced a 'mix of Buddhism and Daoism' by telling them that she would become Christian – "I asked for a cross to be put above my bed". After a period of praying to a God that she feared did not 'understand Chinese language', she decided to 'believe in the Buddha' because 'he acted' when she asked for the river by her parents' house not to rise any further to avoid causing flooding. She narrates this as the first time she came to 'know Buddhism' but felt this was lost as she got older. It was only after this experience with her grandparents that she decided to 'find Buddha' in her life again.

[107] See Bruckermann, C., & Feuchtwang, S. (2016: 164-166) for a discussion on the links between food and identity in Chinese history.

[108] Vermander et al. (2018: 15) argue that these processes in Chinese cities speak to how 'sacredness is stored' and 'integrated in the general fabric of the city, becoming part of its identity, carrying both shared legacies and conflicting significances'.

She shared with me that ten years ago her grandfather had become very sick and shortly after had passed away leaving her grandmother on her own. Her uncle at this time sold the property for a lot of money and *'kept it all for himself'*. This had created a lot of discord amongst various family members, but Sister J in particular was *'angry beyond words'.* Her grandmother had been placed in a care home because at the time no-one had the money to look after her at home.[109] Her grandmother had suffered physical abuse in the care home so Sister J shared that her and her husband pushed themselves financially to buy a larger apartment so they could look after her. She told me:

'I promised to take care of her. I made a promise.'

However, her grandmother passed away shortly after this visit. Sister J said that the anger she experienced towards her uncle felt *'out of control'* and created a *'hot temper'* within her that impacted all of those around her. Her grief was wrapped up in her uncle's betrayal as well as her perceived failure to keep her promise; a failure to keep her filial obligations to her grandparents.[110] These feelings of failure in upholding filial obligations of care towards parents and grandparents was shared by many of the other women, although predominantly those within the Buddhist RICO. One woman shared how she felt she had failed her parents whilst they had been alive because:

'I did not show enough filial piety to them.'

She recounted to me how her expressions of 'filial piety' had taken 'practical forms', such as cooking meals, washing clothes and cleaning the house. However, she felt that she had failed in providing them with 'emotional' expressions of her filiality and had not known how to express her 'love' and 'emotions' towards them. She also spoke of the 'hot temper' she had developed at the time in response to their 'ungrateful attitudes' towards her help, telling me that they rarely thanked her. At the time she did not know:

'...that you do not do these things for recognition.'

Whilst this participant shared that her feelings of 'emptiness' and being 'lost', a commonality amongst all the women irrespective of RICO, had stemmed from grief, it was her feelings of 'failure' in being able to demonstrate the correct forms of 'care'

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[109] Sister J shared that her uncle did have the money but refused to look after her grandmother, causing Sister J even more anger and giving her a 'hot temper'.

[110] Sister J had used the term '*xiao*' (filial piety) throughout when telling me about this event and how she felt she had failed in her duties towards her parents. This reflects studies that examine women's experiences of elder care in contemporary China, their perception of filial obligation and practice and how this is viewed by family, friends and neighbours (Zhan, H.Y., & Montgomery, R., 2003).

towards her parents that had propelled her to look for a way to do this in her daily life after their death. It was the message of love, kindness and gratitude that had drawn her to the Buddhist RICO, but it was their understanding of what 'proper filial care' looks like that had convinced her to work for the organisation. She shared that it had helped her understand how to provide 'true' expressions of filial piety towards her in-laws:

'I hug them; I sing for them; I tell them that I love them.'

Across both the RICOs the women spoke of how their pursuit of the 'feminine ideal', whether this was perceived in terms of their filial obligations towards family or in terms of the pressures surrounding marriage and reproduction, had caused arising conflicts between the opposing demands of personal desire, duty and gendered ideas of what a Chinese woman should do. This resulted in a fracturing of their sense of self and creating 'harm' in their 'everyday' (Zuo 2016; Elias & Rai 2019). In doing so, they began a search – sometimes described as conscious and at other times as being 'accidental'[111] – in finding the RICO that they now work for. Alongside these narratives of conflict stemming from the 'feminine ideal', the second subtheme that emerged from their narratives was discussions surrounding 'the workplace'. This includes experiences of gender discrimination as well as feelings of 'apathy' and 'alienation' in relation to the nature of the work involved. Furthermore, some women spoke of feeling a 'lack of purpose' since being retired where the absence of 'the workplace' caused conflict in their everyday. These are discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter.

4.2.2. The Workplace

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 SOEs (Harrel 2000; Entwistle & Henderson 2000; Cook & Dong 2011; Zuo 2016).[112] 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

[111] This is discussed in further detail in Section 5.2 of Chapter Five. For further discussions of women's experiences of their journey to their religious tradition see (Starkey 2014; 2019; Jaschok & Shui 2000; 2011).

[112] As a result of the 'Labour Law' in 1995 permanent employment for workers was ended, impacting urban workers in particular (Zuo 2016: 85; see also Lee 2007). 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 sixty percent of the average monthly salary earnt by a working mother at the time (Zuo 2016: 83).

marketisation and the pursuit of profitability (Zuo 2016: 84).[113] Examples of gender discrimination and stress in the workplace were a common thread in the narratives of conflict shared by the women from both RICOs. However, this was particularly prominent for those who had joined the Protestant RICO. 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 and Shui 2000; 2011).[114] 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.

These feelings of apathy towards the nature of the work itself was shared by many of the women, with all of them stating that they were searching for work that would 'have meaning'. Sister N's story shows similarities to stories of women in other studies who

[113] This is reflected in other studies (Cooke et al. 2015) 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).

[114] Elias & Rai (2019: 202) argue that not recognising the impacts of both women's 'inner' and 'outer' spheres in their daily lives (e.g., production and social reproduction) has 'material, harmful, consequences that are manifested in different spaces'. They conceptualise this 'harm' as found in the 'context of the everyday', including 'physical and mental harm to the individual, household and community, emotional and discursive harm, and harm to citizenship entitlements' (ibid: 215). Their discussion differs from mine in its discussions of physical violence against women, especially in relation to domestic abuse. However, their theoretical discussions of social reproduction as the everyday provide a framework for understanding the potential conflicts, or 'harms', that arise when this is not taken seriously in the lives of women, including those in contemporary Chinese society and in this research study.

were 'economically successful' in the decades following the shift to a market economy and experienced unprecedented educational investment from their parents (Tsui & Rich 2002). Two other women in her work team had also come from well-paid leadership positions in the private corporations they had worked for previously, with one commenting: *"I had a good position for a woman".* For these women, who had experienced great success in their workplaces prior to their involvement with the RICO (this was specific to the Buddhist organisation[115]), their conflict had been about the meaning they derived from the work, arguing that it left them feeling 'empty' and as though they were not achieving anything of 'real meaning' in their daily lives. Whilst the other women's narratives across both RICOs also displayed this want for more 'meaning' to be derived from their work, it was spoken about more in terms of their previous work being 'unchallenging', 'repetitive' and 'boring'. For Sister N and the other two women in her team this had not been the case as her work had been challenging and exciting initially but had lacked something that would provide her with the ability to "*nourish me on a deeper level".*

The final common thread that emerged when examining the arising conflicts that the women expressed in relation to 'the workplace' was from those who are now retired.[116] 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'.[117] 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

[115] The three Sisters who work full-time at the Buddhist RICO's PRC head office shared commonalities because their search for meaning beyond the everyday had far more focus on finding a 'spiritual understanding' of their lives and the world around them. This is what propelled them to make the decision to leave behind their successful jobs for their positions in the Buddhist RICO. This is also shown by their desire eventually to become ordained in the tradition of the RICO leader. This desire for ordination makes their narratives somewhat unique in the sense that they wish for the 'religiously-inspired' element of the RICO to be part of the steps that lead them, in one of the Sister's word, to fulfil their 'spiritual journeys'. This was not the same for any of the other women in this study, except for one woman in the Protestant RICO who had undergone divinity training and was a Pastor before working for the RICO.

[116] The legal retirement age for women in China is 50, whereas it is 55 for men.

[117] 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.

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[118] 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. It helps them forgive and calm their hot tempers.'*

She spoke of how these 'hot tempers' had been developed after retirement because the women had not been ready to give up work and 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.

In this section I have examined how all the women's narratives of conflict stem from feelings surrounding a 'lack of purpose'. Within this, I identified two interrelated subthemes: the expectations and feelings of failure in relation to a 'feminine ideal' that they felt they could not live up to and that resulted in a search for something that would a) give them meaning in the face of feelings of failure and conflict, and b) provide a purpose that went beyond daily concerns of family, marriage and reproduction. The second subtheme was 'the workplace' where women spoke of how experiences of gender

[118] In this thesis, 'work' includes recognising social reproduction (as defined by Elias & Rai 2019) in the everyday, which means that volunteering is conceptualised as work despite this current group of women being legally retired.

discrimination caused apathy in relation to their work, as well as how the competitive nature of the workplace did not allow the different spheres of women's lives to be taken into account. The women's narratives of conflict are the key to understanding their initial motivations for choosing to work for their RICO. Therefore, I will now examine in the next section how RICOs provide 'retreat' for Chinese women in the face of these arising conflicts, especially during the initial stages of their search for meaning in contemporary Chinese society.

4.3. RICOs as 'Retreat'?

By positioning RICOs as 'opportunity spaces', I want to argue that they provide 'a forum of social interaction that creates new possibilities for augmenting networks of shared meaning and associational life' (Yavuz 2003: 24; see also Fielder 2019a). All of the women shared that their journeys to their RICO stemmed from feeling a 'lack of purpose' in their everyday, focused on their perceived failure in relation to a 'feminine ideal' or 'the workplace'.[119] These reported narratives of conflict and the women's experiences of their RICOs demonstrate a need to understand the relational and dynamic ways that women are 'entering' these spaces (Massey 1994; Knott 2005; Kong & Woods 2017). I want to argue that women are entering RICOs in order to negotiate the arising conflicts that are taking place in their daily lives outside of these spaces. They do so both physically and semiotically (Lefebvre 1991; Ashiwa 2009).

This is demonstrated by Sister N's story that this chapter is based on. Her 'lack of purpose' emerged from feelings of isolation and emptiness despite having the socioeconomic 'success' coveted by wider society (see Rofel 2007; Yan 2009; 2010). Her entry into the Buddhist RICO acted as a form of 'retreat' from the 'cold outside' where she could create new meaning, relationally constructed with others in the RICO, in her life.[120] By 'entry' I do not just mean the physical steps she took entering the end-of-year ceremony to which she accompanied her friend, although it is true that this was a pivotal moment for conceptualising RICOs as a 'retreat' for her. Her 'entry' also included her agential decision to choose this forum as a way to construct meaning in the face of her 'lack of purpose'. What is additionally interesting in relation to Sister N's relational and dynamic use of her RICO is the (physical) space of her office-campus. Her decision to enter this space by accepting a full-time role created further conflicts in her everyday,

[119] Often a mixture of these two themes would emerge from the women's narratives, irrespective of which RICO they worked for.

[120] This relational element of RICOs is examined in various ways throughout Chapters 3 to 6.

especially with her parents. She described the office-campus as a (physical) space that is 'simple' and 'pure' even though new conflicts emerged from her decision. Unlike all of the other women in this study (aside from Sister H), she lives full-time in the physical space provided to her by the Buddhist RICO. I want to argue that the office-campus serves as an 'intermediate retreat' for Sister N, one where she can step 'inside from the cold', away from her former everyday life, and that holds her there until she can move on to the next stage of her RICO journey – full ordination with its leader. Despite her family and friends describing her life and work in the RICO as beneath their (and her) socioeconomic status, Sister N stands strong and 'patient' with these relationships. Her physical 'retreat' provides the shared meaning she had unconsciously been searching for. Her actions reflect the long tradition of religious women in China rejecting the circumscribed spatial conventions of the 'hearth' and seeking retreat in the 'temple' in order to seek the 'complementary' in their lives (Jaschok & Shui 2011: 22).

Sister J's desire for shared meaning is echoed in the other women's experiences and narratives describing why they 'entered' their RICO. However, with the exception of Sister H, they are relationally shaping their RICO as a 'retreat' in a different way. Despite their RICO offering them a 'spatial retreat' from their everyday conflicts that is 'complementary' in nature, it does not serve as a complete rejection of the 'hearth' (ibid). Rather, their entry into the RICO as a 'retreat' is hoped to enable a fluid negotiation between the 'hearth' and the 'temple' where meaning can be created without disrupting their everyday. This differs somewhat from Jaschok & Shui's (ibid) conceptualisation of 'complementary space' that Chinese women have historically found within religious spaces. The women in this study do not seek to 'disrupt' the assigned gender space they inhabit, but rather to blend the one offered by their RICOs with those encompassed in their everyday. Unlike other studies which saw women 're-orientating' themselves back towards the home as a way of dealing with the arising conflicts surrounding feminine ideals and workplace anomie (Zuo 2016),[121] my participants sought out a way to enter a new space in their search for meaning. At this stage of their search, they had a need to look for somewhere that stands 'apart from the mundane spaces of everyday life' (Klingorová & Gökarıksel 2018: 38). However, this does not necessarily mean 'spaces that are formally marked and recognised as religious' (ibid; see Kong 2001; Kong & Woods 2017). In fact, many of the women are rejecting both as where their search for

[121] For instance, in Zuo's (2016) study women 'took refuge' from the conflicts between family and work by 're-orientating' themselves back to the home and giving up work completely.

meaning can take place.[122] Their initial entry into the RICOs acts as a form of 'spatial retreat' from their arising conflicts. This conclusion not only further develops previous understandings of what RICOs provide for those that work for them (Huang 2009; Wu 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019) but adds new insights that help us understand how the gendered conflicts facing Chinese women impact *why* and *how* they are entering RICOs. It also aids our understanding of their organisations as 'opportunity spaces' shaped by their Chinese location (Yavuz 2003; Fielder 2019a).

4.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the 'narratives of conflict' of women in RICOs and discussed how these stem from feeling a 'lack of purpose' in their everyday as a result of their perceived failure to live up to the 'feminine ideal' of what a 'Chinese woman' should be (Hooper 1994; Yang, M.M.H 1999b; Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018a; Xie, K. 2019) and/or the gender discrimination and alienation felt in their previous workplaces (Cook & Dong 2011; Cook & Xiao 2014; Zuo 2016; Hizi 2018). By identifying these arising conflicts as the initial motivations for women's search for meaning beyond their current 'everyday', I was able to analyse how RICOs act as a form of 'retreat' in this process. As the thesis progresses, I will be able to demonstrate how their initial 'retreat' is developed and shaped by the RICO they work for. In doing so, it will contribute to our understanding of contemporary forms of Chinese women's religious subjectivities and will clarify the implications this has for the literature that seeks to understand the growth of RICOs and their impact on Chinese society (Huang et al. 2011; Fielder 2012; 2015; 2019a; Weller et al. 2017; Wu 2017).

[122] This is seen in many of the women's experiences of studying with a 'Buddhist Master' or going to temple/church before 'finding' their RICO (quotations indicate wording used by participants).

5. Women, Care and Interconnection in RICOs

The narratives of conflict shared in the previous chapter presented the common themes participants discussed in relation to *why* they chose to work for a RICO in contemporary China. This centred on their feeling a 'lack of purpose' within their everyday and how this propelled their search for meaning. Their search saw them make the agential decision to enter RICOs as a form of 'retreat' from their arising conflicts in the 'everyday'. In this chapter, like in the others, I will firstly present the narrative of one specific participant using it as a 'springboard' to reflect on the experiences of the other women in both RICOs.[123] In doing so, I will examine the forms of work undertaken by women in RICOs and the 'quasi-secular' (physical) spaces this takes place in (Kong & Woods 2017; see Lefebvre 1991; Ashiwa 2009). By paying particular attention to the women's embodied practices of care towards themselves and others, I will be able to present insights into how women are 'doing religion' in contemporary China and the ways that RICOs are relationally forming women's religious subjectivities (Jaschok & Shui 2000; 2011; Chau 2019).

5.1. Sister J: 'planting one small apple seed'

I met I met Sister J whilst visiting one of the local branches of the Buddhist RICO. The office resided quietly in an unassuming block off a busy road of the city – concrete and grey, looming over those below it. The building's entrance welcomes those who enter it with two large golden dragons in a foyer made up of an unattended reception desk, a broken vending machine and marked white tiles that give the room a sterile look and feel. This particular office of the Buddhist RICO resides on one of the upper floors, looking over the city's landscape whilst remaining hidden from those without the knowledge that it is there. Arriving mid-morning, the office was already bustling with activity. Taking my shoes off carefully at the office entrance, I put on foot covers that are kept near the door, marking a clear threshold from the outside. At the entrance stands a glass tablet with the image of the RICO's leader carved into it; it is kept pride of place in the centre so you can bow to her three times before entering.

The images of its female leader do not stop with the glass tablet in the entrance. Versions of it are kept in nearly every room, drawing her presence into the space. The entrance also houses a large TV with a small group of tables and chairs for members to sit and watch

[123] Chapters Three and Four's central narratives are based on two women from the Buddhist RICO. Chapter Five and Six are founded upon those of women from the Protestant RICO.

their leader present teachings and core lessons of the day. Despite the physical distance from this office to the residences of the RICO's leader her presence is felt throughout, with the women often pointing to her image during conversations. This local branch of the Buddhist RICO had been 'repurposed' for its use, having only been able to take ownership of the space in the past eight years. The presence of the organisation in the space, with its specific activities and fluid negotiations over what can and cannot take place within it, imbue it with a sense of 'sacredness' for those inside it (Vermander et al. 2018: 116-117); becoming what Kong & Woods (2017: 116-117) term 'quasi-secular' in nature.[124] This reflects not just the nature of the other offices owned by the Buddhist RICO (with one already discussed in relation to Sister N's narrative in the previous chapter), but also that of the Protestant RICO.[125]

On this particular day, I found Sister J in what was termed the 'craft room'. In this room members of the Buddhist RICO would turn recyclable materials into other products such as umbrellas and bags that could be sold. Sister J was sitting by the window when I arrived and I remember thinking that she was a small woman in stature but with her warmth felt a mile away; her smile bringing you in and her presence enveloping you in a feeling of comfort. On this misty autumn morning, the purpose of the day was to make bags for the members of the organisation. Inside would be a bowl, water flask and a set of chopsticks for each owner. Sister J had been ironing the bags as I entered the room but as soon as she looked up and saw me, she knew instantly that I was there to see her. She embraced me with a hug and a smile, asked me to join on a table nearby and placed a pile of the pre-ironed bags in my hands.

She showed me slowly and carefully how to thread the silk ribbon so that they could act as draw strings. She then cut off any loose ends of thread that remained attached to the bag. She smoothed it down a couple of times with her hands, staring intently at it. She

[124] Kong & Woods (2017: 116-117) define 'quasi-secular' spaces as seemingly 'secular spaces that are appropriated by religious groups in order to achieve a religious objective or outcome'. Conceptually, 'quasi-secular spaces' present a way into exploring the 'nature of sacredness' because, using Chidester and Linenthal's (1995: 18 as cited in Kong & Woods 2017: 117) definition, 'sacred' is just an 'empty signifier' until it is 'filled with meaningful content as a result of specific strategies of symbolic engagement'.

[125] Although not as pronounced, there remain paintings of the Bishop who founded the organisation, with the main one hung in a central meeting area where his image can be seen by all. The small outer grounds provide tranquillity and green between the busy city streets and the office building enclosed within the outer walls.

looked up at me and said, 'now you must do the same, but be careful'. She meant what she said and double checked every bag that I clumsily sewed.

As shared in Chapter Three, Sister J's journey to joining the Buddhist RICO started with the death of her grandparents and her feelings of failure attached to not being able to care for them and the anger she had felt towards her uncle for financially exploiting the situation when they had died. Her journey to her RICO had included having one-to-one lessons under a different Buddhist master where she would learn from 'the scriptures from him'.[126] However, she said that she had only seen 'small changes' in how she felt about herself and towards others, with her behaviour only becoming slightly calmer. For Sister J, this experience had not produced the dramatic changes in herself that she had hoped to achieve. It only provided her with 'small understandings' into why she felt she was suffering in her daily life. In the Buddhist RICO she told me that she had found the ability to change herself for the better. As she sewed another ribbon through the bag, she told me:

> *"I find great peace in this kind of work as this makes me feel like the saying: from planting one small apple seed, will come many apples."*

For Sister J, the sewing of these bags was an embodied act of care that served to alleviate her feelings of suffering, as well as producing an item that would be of use to others. For Sister J, this space is not just a physical room that houses tables, chairs and sewing machines. Instead, it is a relational space where her mindful acts of embodied care help transform how she feels on the inside. With each silk thread woven into these bags, Sister J was embodying the teachings of the organisation's leader who calls upon her members to have pure intentions and to display great acts of care towards others.[127]

Her desire is to rid herself of her inner feelings of conflict in relation to her perceived 'failure' in filial piety towards her grandparents and the 'negative emotions' this evoked in her, which was impacting the way in which she conducted herself in relation to others. Often, this also manifested in a prompted change in her outward behaviour, mannerisms and facial expressions. Whilst talking quietly in the craft room, Sister J had started telling me a story from her childhood and was becoming increasingly animated – her arms

[126] Her words.
[127] As discussed briefly in Section 2.1, the Buddhist RICO is an example of a movement towards doing 'Buddhism for the human realm' (Laliberte 2003: 245). Laliberte (2003: 245) discusses how this movement 'emerged in China at the beginning of the twentieth century and […] promotes the practice of charity as a means to attain salvation'.

moving more rapidly, her smile infectious with laughter and the sewing temporarily forgotten on the table. Suddenly, she stopped talking and her arms dropped to her side. 'Grandma'[128] – who was the 'boss' of the craft room – was looking over at us. Sister J immediately dropped her voice to a whisper again, picking up the briefly forgotten sewing. The Buddhist RICO requires that its members fully 'embody' its leader's worldview including control over their behaviour.[129] This was not the last time I would see Sister J change her behaviour depending on where we were.

After this first meeting with Sister J, I would spend many other afternoons with her engaged in the work of the Buddhist RICO. Her narrative, and my observations of our time together, serve to shape this chapter and its discussion of the other women's experiences in both RICOs. In the next section I will examine the *ways* women are 'doing religion', the *spaces* this takes place in and *what* this can tell us about women's religious subjectivities in RICOs, as well as contemporary Chinese society more broadly.

5.2. Cultivation of Self and Others

Alongside the increased academic literature that examines the emerging and changing forms of religious philanthropy in contemporary China (see Laliberte 2004; 2015; Fielder 2012; 2015; 2019; Weller et al. 2017), there has been a rising interest in asking: 'what kind of religious subjects does participation in philanthropy create?' (Wu 2017: 426).[130] It has been argued that participation in religious philanthropy creates 'moral subjects' (Wu 2017) or 'interpellated religious subjects' (Chau 2019: 158) through a process of 'civic-self' making (Weller et al. 2017). Despite differences in terminology, this literature argues that participation in organisations such as RICOs creates new forms of 'personhood' and 'religious subjectivities' in contemporary Chinese society (see Wu

[128] Older members of the organisation are called 'Grandma' or 'Grandfather' or 'Mama/Baba' depending on the age of the volunteer addressing them. Sometimes '*laoshi*' (teacher) was also used for older members who were considered to have a lot of knowledge/experience.

[129] See Huang (2009), Huang et al. (2011), Weller et al. 2017 and Chau 2019 for specific examples of how this manifest in Buddhist organisations in China.

[130] As discussed in Section 1.1.4, various studies argue that there has been a rise of the 'individual self', disembedded from traditional ties of kinship and obligations for the care of others, in contemporary China (Hizi 2018: 299; see also Yan 2003; 2009; 2010). This includes discussions on the impact of consumer culture on the 'desiring self' (Rofel 2007), as well as on the changing experiences of work to form the 'striving self' (Yan 2013). The changing 'moral landscape' of the PRC is presented by Wang (2002) as a 'mismatch' between the official discourses of the CCP that promote collective values (Steele & Lynch 2013: 450; see also Gow 2017) and the influence of the market on individuals to realise their own goals, often in direct competition with those around them. This has led to the argument that, when torn between the two, many will choose an 'individualist moral code' in order to secure what is deemed important in their 'everyday lives' (Steele & Lynch 2013: 450).

2017; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019; Fielder 2019a).[131] This scholarship recognises women's experiences of the impact of their participation (Weller et al. 2017; Wu 2017; Chau 2019) and acknowledges that our theoretical understanding could be 'innovated' through gender analysis (Weller et al. 2017: 175-178). However, there is still little work on women's experiences of participation in RICOs and how it shapes their religious subjectivity. [132] By ignoring the impact of gender on these processes, this literature is not considering the specific 'intricacies' of everyday life or how these relational spaces are an intrinsically 'gendered terrain' (Elias & Rai 2019: 207; see also Massey 1994). Therefore, I will now focus on two 'quasi-secular' spaces – the care home and the book reading group - in order to examine the nature of women's participation in RICOs, and what this can tell us about how they are 'doing religion' in the quasi-secular spaces created by RICOs in contemporary China (Kong & Woods 2017).[133]

5.2.1. The Care Home

I would meet Sister J in her local office of the Buddhist RICO on a late November afternoon. [134] When I arrived several Sisters rushed over to greet me and chastised me for not wearing enough layers on this 'bitterly cold' day.[135] I did not argue with them, letting one put a scarf around my shoulders. It took me a moment to see Sister J, who was shuffling papers on the table in the foyer. She seemed anxious and didn't smile warmly when she saw me, which was very unlike her. I asked her what game she had prepared for our visit and she explained that all the phrases were key teachings of the organisation's

[131] Wu (2017: 426) notes that we should view the changes in official policy (as discussed in Section 1.1.2) towards religious groups working in the charitable sector as an 'interactional' process, rather than following the 'resistance model' defended by earlier scholarship (Weller 1994; Chau 2006; McCarthy 2013). This 'interactional process' has 'encouraged new forms of moral subject-making' to emerge which have grown 'out of the same push for a universalised and rationalised form of charity' (Wu 2017: 426).

[132] There have been studies that have examined women's experiences and roles in specific RICOs (see Huang & Weller 1998; Ting 1999; Huang 2008; 2009; Lu 2011). However, there is a lack of comparative discussion across the religiously inspired charitable sector and what this means for women's experiences of self, family and work.

[133] Mellor (2007: 587 as cited in Starkey 2014: 101-102) argues that 'religion is an embodied phenomenon' that can include 'bodily experiences, actions and ways of thinking'. In much the same way as Starkey (2014: 101-102), my focus is not necessarily on the 'body' as a point of analysis but rather on an examination of how 'embodied' practices of care, both towards themselves and to others, mould the nature of their participation in RICOs and help form their religious subjectivity.

[134] As discussed in Section 4.1

[135] One of the Sister's words.

leader that demonstrated how we should treat one another and demonstrate filial piety towards our elders. Each character was on a separate piece of paper and we would hold them up whilst the audience reordered them to make the teaching. She asked for me to read them out loud so she could hear how my mandarin was coming along. I mispronounced one of the words and she smiled broadly, laughing at how silly the sentence sounded because of it. I laughed along with her, our laughter feeding off each other and getting louder. Suddenly, Sister J's demeanour changed in an instant. Her eyes looked down and the silence enveloped us. She told me:

> *'Our [RICO] culture is to always smile broadly, but to not do so by making so much noise.'*

She demonstrated what she meant by the 'smile' that all members of the organisation are asked to 'wear'. It was indeed big and broad but there was no laughter behind it. It was different to the smiles we had shared outside the office on our days out together away from other members. It was also the smile I had seen her mime to me several times when I did not 'smile' enough in the office. When I copied her on this particular afternoon, her shoulders instantly relaxed and her face seemed less tense. This would not be the last time that I would see her outwardly change her physical demeanour depending on where we were and who we were with.

The care home we were visiting was not owned by the Buddhist RICO; unlike the Protestant RICO whose care facilities are owned and run by them. Instead, the Buddhist RICO's members visit local state facilities. I experienced this in two different cities in Huadong where the Buddhist RICO has local branches. They would also do this in local state-run hospitals with elderly patients. Often the children of members would be taken along to perform 'operas' and sing and dance with the residents. On this particular occasion I had travelled with Sister J on the back of her moped, travelling to an area of the city I was not familiar with. The facility was tucked off to the side of one of the main streets, hidden from immediate view. It was made up of a series of rooms with basic facilities in the front, mainly just chairs for the residents to sit on with the living quarters in the back. The staff were used to these visits by the members of the RICO, exchanging hugs and excited chatter as we brought in the food we had with us. Sister J and I joined some of the other Sisters in the kitchen to help the staff prepare the fruit as well as the herbs that would be used in the bowls for foot washing.

One of the Sisters was a school teacher and, on this occasion, she had brought her class along for the visit. I found out later that she was the daughter of one of the older

volunteers. The children looked nervous, not knowing where to stand, what to do or what to say. They huddled together in a corner whilst the Sisters organised the residents into a large circle in the main living space and prepared all the activities. Then, much to the children's surprise, the Sisters grouped each one with a resident who they needed to stand in front or beside of for the duration of the visit.

The children looked incredibly uncomfortable and many avoided making eye contact with the resident they had been paired up with. One of the Sisters led us all in song, making hand actions that we all needed to copy. The students picked it up quickly, although nervously looking at one another to check they were doing it correctly. As we did this, the Sisters came around wearing their 'smiles', gesturing for us to smile wider if we weren't already. They encouraged the students to make eye contact with the residents and make the physical distance between them as small as possible.

Once we had finished the song, the students were called over by the teacher and they pulled out posters they had made prior to the visit. On each of them were 'family trees' on which they had written the names of their family members and something about each one of them. They had then been asked to share something they loved or admired about their family, especially their parents and/or grandparents. The students were reluctant to share at first, stumbling over their words and looking at the ground. However, the more students who shared, encouraged by the Sisters, the more they wanted to share with everyone. Those who had been reluctant at the beginning added more at the end, expressing their love for their families and often speaking of how they should demonstrate more 'filial piety' towards them.[136]

The Sisters were encouraging throughout, smiling and, along with the residents, clapping to the students' responses. Once they had finished sharing, the Sisters brought out bowls of warm water filled with sweet smelling herbs and cloths. They also handed out cut up fruit to give to each of the residents. A bowl was placed at the feet of every resident and a student or Sister paired with them. I noticed a look of horror openly spread across a few of the students' faces, even though they tried to quickly hide it. Sister J kneeled down next to me and said:

> *'Copy me. Get some water on the cloth and be gentle, so gentle.'*

[136] Sister J had sat next to me whilst this activity was happening to translate what the students were saying.

She picked up one of the feet of the female resident she was knelt before. She held the foot as though it were made of a precious, rare material and begun massaging it with the cloth and her hands. Her eyes never left the foot unless it was to smile up to the resident who was happily sat in her chair, enjoying the pieces of orange Sister J had given her. This 'intimate practice' connected Sister J with the resident in a process of 'becoming' in virtue of which they are relationally cultivating the religious meaning *in* and *through* the space around them (Hopkins et al. 2013: 7-8; see Kong & Woods 2017: 165; Knott 2005a).

When I looked around, the other women and students were solely focused on what they were doing and the person whose feet they were gently massaging. Each student had a Sister next to them to give guidance and make sure that each resident was comfortable. This act of embodied care towards those in the care-home was not just about providing a service for residents. For Sister J, and the other women there, it was an act of 'doing' their religion (Chau 2019: 4). During their visit, the care-home was no longer just an institutional facility, but rather had 'repurposed' by the women for their religious motives (Kong & Woods 2017: 165).

Once finished, we would play the game that Sister J had prepared for the occasion. She had told me on our way to the care home that this was the first activity she had been entrusted to create by the other sisters. She was incredibly nervous about how it would be received, not only by the residents, but also by her fellow Sisters. Despite these nerves Sister J had her 'smile' spread across her face, using hand actions and a microphone to get everyone involved. The first round went down well with all and her face beamed with pride and excitement. However, the second round did not go as well, with some of the residents becoming less interested and struggling with the order of the words. Sister J did not outwardly show that any of this got to her, keeping up her smile the whole time and exuding enough energy to cover those who had lost theirs. At this point, she could not let her 'inward' impact on the way she was expressing her 'outward' because this would have disturbed how she was meant to be caring for those around her (Huang 2009; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019; Brummans et al. 2019). Within this space, she needed to embody the compassionate and loving values of her RICO, even if her attempt may have faltered (Huang 2009; Chau 2019).

As we walked away from the care home, down a side road and back onto the bustling main roads of the city, Sister J's face had dropped a little. Her smile was no longer so big

and, at times, barely there at all. I put my arm in hers and asked if there was anything wrong. She replied:

> *'We do not say hard work or working hard. Instead we say happiness, we say love'.*

I hugged her arm tighter and asked whether foot washing was a normal part of their activities when volunteering in care homes. She tells me that it is because it is a way for the volunteers to display 'filial piety' towards the residents and that it really helps them to feel loved. Sister J's embodied practices of care during our visit represented the 'universal love' that her RICO's leader says they can cultivate within themselves and showed how to transcend and share it with those around them (Laliberte 2003; Huang 2009; Huang et al. 2011; Chau 2019). Through these embodied practices Sister J inscribed religious meaning into the 'repurposed' space of the care home which enabled her to 'do' her religion *in* and *through* this space. These embodied acts relationally cultivate her religious subjectivity in regard to the other RICO women, the residents and the students (Chau 2019: 4 and 156-158). In the same way as Weller et al. (2017: 122-123) argue, she engages in 'doing religion' by 'doing good'. However, what Sister J's experiences in the care home demonstrate are the gendered implications of the ways in which this is 'done'. As explored in Chapter Three, her acts of embodied care are motivated by her feelings of failure derived from gendered filial obligations. The care home becomes a quasi-secular space in which she can rectify these feelings of failure by embodying the 'care' she was not able to provide for her grandparents.

As we left the building, it struck me how the care home could be so easily missed if you weren't looking for it. There were no physical signs pointing towards its importance for the women who go there every week, cultivating themselves in relation to the care they give to others. I will now discuss how some of these themes played out during our time spent together at the Buddhist RICO's book reading group.

5.2.2. The Book Reading Group

Another experience I shared with Sister J was her attendance at the book reading group within the Buddhist RICO's local branch that I described earlier in this chapter. I took part in this reading group at least once a week for eight weeks at the end of 2017. The room where the reading group took place was relatively small with a table in the middle that would allow for eight to sit comfortably around it. Every week, members – both newer and those who had been working for the organisation for quite a few years – would

gather in this small space, bringing with them offerings of sweets, fruits and biscuits. There would always be a fresh pot of tea and a copy of one of the founder's books for each person.

The walls were covered by storage that housed the Buddhist RICO's literature. One main image of their leader hung directly above the top end of the table. Before sitting, everyone would bow three times to this image with Sister J telling me that it helps invoke her presence into the room and help guide their discussions of her teachings. Again, despite the room being housed in an 'office space', the material uses of images, incense, and food meant staff were imbuing it with religious meaning (Knott 2005a; Kong & Woods 2017; Fielder 2019a). The session would then get started by a chosen member leading the group. They would remind them of what had been covered last week, what page everyone was on and provide a short overview of the passage that would be covered this week. The group would then take it in turns to read a page with others helping when someone didn't know a certain pronunciation. No-one read ahead in this session. Everyone focused, line by line, making sure there was symmetry in their pace when it was their turn to read. When the assigned passage for the session had been read out loud, there would be time for discussion once again led by whoever was 'chairing' the session. This discussion would always begin with the chair asking those around the table what they thought the passage meant. On more than a few occasions, the newer women to the group struggled to speak about its meaning or stayed very quiet.

This would normally be where Sister X – in the case of the sessions I was in – would step in and give her understanding of the passage and ask the group how it might link with experiences in their lives and/or how they might put this into practice in their lives. Sister X's manner and style would put everyone at ease. Women would become more animated as they shared their life stories, especially those who were newer. Sister X helped the other women understand the written passages of the organisation's leader in a way that was relevant to them and their experiences.

One woman had studied the Lotus Sutra before attending this reading group and had a 'working knowledge' of it.[137] However, she said that attending the reading group had

[137] The text we were reading in this session (and was the basis of all the book reading sessions I was a part of) is based on teachings shared in the Lotus Sutra, the Sutra of Innumerable Meanings and the Sutra of the Bodhisattva's Eight Realisations, it is their leader's interpretations of these sutras (see Brummans & Hwang (2010) for similar practice of this, as well as their recent study with Cheong (2019) on the communicative practices of 'religious non-governmental organisations' (RNGOs) with a specific focus on the use of mantras in Buddhist NGOs.)

helped shape her understanding of its teachings. By attending the readings each week in this space, she had come to know how these teaching can only be truly achieved through the act of 'doing'. For her, the 'real existence of Buddhism' can only be found in working for the organisation. She shared how the reading group, as well as the work she did for the RICO, was a process of self-transformation that helped her have 'Buddha in my heart' and to become him through learning, action and understanding. She said that, the reading group had also helped her to understand the meaning behind her existence and helped alleviate her fears surrounding death. The teachings of the organisation's leader had shown her that 'learning' was a process of finding 'simple ways' to demonstrate your commitment to others and yourself, rather than just through the study of complex sutra teachings that can only 'show you knowledge', but that do not actually allow you to form yourself in the image of the Buddha or follow the Bodhisattva-path.

The reading group had helped her truly to come to terms with death by understanding the idea of cause and effect (*karma*). By acknowledging that she brought nothing into this world and in death couldn't take anything with her, she learnt that,

> *'...one day, I will die so I want what I have done – my influence – to live on after me. Therefore, we need to cherish our time and not waste it – we need to be like our leader in this way.'*

At first, she had not understood the relevance of the reading group as she could have done this at home on her own. However, it had become a process through which, in the company of others, she had been,

> *'cleaning my own heart and improving myself.'*

She said that by talking things through with the other women, it had helped her,

> *'clarify my relationships. It helped me understand how we stand with others and with ourselves and the part that plays in the world.'*

At the time, I had noticed that the majority of the women in the group were nodding along in agreement whilst she was speaking. Once she had finished, one of the other women – also newer to the group – told me that she had only recently started coming to the reading group and already felt that her 'learning' of Buddhist teachings had greatly improved because

> *'reading and discussing it together helps me understand it.'*

She shared that she finds great enjoyment and pleasure out of sharing experiences and ideas with the other women in the group and that her understanding was no longer 'shallow' but had been 'deepened' through the reading group. At this point, one of the Sisters who had been working for the RICO for many years explained that, no matter how tired or upset she was, she found meaning in her work for the RICO and the study of its leader's teachings. She shared with everyone that she had not gone to university and that, before coming to the Buddhist RICO, she had not really liked to read. Despite having attended temple classes at first, she said it had not helped her 'feel any different'. Instead, taking part in this organisation – and this reading group in particular – helped her change. She said that her Sisters,

> *'…show so much kindness and goodness.'*

This had helped transform how she felt about herself. She shared that when she first came to the organisation, she had been at the lowest part of her life, including an unhappy marriage and being 'very poor'. Through the care of her fellow Sisters she had come to believe that her situation could get better and now she enjoys many good things in her life and feels cared for.

Her experiences were shared by another woman in the reading group who told me that by coming to understand the teachings of the RICO's leader in this book group, as well as by participating in the other work of the organisation, she had learnt '*to let go'* of the expectations she had felt in relation to others in her life. She gave me the example of her daughter who had, a year before she joined the RICO, received a 'bad grade' on her high-school entrance exam and how this had caused her 'real sadness and negativity. She felt as though she had failed as a mother and resented her daughter. She told me that:

> *'[The RICO] has helped me change my character […] I am more caring and in the right way.'*

I asked her what she meant by this and she reiterated the example of the exam grade, saying she was no longer bothered so much about her daughter's educational attainment. She shared that, before joining the Buddhist RICO, she had a 'bad temper' and would get angry constantly with her husband and daughter – he was not earning enough money or her daughter didn't practice the piano enough. She told me that she would 'beat' her daughter if she felt she wasn't showing enough improvement in her piano lessons. But now she does not 'care' about such things anymore – she has let them go. She said that her husband and daughter like the changes in her since she became involved,

'I am a lot calmer, happier and positive.'

This experience was shared by all the women I spoke to in both the Buddhist and the Protestant RICO. Several women in the Protestant RICO shared that their time working for the organisation had taught them how to be 'happier with less' and to 'let go' of 'small concerns' that no longer mattered once you knew the suffering and needs of others. Through their embodied practices of care towards others, they were able to cultivate themselves in a 'process of becoming' (Kong & Woods 2017: 165). During this process, they were able to let go of the 'desiring self' (Rofel 2007) that caused them pain and instead cultivated an interconnection that shapes their individual religious subjectivity.

5.3. RICOs as 'Interconnection'?

I have borrowed the term 'interconnection' from Zwissler (2018)[138] in order to examine Chinese women's experiences of cultivating care towards the self and others in RICOs. As Weller et al. (2017: 122-123) argue, Chinese women in RICOs are 'directed' by the need to 'look outward rather than inward'. By engaging in an embodied practice that focuses on the needs of others and speaking with the mind and heart of 'we' rather than 'I', the women are developing a religious subjectivity that is 'interconnected' (ibid: 122-123 and 205-206).[139] This process of 'interconnection' is cultivated in the 'deeply social and socialising' spaces that the RICOs create for those within them (Hopkins et al. 2013: 7-8). In this sense, RICOs become a particular forum for 'doing religion' that provides something for women that is unique from other spaces.[140] Interestingly, some of the women in the Protestant RICO shared that they are members of churches outside of their work for the RICO. They view their work for the RICO as an interconnected way of expressing their faith, in addition to doing so within the 'official sites' they inhabit, ultimately allowing their religious subjectivity to be 'mobile' and cross over into different spaces (Tweed 2006: 262; Kong & Woods 2017: 165).

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[138] Her account examines religious women's forms of feminist activism in the UK. However, her analysis provided interesting points of comparative reflection with my participants' experiences of the various (physical) spaces created by their RICOs. It also resonated with my focus on women's experiences, whilst other studies on 'relationality', 'connection' and 'subject making' in China do not fully acknowledge the gendered implications of their theories (Wu 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019a). I will, however, develop my conceptualisation of RICOs as 'interconnection' not just in relation to the theoretical lens that I constructed in Section 1.2, but also to the aforementioned studies as they provide vital reviews of the Chinese location.

[139] Chau (2019: 4-5) argues that 'relationality [is] at the heart of religion in China'.

[140] This includes 'official' and 'unofficial' sites of religion.

By viewing RICOs as 'interconnected', the women are able to 'make meaning' regardless of whether they are committed to the religious tradition that their RICO is rooted in (Weller et al. 2017: 133). This is less prominent amongst the women in the Buddhist RICO that promotes the need to be a 'Bodhisattva' in this world in order for their leader's vision of a Pure Land to be realised (see Huang 2009; Huang et al. 2011; Weller et al. 2017; Wu 2017; Brummans 2015; 2019; Chau 2019). They are able to create a new religious subjectivity in which 'doing good is the same as doing religion' (Weller et al. 2017: 113). For some scholars this is a process of 'moral subject making' (Wu 2017) or developing an individual's 'civic-self' (Weller et al. 2017). However, focusing on the experiences of women *through* and *in* these spaces demonstrates particular gendered formations of the self.

Firstly, the women wish to alleviate arising conflicts that originate from specifically gendered consequences of wider sociocultural forces. In particular these are the expectations of the 'feminine ideal' of a 'Chinese woman' and the specific forms of discrimination that they have encountered within previous workplaces. Secondly, the 'intimate' embodied practices of care were carried out by women far more than men. This does not mean that men did not partake in these forms of 'doing religion' but the women clearly shared a desire to practice *through* embodied care. For women in both RICOs this was achieved by taking recourse to the universalised language of 'love' mobilised by both of the organisations (Wielander 2011; Wu 2017; Weller et al. 2017). Furthermore, the women sought out spaces in which they could study, learn and grow through the sharing of their narratives with other women (Jaschok & Shui 2000; 2011). For example, Sister J's husband 'came to know' the writings of their leader through individual study of scripture. Sister J and the other women in the group, on the other hand, formed and shaped their understanding of their leader's teachings in discussion with others. Through this process, Sister J became interconnected, not just with the other women in the group, but also with their charismatic leader (Huang 2008; 2009).[141]

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed how the current literature examines the new religious subjectivities being developed in organisations such as RICOs in contemporary China (Huang 2009; Fielder 2012; Wu 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019; Brummans 2019).

[141] The ways this manifests, particularly for women in the Protestant RICO, is explored in more detail in Section 6.2

However, while this literature often discusses women's experiences in relation to their theoretical analysis, it does not fully examine what this can tell us about how women are 'doing religion' and what this means for them within their gendered everyday of contemporary China (Wu 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019; Brummans 2019).[142] Therefore, this chapter has made a contribution to the existing literature by examining how women's religious subjectivities are shaped and formed *in* and *through* a process of interconnection that is embodied through their work. In doing so, it has provided new insights into contemporary forms of religious subjectivity. While this often resembles practices that religious women in China have historically engaged in (Jaschok & Shui 2000; 2011), it also demonstrates how the socio-political and cultural changes of contemporary urban China have shaped them. In the next two chapters I will examine the impact of the work that is conducted through this interconnected process on the women working in RICOs, the organisations themselves and wider society.

[142] Huang's (2003; 2008; 2009) studies examine women's experiences in the Buddhist Compassion Tzu-Chi Foundation and offer clear comparisons with the experiences of the women in this study, especially in relation to expressions of compassion and the practice of 'doing good' as a form of 'doing religion'. She has also provided insightful contextualisation for this study (ibid). However, her studies mainly focus on the Taiwanese context and/or do not utilise a spatial theoretical lens to examine her data in order to understand women's experiences and cultivation of their religious subjectivity.

6. A Feminine Culture? RICOs as Bonds, Binds and Bridges

The purpose of this chapter is to examine, in light of the wider academic conversations briefly discussed above, what the organisational culture of RICOs provides for the women working for them. This will be done by examining previous scholarship on 'social capital' in China, paying particular attention to how it is enacted differently across genders (Chen & Lu 2007; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019). I will examine the women's experiences and how this relationally shapes RICOs formations of social capital through a framework of 'bonds', 'binds' and 'bridges'.[143] The structure of the chapter is founded upon the narrative of Ms. W whose work for the Protestant RICO spanned over two decades and explores the key subthemes that emerged in relation to the other women's understanding and experiences of what their RICO organisational culture provides for them.

This chapter focuses on how women are *bonded* to the shared values and common identity that their RICO provides them (Chen & Lu 2007); the ways this *binds* them together with those from different social groups (Chau 2019: 4); and grants them access to channels of power that they would not have had otherwise by exploring how RICOs act as *bridges* into wider networks of national and international partners (Weller et al. 2017: 157-168). This is narrated as a particularly 'feminine' work culture that takes into consideration the needs of their 'inner spheres' that have had gendered consequences for them in the past (as discussed in Chapter Three). In doing so, I will argue that RICOs and the women working for them relationally become a 'space of capacity' that discursively develops values, trust and networks based on mutual support and belonging (Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019a).

6.1. Ms. F: 'am I even a woman?'

The only time I would meet with Ms. F was in a local café near the office of the Protestant RICO. It was one of many new 'coffee houses' that had sprung up in the past couple of years. It styled itself similarly to others in the area with neutral colours and simple geometric lines in the furniture and artwork. We were not alone and were joined by a

[143] I discussed scholarship on 'social capital' in Section 1.1.2. The specific reasons for choosing this framework for analysing the 'forms' of social capital mobilised and shaped both by the women and the RICOs are discussed in Section 2.3.3. Whilst I have drawn on previous work that has utilised the framework of 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking' (Gittell and Vidal 1998; Szreter 2002), I have changed terms and focuses based on scholarship that specifically focuses on the Chinese location (Chen & Lu 2007; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019) and the words used by the women themselves (e.g., 'bridges').

small group she was working with from an NGO in Beijing who had sought out her expertise. The others started chatting amongst themselves and I realised that Ms. F was staring at me quite intently.

'Why do you wish to speak to me? What can I possibly tell you?'

I had been taken aback slightly as I had been approached by my contacts about meeting with her, giving me the impression that she was somebody that they thought would be interested. I clumsily replied that I was wanting to learn more about women's experiences of her RICO and the work they have done in the organisation. She threw her hands in the air and declared,

"am I even a woman?" and repeated, *"what can I possibly tell you?"*[144]

Graduating in the late seventies, she told me she had been placed in a newly established company to do interpretation and translation. Her work for them had involved negotiating with their international partners and enabled her to practice and develop her English language skills. In the late eighties, she and her husband moved abroad where she had majored in English. She shared how her 'introduction to Christianity' occurred whilst studying abroad and had helped her explore a side to herself that she felt had always been there but never fully expressed. This experience motivated her desire to work for an organisation that demonstrated 'Christian values' and, upon returning to China, she had become one of the early staff members for the Protestant RICO.[145] She told me that:

'I wanted to work for a company that had a loving nature, like a family and has a Christian initiative.'

We had been chatting for a while now and I noticed how much she had relaxed. She was sat back in her chair, coffee in one hand and the other gesturing as she spoke. The more she talked about her life and work, the more animated she became. Her eyes were glistening with tears. They would not fall until later in the conversation, albeit only briefly and quickly wiped away. She took a deep breath and then said:

'...all my work was pioneering.'

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[144] Ms. F's response reflects Yang's (1999: 41) experience of conducting interviews on 'topics concerning gender' in China. Yang commented that participants 'reacted as if it were the first time they had thought of differences between women and men'.

[145] Ms. F's introduction to 'Christianity' when studying abroad is shared with other women in this study and is discussed in Section 5.2.

For Ms. F, the meaning she derived from her work meant that the more she did and the more experience she gained, the more she wanted to keep on doing it. I reflected that maybe this was why she was still offering her expertise to growing social organisations despite being retired – a suspicion that she confirmed at the end of our meeting. She presented her work as challenging and providing her with meaning on a daily basis:

> *'I just kept going and going, getting deeper and deeper into the work. It was always challenging and new.'*

She shared that time had moved so fast in her life, being involved in one project after another, never standing still. Ms. F shared that one of the most important things for her about working for the organisation was the creativity it enabled her to have. It gave her the opportunity to explore new methods and ideas without feeling stifled, especially in the early days. Secondly, she told me whilst making a point of looking intently into my eyes, that:

> *'[The RICO] gave me a platform. Without [them], I would have had no platform to make a difference.'*

She dropped her eyes, focusing on her coffee for a moment. When she looked up, she shared that through the platform that the RICO had given her she had been able not only to help mould what 'development' now means in China, but also to develop constantly as a person. She went on to say how incredibly moved she had been by the organisation's international partners who she feels answered a call to help serve the needs of people living in China over the past few decades. This help was not just financial, but also involved their professional commitment, values and capacity. Ms. F told me that she saw her role in the Protestant RICO as a 'channel' or a 'mediator' between their foreign partners and the communities she worked with on the ground in China. This position meant that she needed to develop the ability to be diplomatic and understanding of different situations and audiences in order to successfully deliver her projects. After all, some of them had been going on for nearly ten years. She gestures as she states with gravity:

> *'Relationships are the most important thing needed in order to get things done and make things happen. I have collected and maintained a lot of these relationships.'*

She told me about an experience in which she became aware that it was time to leave a specific project. One day one of the staff said: 'we love working for you'. This made her

realise that they thought of her as a kind of 'leader' and she hated this. She told them that, in fact, 'I am working for you and this community'. She let them know that she needed to leave but they did not want her to go. For her, it was so important that they were self-sufficient and 'sustainable' that it was the right time to leave, though. Here I asked her what 'community' means to her. She responded that the 'Chinese' had a habit of thinking about community in terms of geography when, in fact, it has many different levels.

> *'Of course, it is about the people. It could be a project or my partners', it could be urban or rural or an institution, but really what community means is a group of people bound by something. The work is like holding up a mirror and seeing myself reflected in it and knowing that I have done well.'*

She thought for a moment and then said that she came to the realisation that development would be a process that spans more than just one generation – 'over many there will be real and lasting change'. She says she can already see this; China is developing and the field of social welfare is changing, too. The knowledge being used in it is changing and starting to embrace international criteria, but these things take time to reach the levels where they are really needed because of strong cultural differences and expectations. In particular, she noted the expectation of Chinese children to be perfect and successful and how some cannot see the beauty in the people she has worked with. She said it will take time for attitudes to change, but she had already started to see this happen and it made her very happy. Our coffee had gone cold by this point and she seemed ready to leave, so we embraced awkwardly and parted ways down the winding side street that led to one of the city's busy main road.

Ms. F's career and experiences in the Protestant RICO presented the core theme of '*making connections*'. This emerged from how she came into initial contact with her RICO, as well as her first experiences with 'Christianity' whilst studying abroad. These initial connections mapped onto the experiences of the other women, across the two RICOs. However, it was the subthemes that were identified from the process of analysing her narrative that really spoke to the experiences of the other women and highlights not just how the women view the organisational culture of their RICO and what it offers them, but also how their work for it has relationally shaped their RICO. Therefore, the next section will discuss these experiences using the framework of '*bonds', 'binds'* and *'bridges'.*

6.2. Making Connections

Just like Ms. F, the majority of participants shared that they had initially been introduced to their RICO through personal 'weak ties', such as their spouse, parents and/or friends (Weller et al. 2017: 155).[146] The importance of these relationships for the Buddhist RICO was described as integral to their initial connection. Many of the women would share how the invitations extended to them by friends and/or family to attend an event – such as recycling, book reading or an end-of-year celebration – had played a role in how their search for meaning had developed. Many did not explicitly say that they had shared the narratives of conflicts that were discussed in Chapter Three with these relationships. However, some alluded to the fact that their friends had suggested that they 'come along' to an event to see if it would help, or by sharing that their own attendance had helped them become 'happier', 'calmer' and had gotten rid of their 'hot tempers' towards others.

This intimate connection is not representative of all participants, though. Many shared that they attended an 'exhibition on Buddhism'. Their narratives of conflict, particularly around the 'feminine ideal', acted as a catalyst for searching for events such as this. Many shared that they also attended a 'Buddhist temple' in their city, hoping that this would help with their feelings of being 'lost' and 'empty'. This also included a few of the women attending one-to-one classes with a Buddhist Master but explaining that they felt that this (much like Sister J's story in the previous chapter) only allowed them to see 'part of what Buddhism is'. For one of the women, the connection with the Buddhist RICO came out of their experiences in a local Buddhist temple where they had met a woman working for the organisation who recommended joining.

The experiences of the women making connection with the Protestant RICO in its first ten years reflect Weller et al.'s (2017: 155) discussion of 'strong ties' whereby the earliest members were introduced through a spouse or sibling who knew the founder of the organisation or one of the members of the initial staff. This differs to the participants who had joined in the past five years or so, with many being connected through 'weak ties' such as networking at conferences, colleagues of a friend or word of mouth as the reputation of the organisation grew (ibid). This was evidenced particularly by one woman who shared that she left her previous role in a secular social organisation and took a

[146] Various studies on women's experiences of religious organisations highlight the importance of relationships when making initial connections (Huang 2008; 2009; Cavaliere 2012; 2015; Starkey 2014; 2019; Weller et al. 2017).

demotion in order to work for a RICO that was 'so famous' and would help her achieve her ambitions. Quite a few of the other women had made their initial connection with the Protestant RICO through online job searches, propelled by the arising conflicts they had experienced in relation to previous workplaces. One of the women described their connection as 'accidental' because of them 'stumbling' across a job advert for a project manager role. However, she did reflect on how the conflicts in her previous workplace had made the advert 'stand out' to her amongst the other roles that were in a similar sector to the one she was unhappy in.

There are clear differences between the two RICOs in the way in which initial connections were made. For example, many women needed to go through a formal interview process before working at the Protestant RICO and were not necessarily introduced through 'strong' or 'weak' personal ties, whilst the majority of women first experienced the Buddhist RICO through participating in an activity such as recycling, book reading, or the organisation's end of year ceremony.[147]

The connections made by the women in the 'early days' of both RICOs supports Weller et al's (2017: 155) argument that these types of organisations are able to build on 'dormant ties of class and gender'.[148] The experiences of those in more recent years also gives credence to the conclusion that these initial connections reflected the desire for certain 'cosmopolitan and gender values' that are actively promoted by both RICOs.[149] For many of the women in the Buddhist RICO, their desire to 'seek out' this type of work was driven by wanting to contribute to society (especially retired women who no longer felt

[147] This difference is not clear cut with some women sharing that they 'came to know' about the Protestant RICO through their increasing presence at events promoting the charity sector such as dinners and fundraising events. However, this was not the main route for making their initial connection with their RICO, which was definitely the case with all of the women in the Buddhist RICO.

[148] In much the same way that the women's liberation movement of the 1980s was born out of the 'middle-classes', the earliest connections made by the women with both RICOs were achieved through their intimate, middle-class networks. This still holds true in many ways today but there is far more scope for women to join from other social classes. An example of this was shared in Section 4.2.1 when one of the women explained that she was not university educated and had 'little money' but that this had not stopped her working for the Buddhist RICO. I was also told by one of the female leaders in the Protestant RICO that one of the girls the organisation sponsored had gone on to study at university, had worked for them and was now engaged in philanthropy in China and beyond.

[149] Weller et al. (2017: 155) note that it is 'no coincidence' that these values fit in with those promoted by the CCP in order to "modernise' the philanthropic sector. The importance of values is discussed in further detail in Section 6.2.1.

'valuable'). In turn, this motivation was often specifically driven by a narrative of Chinese society as becoming more 'individualistic', 'selfish' and 'wasteful'. Many also favoured the organisation's educational programmes as well as their activities caring for the elderly. One woman shared that her friend had taken her to help at an 'elders' home' and it made her think about the fact that 'everyone is getting older' and how it is the responsibility of younger people to take care of the older generation.[150]

Another point of interest when examining *how* and *why* participants made their initial connections with their RICOs was how several women – across both RICOs – had sought out an organisation with 'religious roots' after coming back to China having studied and/or worked abroad for several years. This is demonstrated by Ms. F's who was 'introduced to Christianity' through fellow students on the university campus. It is an experience that is similar to that of other participants from the Protestant RICO – both older and younger members. It was also shared by Sister N who had been invited to Bible study whilst attending university abroad. The church had become a large part of her life, with her attending several times a week and all of her 'close friends' coming from the church. However, once she had returned to China, she had not had the same experience in the various churches she had 'tried out' in her city. She shared during our interview that

> *'you will find me an odd story – a 'myth' if you will. […] A Christian who turned Buddhist – can you believe it?!'*

Her narrative of converting from one tradition to another was unique among the participants but her engagement with a religious worldview whilst studying abroad and how this motivated her actions when back in China was similar to other women. Sister N's shared experiences of 'Christianity' whilst abroad exhibited similar elements to her current involvement in the Buddhist RICO where she takes part in various community activities every weekend alongside attending group Bible study. However, upon returning to China her experiences of church had been 'more individual' with an emphasis on keeping it 'within the walls of the church'. She discussed her 'becoming Buddhist' as a

[150] Once again, this reflected Weller et al.'s (2017: 155) argument that RICOs draw on 'dormant gender ties'. This is supported by studies that examine urban women's obligation to elderly care in contemporary China (Zhan, J. H., & Montgomery 2003; Cook & Dong 2011; Qi 2014).

process of understanding that 'death is not the goal' but rather a part of the process and finding the 'true understanding' of how to live.[151]

Whilst the experience of being 'introduced' to religion whilst studying abroad was not shared by all participants (a minority never having travelled abroad), the socioeconomic and educational background of the women involved in RICOs became more pronounced when examining how their initial connections were made. A few women who were in leadership positions in both RICOs spoke of how their RICOs attracted a 'certain kind of woman', especially the Protestant RICO. This 'woman' is a university graduate (if not postgraduate) from a middle-income family who has often travelled abroad and has acquired a variety of skills from other sectors such as business and finance. This may be more prominent overall in relation to the Protestant RICO, but the more formal the role in the Buddhist RICO the more the women approached this ideal. Whilst this was true for some participants, this was not the case overall. In fact, many were in their 20s and 30s and under the leadership of women who were not close to the legal retirement age. This somewhat supports the 'cosmopolitan values' argument put forward by Weller et al. (2017: 155) where the women's arising conflicts from Chapter Three fuel them to find workplaces and professional organisation structures that display these values.

Whilst the discussion on the importance of values is the focus of the next section, it is pertinent to mention how these played a role in the making of initial connections with both the RICOs. The connections often came about in a 'diffused' way, with women having experiences of 'Christian' values whilst abroad or from friends/family and this, in part, shaping how they came to view the Protestant RICO and the kind of work it would do (even if this was not known in detail yet). This is similar to the women's experiences from the Buddhist RICO whose initial connection was established by attending an event where they had met people who are 'kind-hearted', 'pure', 'generous' and 'kind'. Some shared that experiencing this was 'overwhelming' and is what made them decide to attend a second time. It was the people, rather than the work, that brought them in (Chen & Lu 2007: 425). The importance of values and shared identity is discussed in the next section.

[151] Sister H was one of only two Sisters who worked in official full-time roles for the Buddhist RICO and also demonstrated a desire to be fully ordained in the organisation's tradition (along with Sister N). This desire to 'ordain' was not shared by any other participants from the Buddhist RICO. Their experiences of the physical office-campus space are shared in Section 3.3. I have also noted that a focus on 'conversion narratives' could be an area of future research. More specific and detailed questions could be asked in order to reflect on the wider literature discussing religious conversion in contemporary China (Ng 2002; Yang, F. 1999; 2003).

I will examine how RICOs *bond* women together and what this can tell us about the organisational culture of RICOs in contemporary China.

6.2.1. Bonds – The Importance of Values

As briefly discussed in the previous section, the importance of 'values' is significant for all participants and played a key role in both *why* and *how* they made connections with their RICO. When I asked what core values the women thought the RICO encompassed, many did not mention specifics. Across both RICOs, women spoke of 'kindness', 'generosity' and 'love'.[152] The participants from the Buddhist RICO provided a bit more detail by speaking about the four key teachings of the RICO's leader with a focus on the importance of 'compassion' and 'contentment' in relation to self and others. Several women from the Protestant RICO explained that the core shared value of their organisation is to be 'love in action'. Otherwise, however, they spoke of their RICO's values in non-specific terms, such as 'I love [the RICOs] values', '[the RICO] instils good values in those who work for them' or 'I also agree with [the RICO's] values and this is why I chose to work for them'.

Having read Madsen's (2017) study on social workers in China and the importance they placed on values, both individually and for their profession, I had expected more of a response to my question in relation to values. For the Buddhist RICO, many women would instead spend more time discussing the links between their leader's teachings and the values it helped them cultivate as part of working for the organisation. The responses received from the Protestant RICO (as shared above) came from a group interview when I asked women from various departments about their work, motivations for choosing the RICO and what values were important to them. Their reaction, at the time, had shocked me. Initially I thought I had incorrectly asked my question in Mandarin.[153] The woman who was participating but also acting as translator threw her arms up in the air and laughed. Three of the other women also laughed quietly alongside her. They just said,

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[152] Discussions on the use of 'love' in both RICO and official public discourse is examined in Section 6.3.

[153] I had used the term '*jiazhiguan'* that Madsen (2017) used in his unpublished article. The implications of using this term are discussed in this section. Despite the other reasons I discuss in this section, there is a chance that my question had been 'lost in translation' and would have produced different results if asked by a researcher fluent in Mandarin. However, the woman translating was fluent in English to a very high level and works on the RICO's international programmes with foreign – English speaking – volunteers, so I think that this explanation of the results is unlikely.

'We have been asked and told a lot recently about what our values are. We have thought about it a lot recently.'

I could sense they were uncomfortable to say more and none took me up on my offer to communicate more on the subject via WeChat at a later point.[154] In 2017, official public discourse had focused a lot on the 'core socialist values' including the role of the individual citizen in achieving the nation's 'Chinese Dream' (Gow 2017). The interviews conducted by Madsen (2017) had been done in 2015 and since then there had been highly visual campaigns on what 'values' are important for the modern Chinese citizen (ibid; Gow 2017). Some argue that, in particular, they promoted particular gender norms for Chinese women and men (Hird 2017; Hong-Fincher 2018). However, I would argue in a similar manner as (Madsen 2017) that the women's values towards how to deliver effective social work was not derived from 'propaganda or official speeches' but rather from their 'training and experiences that constitut[e] their way of life'.

All the women – across both RICOs – spoke of how the values of the organisation had not just been the initial reason for joining, but also for what they had experienced since working there. The values demonstrated to them by colleagues had helped *bond* them, with several women from both RICOs speaking of the 'spirit' of their organisation and how this made it such a different workplace to the ones they had experienced before. On different occasions women expressed this sentiment with tears, often falling silent after a period of reflection on their careers in the RICO.[155] One woman in particular spoke of how the 'spirit' of the organisation had been the 'final piece of the puzzle' in understanding what her 'calling' in life was, finally knowing how to properly implement her faith into practice.

Amongst these general responses to questions specifically asking about the RICO's values, as well more general questions on their motivations for choosing to work for a RICO, there were three main areas to which the women related the topic of values: 1) the culture of the workplace, 2) the nature of the work and how it is delivered by colleagues and 3) how this allows for the transmission of these values into wider society.

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[154] This suggestion speaks to my inexperience as an interviewer in the field and is something that, upon reflection, I would not have asked had I thought it through properly and not been so nervous about conducting a group interview.

[155] See Huang's (2003a) study of women's emotions within the religiously inspired charitable sector. Whilst her work discusses 'weeping' in response to the charisma of their organisation's leader and the individual suffering of members, it reflects some of the emotive responses experienced by my participants when reflecting on their careers in the RICOs.

The culture of the workplace was described as particularly 'feminine', with women from both RICOs commenting how it was 'good for women'. In relation to the Protestant RICO, several women spoke about how the work culture meant that they no longer felt that the private and public spheres of their lives were fractured and the arising conflicts between work and family explored in Chapter Three no longer being an issue in their daily lives.

Ms. Q from the Protestant RICO gave the example of a woman's child becoming sick. If this were to happen, she feels that the RICO would provide a space in which a woman is not being punished professionally and is instead met with understanding from male and female leadership. This is not reflective of her time in the private sector where she had felt personally punished if her home life had impacted upon work. She described the work culture for the Protestant RICO as a 'positive climate towards women', especially in relation to pregnancy. She shared that the culture means that women can become pregnant and be open about it within the workplace without fear of repercussions. She shared that you can arrive to meetings with a 'big oversized belly' and it is not an issue; there is no stigma attached to it. For Ms. Q this stigma was felt by a lot of the women in the RICO, herself included, in their previous workplaces in the private sector. This meant that, for Ms. Q, the culture of RICOs is particularly attractive for women because the double burden of work and home are somewhat eased. This is especially the case in terms of the gender discrimination experienced in subtle forms such as not being promoted as a result of a perceived lack of productivity (Cook & Xiao 2015). She commented that even though this is not 'something' (meaning having children) that is desired by all the women in the organisation, it means that:

'there are not two distinct spheres of my life that don't impact on one another.'

The work culture of the Protestant RICO as being 'good for women' is discussed further in Sections 6.2.2, 6.2.3 and 6.3, but it demonstrates here that the change in the values when joining the Protestant RICO helped 'ease' the conflicts experienced by the women in previous workplaces. Irrespective of whether they wanted to have children or not, all of them felt *bonded* to the values of the organisation because they were 'good for women'.

My interviews with all of the women demonstrated that the values of the organisation impact not just the nature of the work that is conducted, but also *how* it is done by colleagues. It makes the women feel that they are bonded to each other in a shared

understanding of what the work means for them and wider society.[156] What is interesting for the part of my framework that analyses the organisational culture of RICOs and women's experiences of them, is the way that the participants saw the qualities needed for this 'type' of work and delivering it effectively as 'feminine'. This was one of the main reasons shared by women across both RICOs for why women were so attracted to working in charity – their ability to be empathetic, to listen and to care. The gendered implications of this were explored in Section 5.1 when discussing the embodied practices of care demonstrated primarily by the women in the Buddhist RICO, but also in the Protestant one. There were some clear differences in how this was described across the two RICOs. The feminine qualities were mainly emphasised by the Buddhist RICO with many wishing to live up to the 'feminine ideal'. For those in the Protestant RICO, on the other hand, it was more about how that 'feminine ideal' was about easing the tension in the workplace environment by reducing the 'harms' of separating production from social reproduction, including stigma surrounding pregnancy and women's productivity (Elias & Rai 2019; see also Yang 2012; Cooke & Xiao 2014; Xie, K. 2019).

The final way women described the importance of values in their RICOs was the ability to 'transmit' these to wider society. In the case of the Protestant RICO, women recounted how local communities saw members of the RICO as different to other NGO workers (reflected in Ms. F's narrative), even though there was never any evangelising whilst working (this point was made very clear to me by several women). The values of the Protestant RICO – encompassed in the idea of its 'spirit' and mission of 'love in action' – are embodied by those that work for it and the women shared that this is vital when doing 'development work correctly'. This is something that their RICO can uniquely offer them. For example, for Ms. W, the 'spirit' of the organisation was displayed most when visiting a community during or after the implementation of a development project. She recalled one occasion when she had spoken to the 'village head' and asked what the organisation's greatest contribution had been to their community. He told her that it had been their 'loving spirit' demonstrated by staff living and 'suffering' alongside them and not accepting any gifts. On this particular occasion, the 'village head' had shared this with her in front of a local official and even pointed out that their staff had put the local government 'to shame'. The intensity of his feelings had shocked her, especially when shared in front of an official. She felt the depth of his respect and admiration for the RICO's staff and their 'loving spirit'. At this moment Ms. W's eyes started tearing up and

[156] This will be explored in more detail in Section 5.2.2.

she shared that she had cried in the past when recollecting this moment of appreciation from the 'village head'.

Quite a few women in the Buddhist RICO spoke of how the values cultivated in the organisation can act as a 'soft power' in showing others how to live 'correctly' in China. One woman, despite no longer working for the Buddhist RICO, shared that it had been the values of the RICO that had drawn her in because the 'spirit' of the organisation caters to both 'the heart and mind'. She told me that this created members who would never give up in the face of adversity and who would associate with others in their daily lives who also embraced these important values. For her, the RICO functions as a method to provide younger generations with much needed guidance on the values needed for Chinese society to prosper. She feels that without it they cannot possibly understand the hardship their 'elders' have experienced. This can be transmitted to them either by engaging with the organisation directly and coming to know and understand the teachings of its leader, or through the transmission of these values from their parents who are involved in the organisation. Her, and another woman, spoke of how this is done through their 'cultural activities' such as tea ceremonies and celebration of Mother's Day. For Sister H, this taught their members how to

> *'be human, how to be a woman and how to be a man, how to communicate, reach out, build relationships and go beyond technology.'*

This focus on their RICO acting as a form of dissemination of its core values was shared by the women in the Protestant organisation. This includes Ms. M's sharing that her involvement in her RICO had not just helped her develop her own understanding of what values are important but also did this for her son. However, where the two contrast is in the discussion of 'how' these values should change others. Ms. M spoke of the want for her son to understand the suffering of others living in China and the privilege that his life has. She also spoke of how her son's experience of working there had helped him to develop care towards others, as well as a deeper understanding of what 'social justice' should look like in Chinese society. However, the example I gave above from the Buddhist RICO focuses on promoting 'correct' practices of filial obligation towards kin, as well as promoting 'traditional Chinese practices' such as tea ceremonies in younger generations. And yet, this also asks for them to provide embodied practices of care beyond intimate connections but also towards 'strangers' (as discussed in Chapter Three; also see Laliberte 2003; 2012; Chau 2019: 155-158).

Both RICOs provide an organisational culture that 'bonds' women working for them through their core values. These values are rooted in the religious traditions that each RICO is 'inspired' by but are often utilised as 'bonds' through their use of common language such as 'love', 'compassion' and 'care'. In doing so, women – irrespective of whether they identify as 'religious' – will speak of their RICO's organisational 'spirit'' and how this is what uniquely fosters their relationships with each other, as well as with those they provide services for. With this in mind, I will examine how RICOs 'bind' the women working for them to various sections of society, fostering trust up and down the 'social ladder' and potentially creating new forms of social capital for all involved (Weller et al. 2017: 152).

6.2.2. Binds – Fostering Relationships, Fostering Trust

I made the decision to use the term 'binds' rather than 'links' / 'linkages' / 'ties' which is standardly adopted by the wider literature on social capital (see Paxton 1999; Zhou 2000; Fang 2002; Chen & Lu 2007) based on reading Chau's (2019) study on religion in China.[157] Chau (2019: 3-4) argues that 'relationality' is at the heart of understanding 'crucial aspects of Chinese society' including religion. What is of note for this thesis is how he links this to a discussion on *guanxi* (social relationship), arguing that the 'religious realm is one of the most crucial arenas where *guanxi* is played out'– it is what *binds* people together (ibid: 4). How this manifest within RICOs and the particular implications it has for women is, therefore, the focus of this section.

In Ms. F's narrative in Section 5.1, the importance of social relationships and trust in her work was paramount to the success of a RICO programme and her own professional development. When mapped onto the other women's experiences, her narrative reflected their views and there were clear similarities when it came to discussions on how these relationships were fostered. The ability to work with communities other than their own was viewed by many women as a relational process where they gained as much from the experience as those who were users of their RICOs programmes.[158] Ms. W explored this when sharing her experiences of how the 2008 Szechuan earthquake had been handled by her RICO, noting how staff lived with the community for over 18 months after the

[157] This is discussed in further detail in Chapter Two where I outlined my theoretical lens.
[158] The idea of cultivation of self and others was explored in further detail in Chapter Four. Here I am examining whether or not, by fostering these reciprocal relationships, women in RICOs are able to develop greater or new forms of social capital in contemporary Chinese society; forms that would not have been available to them by working in other organisations.

disaster. She spoke of how reconstruction had been 'participatory' where the community were a core part of decision-making processes. A requirement of the Protestant RICO was to have consulting panels of community members during a project such as this one. Ms. W made a point of saying how her RICO makes sure to have gender-parity whenever they set up these types of panels in project sites.

The participatory nature of their work was shared by the women in the Protestant RICO with many noting that through their work, they were able to see how people came together. One of the women whose work involves conducting training and 'capacity building' in local churches throughout Huadong described her work as providing the local community with the necessary skills and knowledge to do 'God's work' and *bind* people together, irrespective of their social status and economic situation.[159] The participatory nature of their work was shared by women from the Buddhist RICO who held full time positions with the organisation – Sister N and Sister H. They both explained how their approach placed the needs of the community at the centre and that their members were always aware of this when undertaking work for them. Two other Sisters told me that their first experience of working after a natural disaster had been the 2008 Szechuan earthquake and that it had taught them that this kind of work was not just about the delivery of services, but also about taking care of the 'whole person'.[160] Women in both RICOs shared how, without this element, there cannot be a fostering of 'authentic relationships' and there cannot be trust between those involved.

Various women spoke of how their work in the RICO had developed their own skills in knowing how to foster these relationships and gain the trust of others, no matter what 'section of society they are from'. For Ms. L, her work in the Protestant RICO had provided her with the opportunity to do work in 'rural areas' where she could be 'hands-on' and see the immediate impact of her work. This feeling was shared by a newer member of the Protestant RICO who said that the programmes that she works on are:

> *'small in scale but are very important in the impact they have for others.'*

[159] In the interview, the participant used the word 'bind', and this fed into my initial analysis process when mapping Ms. F's experiences onto the other women's.

[160] Many of the women working for the Buddhist RICO (those who are not in full-time formal positions) will have self-funded their trip to Szechuan in order to provide relief in the wake of the disaster. It is a requirement of the RICO that members save enough money in order to be available to conduct at least one trip every three years.

Another woman from the same RICO commented that she loves that her job gives her the ability to 'work with a range of people – not just rich or poor but a variety of different people who have different perspectives on life'. This sentiment was supported by another woman who said that the ongoing communication she has with the children in their rural education programme is the 'emotional pull' that is central to her work.

Another key theme was the ability for RICOs to *bind* women into 'channels of power' that they perceived to have been closed to them before they joined (Weller et al. 2017). This was particularly prevalent from women working for the Protestant RICO whose work in the PRC has grown exponentially over the past three decades. Various participants discussed how their work with the Protestant RICO has seen them foster relationships with local officials which have allowed them to 'change attitudes' towards marginalised communities in China. When speaking about women in other social organisation in the city, Ms. L said they struggled with the 'male culture' of local government and the meetings that they have to attend in order to gain approval for their work. She shared that women who have previous experience of government – either through work or personal relationships – find it a lot easier to navigate this 'male behaviour'.[161] She argues that this kind of 'male-dominated bonding' often acts as a barrier to women's advancement in these environments (Tsang et al. 2011: 320). Many of the women working for the Protestant RICO have previous or current experience of working in governmental positions.[162] Furthermore, the women are able to develop confidence in knowing how to negotiate these environments thanks to the support of their RICO. The nature of the women's relationships with local officials is viewed as reciprocal in nature, mutually beneficial and often shaped just as much by the women's views and work as by those holding a government position (Chau 2019: 4)

6.2.3. Bridges – Female Leadership, Mentorship and Partnership

When examining RICOs as 'bridges' for women working for them, it became clear how important female leadership and mentorship were. These bridges included local, national and global partnerships - in some cases these were exclusively between women - but also comprised of their RICO's general organisational partnerships.

'How do we evaluate female success? As a boss? That is not possible.'

[161] She uses the example of smoking and drinking during meetings as examples of 'male behaviour'.

[162] Both formal and consultative positions.

The above was said to me by Ms. Q as she spoke about her previous experience in the private sector during our interview in the Protestant RICO office. Ms. Q shared that she found it impossible to evaluate her own personal success in her previous work as she had no examples of female leadership. Even if there was a woman in a position of leadership, she would not have had direct contact with them. This is in direct contrast to what she has experienced since working at the Protestant RICO. Ms. Q started as a project manager on small-scale projects in rural parts of China where she was involved in finding local resources and support for the projects as well as building good relationships with local government officials.[163] Her role in the organisation evolved over time and eventually she was placed into a 'student leader' role. As part of this, Ms. Q told me, she focused on the management of an aspect of the organisation and delivering a 'whole organisation' objective, rather than the success of one particular project. She commented that this 'student leader' role was often assigned to women in the RICO in order to develop them further. Ms. Q now heads up a department that she views as a 'very pioneering area' in which she can build on her previous relationships and networks whilst also developing her own skills.[164] For Ms. Q, as was similarly expressed in Ms. F's narrative, the RICO provides a 'wide space' to have ideas and she feels encouraged in the environment to try and test them and 'grow as a person' in doing so. Ms. Q told me that she has felt 'mentored' and supported by women since she began at her RICO and this is now a role she fulfils for the women who work for her, and whom she mentors as a female leader in the organisation.

The importance of mentorship and working under female leaders was also something felt by the younger women I spoke to. Ms. S, a younger staff member, noted that her work with Ms. F provided her with the opportunity to learn on the job because it allowed a bottom-up participatory approach to development projects. Ms. F's mentorship had given her experience of an approach that she feels is vital in social welfare in China and allowed her to see how to do it first-hand. One of the women in the Protestant RICO also spoke about being mentored by more experienced women in her department. They taught her new things daily and she could see how they had developed within the organisation, providing what she called a 'vision' for what she could achieve. The other women in the organisation acted as a reflection for her in this space. She also told me about meeting a

[163] This is explored in relation to all of the women's experiences in both RICOs in Section 5.2.2.
[164] This department is examined in more detail in Section 6.2.1.

woman at a large conference she had attended as part of her work, who told her that only through constant learning and improvement in her organisation would she be given

'space to tell her story and have a voice'

and for her

'it is very important to achieve this.'

She had not experienced this in her previous workplace and could now imagine possibilities in her future that had not been there before. These feelings were shared by the women working in full-time roles in the Buddhist RICO, especially those working on large-scale projects such as service delivery to northern parts of rural China. In comparison to the other organisation, the Buddhist RICO was founded by a woman and has always had a majority female membership, including various leadership positions.[165] Women with experience mentor newer members in much the same way as in the other RICO but there is more of an emphasis on learning the teachings of their leader, as well as on how to complete the various tasks involved.[166] Whilst there are specific positions intended for men and for women in the Buddhist RICO, which call for different responsibilities, this gendered divide in roles rarely plays out in everyday practice.[167] Whilst the Protestant RICO's local, national and global partnerships are with other organisations,[168] the Buddhist RICO branches I visited in the PRC can tap into the other national and international branches it has. The women shared with me that they felt they were part of a 'large network' and as though they knew hundreds of people despite never having met a lot of them. Sister N commented to me that before working for the Buddhist RICO 'many women's lives are small' and that the organisation expands their world 'by a million' because the '[RICO] network' means they are able to achieve and 'tap into' so

[165] The attraction of the female leader is felt by members irrespective of geographical distance thanks to her 'gendered charisma' (Huang 2008; 2009; Weller et al. 2017: 162).The term was coined in the work of Huang (2008; 2009) and later used by Weller et al. (2017: 152-162) to examine the social capital of organisations such as RICOs in contemporary Chinese societies.

[166] This is explored in more detail in Section 4.2.

[167] This is also reflected in Brummans et al (2019)'s study of work roles in the Buddhist Compassion Tzu-Chi Foundation (see also Huang 2009; Huang et al. 2011). However, whilst this relates to how some work in the organisation is undertaken, this does not reflect the differences in how women choose to study the teachings of the leader, nor the prevalence of women being involved in work that is done during the day such as visits to care homes. Women's use of various spaces is further explored in Section 4.2.1.

[168] Although this is changing with the opening of two new offices abroad as part of the RICO's 'internationalisation process'.

much more. The women's connections with other branches, however, are often maintained face-to-face at annual training seminars, including those held at the Buddhist RICO head office where many get the opportunity to 'meet' their leader in person.[169] A few discussed (in the same way as Ms. F) that this provides them with a 'platform' not just to learn from other countries, but to also to relationally share their expertise.[170]

6.3. RICOs as 'Capacity'?

The above discussion of women's experiences in RICOs, through a framework of *bonds, binds* and *bridges,* demonstrates that there are innovative formations of social capital takings place in RICOs that have implications for the women who work for them (Weller et al. 2017).[171] Once connected with the RICOs, women are able to mobilise older and newer forms of social capital which would not have been possible in other work environments. The networks of the RICOs provide women with the forms of social capital that come from working for large-scale organisations that have access to channels of official power that may have been closed off to them otherwise (Lin 2000: 787). This social capital, built into the organisational structures of both RICOs, presented a capacity-building potential for women because it enabled them to hold leadership positions. This is unlike in the private sector where, both academic studies and the women themselves reported, this is harder for women to attain (Cook et al. 2015; Zuo 2016 Hizi 2018: 302-303).

Women from both RICOs discussed these forms of gender discrimination and lack of mobilisation in their previous workplaces (Entwistle & Henderson 2000; Cook et al. 2015; Zuo 2016; Xie, K 2019). They also described the burden of the 'feminine ideal' and how it manifested as feelings of failure in relation to caring roles and expectations.[172] However, they shared that, in their RICOs they had found an organisational culture that is 'feminine' because it is 'good for women'. For the women in this study, their RICO ensures that the spatial fractures that occur when they are asked to choose between the 'inner' and 'outer' spheres of their lives were not necessarily present (Yang 1999a; Jaschok & Shui 2011; Zuo 2016). Within RICOs, 'social reproduction' is considered a

[169] The women I talked with, who had taken part in these events, shared that they had not spoken to the leader personally but had rather been in the audience when she was presenting or had been in the crowd when she 'walked among them'.

[170] Examples of this and their possible implications, are discussed in Section 6.2.

[171] I claim this whilst recognising that the forms of social capital produced within RICOs can have 'both the advantages and limitations' of other manifestations (Weller et al. 2017: 175).

[172] As discussed in Section 3.2.2 and 3.2.3.

part of the 'everyday' so that women are able to let their home and work overlap with one another (Elias & Rai 2019). In many ways, this means that RICOs act as a form of capacity for the women who work for them. It gives them the capacity to undertake meaningful work that they did not experience in previous workplaces without having to sacrifice the needs of their families.

This, in many ways, reinforces the gendered 'feminine ideal' that is perpetuated by official and public discourse, as well as by their familial relationships (Yang, M.M.H 1999b; Du & Dong 2010; Hong-Fincher 2013; 2014). However, I would argue that it provides them with the capacity to partake in both their family and work lives, without having to give up one for the other, in order to alleviate the arising conflicts that occur when trying to spatially divide them (ibid; Zuo 2016: 158). There were exceptions to this, with one woman sharing that she was not sure how she would continue her current role after having a second child (Hong-Fincher 2018b). The women are, to a certain extent, still subject to the gendered social expectations that occur outside the space of their RICOs and that impact the societal conventions on who should provide care and that create a double burden for women (Cook & Dong 2011; Zuo 2016).

The women's description of their RICO's organisational culture as 'feminine' was tied to the values of the organisation that helped *bond* those within it. The women often said that the values of 'love', 'kindness' and 'generosity' promoted an environment of care and understanding that was not just 'good for women' but also meant that the work was intrinsically 'feminine'.[173] This was contrasted with other workplaces that were described as 'male-dominated' or as having a 'masculine culture'. The *bonds* created by the organisational values of their RICO did not just impact the conflicts in the women's everyday when the 'inner' and 'outer' are kept separate (Cook & Dong 2011; Elias & Rai 2019), but also provided a work environment that drew upon, what they saw as, uniquely 'feminine gifts' and their skills as women – skills that are often ignored or seen as 'bad for business'. RICOs, described by the participants as a 'feminine culture', provide a 'healthier' environment that 'fosters compassion', reduces 'levels of stress' and allows 'their individual and collective actions' to have an impact in the capacity of others

[173] Weller et al. (2017: 175) argue that the values of organisations such as RICOs should be considered 'morally neutral' in that they can be utilised merely 'socially' rather than 'religiously'. However, my discussion builds on their examination, not just of how gender will inform women's experiences of the organisations (as well as wider society), but also of how the women themselves have described the RICOs' values as 'feminine'.

(Brummans et al. 2019: 159).[174] This is not one-sided with many of the women noting that this organisation culture is attractive to women who are highly-educated, skilled and 'cosmopolitan' (Weller et al. 2017: 133). These women have pioneered the development practices that have shaped how both RICOs operate within Chinese society (Weller et al. 2017: 113). This means that the work done for wider communities is a participatory, relational process that seeks to 'build capacity' for all involved. Women in the Protestant RICO shared that this often directly impacted other women who suffer from intersectional forms of marginalisation in Chinese society.[175]

6.4. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine, firstly, how the women's initial connections with their RICO were made and, secondly, what this could tell us about their mobilisation of 'social capital' (Chen & Lu 2007; Weller et al 2017; Chau 2019). Ms. F's narrative demonstrated that after the initial connection had been made, she had been *bonded* to the Protestant RICO because of its organisational values. Her ongoing work with various communities fostered *binds* founded upon trust and mutual respect. Her narrative also demonstrated how her RICO had acted as a 'platform' for her career, creating opportunities and the capacity to become an expert and leader in her field. The Protestant RICO was relationally shaped by her skills and expertise and the capacity she brought to them as well. This was also evident in the capacity-building that was provided by the RICO and the women working for them to various communities.

Ms. F's story mapped onto the other women's experiences and, with the help of the *bonds, binds* and *bridges* framework utilised in this chapter, I was able to demonstrate the relational and dynamic way that RICOs, the women working for them and the partnerships they are involved in, produced new and innovative forms of social capital. This provides a particularly 'feminine culture' that is 'good for women' and that, on the whole, allows women not having to separate the 'inner' and 'outer' spheres of their lives. In doing so, this chapter is able to add to the diverse literature that currently examines 'modern' manifestations of 'social capital' in China (Chen & Lu 2007; Weller et al. 2017). It also provides support for studies arguing that current organisational cultures in China's private sector foster practices of gender discrimination which are detrimental to

[174] Achieved through 'hard' and 'soft' skilful means (Jaschok & Shui 2000).

[175] This will be examined further in Section 7.3 as evidence for women in RICOs *organising* for social change and indirectly having an impact on the socioeconomic development of women in China more broadly.

women because they lack an understanding that social reproduction *is* the everyday and has gendered consequences (Elias & Rai 2019). The implications of these findings demonstrate how RICOs can offer a 'capacity' for the women who work for them, as well as for women in wider society through its programmes, networks and partnerships (Brummans et al. 2019). It is here that a particular statement made by Ms. F's becomes pertinent,

> *'...over many [generations] there will be real and lasting change.'*

What is the impact of women's work in RICOs? Do these *bonds, binds* and *bridges* create sustainable social change? If so, can this be conceptualised as a form of activism? Are women *organising* for social change through RICOs? These questions remain and are the focus of the next chapter.

7. Women in RICOs and Everyday Activism

The previous chapter examined how RICOs act as mobilisers of old and new forms of social capital for the women who work for them. In this discussion the women's want for social change emerged from their experiences and narratives. This can also be seen in the way they negotiated the various (physical) spaces of Chapter Four and spoke of their RICO's 'values' and the impact that these can have on individuals and wider society. Therefore, in this chapter I will argue that the women's work is part of an ongoing 'cognitive praxis' that seeks to develop new forms of knowledge and practice in the field of development in contemporary China as well as globally (Hsiung et al. 2001; see also Fielder 2019a). This will be achieved through a discussion of the varying ways this 'everyday activism' is done by switching scales between very localised micro-expressions, national and international programmes. In general, the study of the 'everyday' and 'activism' are separate to one another, with the former being associated with 'the mundane, the routine and the hidden' and the latter seen as 'public, explicit, explosive' (Pink 2012: 4). However, drawing from Pink's (2012: 4-5) conceptualisation of 'everyday activism', I will argue that the everyday is a space in which 'human creativity, innovation and change' occurs. This allows for 'activism' to be conceptualised as not only having an impact on the everyday, but also enables us to see women 'doing activism' in the activities, places and spaces of daily life where the importance of the local is not lost (ibid: 5). In doing so, we can move beyond the binary of struggle and resistance in order to see where change can ignite (ibid).

This chapter is made up of three main sections. The first introduces the life and career of Ms. M whose narrative presents the key themes that emerged when mapping her experiences onto those of the other women. This leads into an examination of the various forms of work that the women undertake in their daily lives, which will be understood as 'everyday activism' (Pink 2012). After a broader discussion, I will focus on two local forms of their activism by investigating the 'incubator' developed by the Protestant RICO and the 'environmental protection' strategies put in place by local branches of the Buddhist RICO. I will conclude by arguing that women are 'organising' through RICOs in order to achieve their vision of a 'good society' (Milwertz 2002: 10; see also Christen-Ruffman 1995: 374; Weller et al. 2017).

7.1. Ms. M: 'we are the body of the organisation'

I had initially met Ms. M in Spring of 2017. The small curving street in which the office of the Protestant RICO sits is a blur of bright colours and amazing smells from the mixture of tiny clothing boutiques, hole-in-the-wall restaurants, and a small primary school opposite with its walls rising up slightly to hide it away from the busyness outside. I arrived at the gates that I would soon become very familiar with, staring at the beautiful house rising up from behind it. It had been gifted to the organisation with a more recent extension that housed the main offices for employees hiding in the back. Ms. M met me on the steps, smiling and inviting me for a tour of the building. Even on this first meeting she made the extra effort to tell me in detail about the history of the organisation, the work they were currently doing and what departments were working where.

On our second meeting at the same office she would embrace me in a hug before accepting my gift of fruit and leading me through some of the rooms I had come to know well by now. She opened a side door and we entered one of the meeting rooms, a big solid wood table in between us. I think she could sense that I was nervous and started talking immediately, telling me what she had heard from other women I had spoken to and how it made her reflect more on her experiences. She shared with me that she had been born into, what she called, a 'strong Christian family' with a grandfather who had been a pastor in the church. The church had therefore been a big part of her upbringing, despite what she termed the 'conflicting messages' she would receive about religion from school and the narratives about missionaries who were only in China to hurt people and destroy their way of life. However, her grandfather would share very different stories of compassion, love and the caring nature of missionaries. Despite causing, what she called, a 'conflict in her heart' when she was young, her faith had 'taken root' and she had become an adult who being a Christian was important for.

Graduating firstly from a bachelor's in theology and then an MBA in Business and Finance, Ms. M reflected how often people would comment on the bizarre mix of education she had undertaken. For these people, these two areas of study bore no similarity and yet, for Ms. M, they were the perfect fit:

'It was part of God's plan for me.'

This plan begun to be realised fully when she had started working for the organisation and all elements of her education could be used in her work. In a similar way to other women in this study (explored in Chapter Three) she had worked for another large

company before joining the RICO and had felt a lack of purpose and inner conflict from the kind of work it entailed and the culture of the work environment. She had worked for her RICO for twenty years now and smiles broadly as she shares this with me:

'I can see that my projects can change people's lives.'

She had originally worked in one of the organisation's educational projects before focusing on projects providing help for communities impacted by the spread of HIV/AIDs and women's health. She then became leader of the division that focuses on education and international exchange. She shares with me that without her work in the RICO she would not have known the 'real picture of suffering in China' and about the communities that 'had almost given up hope'. She placed two hands on the table, one over the other, and looked intently at me:

'The work has had a real impact… in many small, small ways.'

At this, she explains that she believes women make a unique and great contribution to the 'civil society' of China,[176] because they are the majority of the workforce:

'women are the bodies of these organisations.'

Whilst reflecting on this, she tells me that this does not stop male-dominated leadership. This is also true for the voices heard at conferences and workshops on social work, despite the actual 'grassroots work' being done every day by women. Ms. M thinks that the organisation attracts women who are highly educated and use this education and their abilities to design and implement a lot of their successful projects. She comments that women are more equipped for this type of work as the 'gifts' they have been given by God – such as being caring and sympathetic – are perfectly matched for it.

I ask her what she thinks has been the impact of her work. She takes a pause before answering that she feels she has gained far more from the organisation than she has given. She speaks of how the RICO works with people in the most marginalised and suffering communities in China, raising her arms gently into the air:

'[The RICO] holds them up… up, up, up.'

[176] The term 'civil society' remains a contested term in scholarship on China. For full discussions see Madsen 1993; Chamberlain 1993; Ma 1994; Howell 1995; Ming 2011; Shieh & Deng 2011. For discussions on the role of religiously inspired charitable organisations in shaping civil society see Fielder 2012; 2016.

And yet, one of the greatest impacts has been seeing how these communities have collaborated, utilising the gifts she believes God has given them:

> *'They can create their own future; they are the owner of it. It is the only way to make sustainable change.'*

She goes on to say that these collaborations have also helped change the minds of local government officials who had written these communities off and seen them as worthless. She calls this a 'side effect' of her work. It gives power back to these communities, providing them with a voice with government and a space for recognising their abilities. This 'side effect' of the work done by the RICO is the most valuable element of all:

> *'This long-lasting change in attitude is far more precious than any money that can be given.'*

Another impact, she tells me, has been the way in which she has raised her son. As a teenager she had organised for him to volunteer for the organisation in his school holidays. He was tasked with making data entries for their orphan education programme in rural China. She said that this raised many questions for her son, asking how it was possible for people to earn as little as eight hundred yuan a year (around £95). She explained to him that this level of poverty exists in China and that other people's lives are very different to their own:

> *'China is not all the same. Its parts are so very different.'*

This experience provided her son with different stories and realities of people's lives across China. Ms. M reflects that it helped her son realise that not everyone's lives are the same as theirs and how lucky they are. She beams with pride when she tells me this, adding that this work and the environment it fosters at home has made her son a better person. They are not a family to shy away from discussions on important topics, even if they don't agree with one another. For her, this helps them to grow and understand the realities of China better.

She takes a breath and tells me that her RICO is an example of God's work in China. Even though church is where God's words are usually shared, the work done in this organisation means they are:

> *'God's instrument to do good things. [The RICO] belongs to God and as staff, we are just His instrument.'*

She ends our conversation by telling me that she holds on to this thought especially at times when she personally does not feel like she measures up or has made a mistake. This helps her understand that, irrespective of how she is feeling or the mistakes she may have made,

'God knows my intentions and why I do what I do.'

Ms. M's experiences presented the theme of 'creating change' as a core aim for her work in the Protestant RICO, as well as demonstrating that this took place at varied scales as part of an ongoing 'cognitive praxis' (Hsiung et al. 2001). Therefore, I will now examine how this took place across both RICOs and how the work of the women involved can be viewed women *organising* for social change in contemporary China, and more broadly.

7.2. Creating Change, Switching Scales

'We can let the things that hurt us, destroy us. We can moan and whine about how unfair things are or how we hurt on the inside or we can take and do things to make it positive – like work in philanthropy, to do social work. These things will create change, even in small ways, for society.'

The above was said to me by a participant from the Protestant RICO. When we met in 2017 she had only been working for the RICO for a year.[177] She was the participant to have taken a de facto demotion from her previous job in order to work for this organisation. In her view, the 'famous' nature of the RICO would mean that not only could it act as a platform for her but also for wider society in China and abroad. The desire for 'sustainable' social change was shared by all of the women interviewed across both RICOs.[178] For those women whose motivations had not been centred on a desire for social change when initially joining the RICO, it was a goal that became vital to *why* they now do the work and what they want to see happen in the future. The work that they described as 'creating change' is taking place at various scales from highly localised micro-expressions to those with national and global impact. By examining the ongoing process of 'switching scales' that occurs in the work done by

[177] Since then she has been promoted to a Project Manager within the Protestant RICO.

[178] The term 'sustainable' was used more by women in the Protestant RICO, especially those in leadership positions and/or who had a research role in the organisation. It was, however, also used by both Sister N and Sister H who are in charge of some of the Buddhist RICO's large-scale projects and evaluation processes in the PRC. For discussions on what is meant by 'sustainable development' see Daly, H. E. 1990; Dodds et al., 2016. This includes literature that focuses on the role of faith actors and/or religion in delivering the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 (Johnston 2010; Sdibe 2016; Tomalin et al. 2019).

RICOs, this thesis can take into account various expressions of 'everyday activism' by the women involved (Pink 2012: 4-5; Kong & Woods 2017: 10-13). It will also demonstrate how this process provides innovation as new forms of knowledge and work are created, tested, revised and enacted (ibid: 60). A key example of this ongoing praxis is the transnational partnership between two colleagues in the Protestant RICO. Dr. X is based in the organisation's office in Huadong and is responsible for developing new programmes in the province.[179] Ms. K is based in the Protestant RICO's new European office that only opened a few years ago. Their research partnership, and self-confessed friendship, focuses on Ms. K sourcing new knowledge, policy and practice taking place within the field of development in Europe.[180] It is then the role of Dr. X to 'localise' any concepts, ideas or practices shared by Ms. K. The plausibility of a project is decided after conducting focus groups in local communities in order to see whether it could address real local needs. Despite their enthusiasm for various projects in the past, there have been cultural and institutional challenges when trying to implement them into the PRC.

Dr. X shared the example of Ms. K discussing her observations of the social work training conducted at an evangelical university in Europe. Their training provided an example of co-operation between the university and the charitable (often religiously inspired) organisations in their country. The plan was to see if they could bring the 'essence' of this university's training course to the PRC. Dr. X conducted interviews with various universities, colleges and social organisations (both religiously inspired and secular) in Huadong. Her findings demonstrated that currently university/college courses only have one channel of funding which they receive through government procurement. Their idea would mean changing content and/or adding extra weekly or monthly training on top of what was already being provided. However, the offer for this form of training was positively received by other RICOs and church-based services in the area. She shared that there had been a real 'curiosity' for social work training that made an explicit link between Christian teachings and charity which is fundamental to the hard and soft skills used by practitioners. She told me that this example is just one of many where ideas are 'selected', 'suggested', 'revised' and 'transplanted' into their RICO's strategy and project implementation.[181] This

[179] She studied for her doctorate abroad and was focused on the historic social role of the Church in China.

[180] With a particular focus on how other faith actors in Europe are conducting development work.

[181] Words used by Dr. X to explain the process.

'cognitive praxis' is enacted across continents by these two women, switching scales in order to take 'global travelling theories' (Spakowski 2011) and indigenize them for local communities with the RICO acting as a 'channel' for this change (see Cheung & Liu, M. 2004). The importance of drawing upon practices from abroad, and particularly those used by their European partners, was shared by a Pastor whose role in the RICO involves working with local churches in Huadong

in developing charitable programmes. She shares that, having spent three months abroad learning more about 'Diakonia' within the churches there, this gave her confidence to implement similar processes in her daily work for the RICO (Carino 2015).[182] She told me that,

> *'It made me realise that this is the way to help society and how to understand the church and its role in China – to act as a bridge.'*

This process is similar to the Buddhist RICO where training seminars are taught at head offices in various locations. This training allows for women from smaller, local branches to learn from those who are more experienced. During the winter of 2017 I had seen ongoing preparations for a weekend-long training seminar that would take place at the RICO's PRC head office which women from all the local branches would attend.[183] The focus of this weekend was going to be 'environmental protection'. One of the women I had met at a smaller local branch told me that she would be giving a seminar on the importance of 'environmental protection' and help with the training on recycling.[184] At these training seminars women are educated not only on how they should be delivering services (e.g., recycling points in local communities), but also on how they should be educating others to do the same.[185] Whilst there is a clear difference in the extent to which the teachings and writings of the Buddhist RICO's founder and current leader influences their work in comparison to the Protestant RICO, there are also clear parallels in the reciprocal scaled-nature of the way in which

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[182] This kind of training was also completed by another woman I met from a different Christian RICO who works in Huadong, who shared that it was becoming 'popular' with RICOs for training their staff.

[183] A part of these preparations was the making of hundreds of bags (discussed in Section 4.2) for new members that would be given out during this training weekend.

[184] She gave me her 'testimony' for joining the RICO. She 'found' the Buddhist RICO when she became chronically ill with a terminal illness that, she explained, was a result of air pollution. This had made her passionate about environmental issues and this was the focus of her work for the RICO.

[185] The implications of this are discussed in further detail in Section 6.2.2.

their praxis is developed and implemented. For example, Sister H explained that their large-scale service delivery programmes are evaluated using 'best-practice' knowledge from the organisation's branches in Taiwan and the United States. However, there remain differences as the Buddhist RICO demonstrates a more 'uniformed' approach to the way in which the work should be performed which is closely linked with its leader's teachings. This means that there was a sense of 'replication' because the same hand actions, songs and texts were used by members in the different local branches that I visited.

Yet, focusing on this alone would downplay the micro-expressions the women demonstrated in their local branches. It would ignore the use of individual knowledge and expertise to help others understand the organisation's teachings (as seen in the book reading group) and the ways the individual women navigated implementing new approaches into their local communities (as seen in their recycling points). The need to see this ongoing 'cognitive praxis' as relational, rather than one-sided with global flows taking precedence, is just as important for the women's work in the Protestant RICO. Ms. K shared how her role is also to represent the 'voices' of her RICO within development discourses emerging from Europe and the US, with a focus on the United Nations as a development actor and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. Even though their development practices were initially heavily influenced by their overseas partners, after decades of growing experience she said that it was now time that their work was acknowledged as 'best practice' and a 'model' for the rest of the world. I will now examine two specific examples – one from each RICO – to discuss these themes further.

7.2.1. The Incubator

A particular example of how the Protestant RICO used its experience to develop best practice models is the opening of their 'incubator' nearly ten years ago. It was late October when I had travelled to meet Ms. Q, the head of this new department. Having walked past quite a few residential buildings protected by community walls, the building finally emerged. An imposing structure with a clean exterior that did not point to its immediate function. Entering the expansive entrance foyer, I was greeted by one of the younger women on the team who was one of Ms. Q project assistants. Leading me upstairs, I walked past the offices of various kinds of social organisations until we reached the RICO's base. I was asked to wait in a smaller meeting room

whilst Ms. Q finished off their morning training session. I was told that it was focused on small organisations that delivered care to the elderly.

Ms. Q came in with six young women who had been part of the training seminar. They were all in their mid-twenties, coming from a range of organisations. They had either just graduated or had only been working full-time for the past few years. One woman had come from a community service centre, run from an official government building, looking to help 'grassroots' organisations. Another woman works for a village official on a project focused on education for migrant children. The women, including those working for the government, had been sent by their organisations to learn from the expertise of the Protestant RICO. The 'incubator' was viewed by these women as a place that helps others to grow and flourish within the legal structures of the PRC by allowing them to navigate through various local and national levels of procedure.

The office was termed the 'incubator' by those within the RICO because they view it as a place that 'nurtures'. This essentialist link to motherhood is made through the language used not just by the women I spoke with, but by their male colleagues and those that they train. The department is an 'incubator' for those who are a 'new-born' to the sector or struggling to grow under the patriarchal societal structures, where male-dominated spaces within official government intimidate and exclude women (Hong-Fincher 2018). This exclusion is also demonstrated in their inability to garner the same forms of social capital that the women in the RICOs are able to mobilise (Weller et al. 2017). Ms. Q remarked that a large percentage of those coming in for training are women – in Ms. M's words, the 'bodies of the organisations'. Whilst the women from these small organisations had been able to draw social capital from intimate connections such as kin and gendered networks in their local communities, they had not been able to 'scale up' and faced a 'ceiling' in their organisation's growth. Interestingly, Ms. Q commented that, despite the passion displayed by women (including those in leadership positions) in other organisations, the women were constrained by the need to give up work for family reasons, such as having another child. Even though these women were not working in the 'private sector' that many of the women from the RICOs were a part of previously, they were experiencing the same arising conflicts in relation to the workplace. In the previous chapter, the women in the RICOs described how the 'feminine culture' in their RICOs provided capacity for themselves, as well as the communities and organisations they work with.

The ‘incubator’ is similarly described as ‘feminine’ emphasising the qualities of empathy and nurture which were viewed by participants as ‘female qualities’ or women’s ‘gifts from god’. The ‘incubator’ becomes a ‘mother’ to other organisations.

However, when discussing with Ms. Q the ‘model of development’ according to which they were training these organisations, this ‘model’ was described as ‘masculine’ and as including ideas of ‘competition and production’. She explained that ‘scaling up’ often meant other social organisations needed to ‘be like the private sector’. Acknowledging that you would find few female leaders in these work environments, it appears as though the role of the ‘incubator’ is not just generally to nurture but to help women survive and thrive in models and environments that may become increasingly ‘masculine’ and therefore cause them conflict. Ms. Q shared that this process involves moving away from the ‘traditional model’ of the way in which social organisations have operated in the PRC, to a model in which women are able to hold more leadership positions. This reflects the sentiments of Ms. M whose narrative details how women are rarely the ‘voices’ at the top conferences or in the rooms where key decisions about the charitable sector are made. I discussed in Section 5.2.3 how female leadership was encouraged and growing in the Protestant RICO, demonstrating further how their work culture provides a capacity for women in a way that other organisational cultures, both in the private and in the charitable sector in the PRC, do not. However, what is of note here is that the ‘incubator’ acts as a form of ‘everyday activism’ for the women it trains. Ms. Q’s team have spent the past ten years educating women from grassroots organisations in ways to navigate the hallways of male power in government and to develop their ‘business acumen’ for leadership in the private sector. The ‘incubator’ becomes a space (both physical and semiotic) where women are able to help others (majoritively other women) to creatively navigate, innovate and change their local communities (Pink 2012: 5).[186]

7.2.2. Environmental Protection

In December 2017, only a couple of months after the 19th People’s Congress, Sister J and a few other women had been asked to come into a local primary school to give a presentation on how to provide ‘environmental protection’ (e.g., what recycling is and why it is important). Sister J was excited about her role in this, telling me that they were putting on a drama production with everyone dressed as flowers to show the

[186] The implications of this will be discussed in further detail in Section 6.4.

importance of looking after the environment. She told me that, before, they had not been able to do things like this and were mainly contained to recycling at home or in their office building. However, 'the government support it now' and so they were expanding their projects. This was reiterated to me by Sister N. She told me that, despite 'environmental protection' being one of RICO's core missions, she had only begun to see its development in the PRC. Projects were often still very small and focused on changing the behaviours of volunteers through becoming vegetarian, carrying their bag – containing a bowl, chopsticks and a flask – and using recycling points in their local offices and at home. Sister N spoke of how the support of President Xi Jinping towards protecting the environment in his 19th Congress speech would help in their growth of these projects.

Recycling drop-off points run by members of the Buddhist RICO were springing up in different communities across Huadong. The majority were being run by women, but men often came and helped with the sorting of the different materials. Every 'drop-off point' contained signature green bins that had signposts picturing the type of material that would go in it once sorted. The recycling points that I visited where either set up outside or in the foyer of the RICO's office. The recycling was never done across the threshold inside the office space. For one of the branches, two 'leaders' were chosen and given different floor numbers – one set going up and the other going down. The two leaders would take one or two other members and each person would carry a thick blue string bag to collect the recycling in. We would knock on the doors of the different offices identified on the list and the leader would tell them what we were collecting and why, informing them of the importance of recycling and what kind of materials they could donate. Some of the office employees appeared familiar with the process and had already placed their donation near the entryway. They were used to the routine of the women coming to collect their cardboard boxes and shredded paper. However, others looked completely puzzled as we dived into their piles of leftover boxes and wrapping, pulling out rubbish and giving advice on what materials could and could not be recycled. The fruits of our labour would be added to the piles in the entrance way of the office floor. We would then spend the next half an hour or so sorting the material into the different piles before someone would come and offer money in exchange for our recycled goods. This money would be added to the donations raised by the office every week.

I visited another recycling point during June. The bins were set up outside a residential building with tenants walking in and out, either glancing at what was going on or bringing out their own donations to add to the piles. It was a small operation with only six RICO members alongside one of their neighbours who had wanted to 'see what it is all about' and a couple of young boys from the building who were learning how to separate the different materials. In the hour and half that the session took place, there was a stream of people dropping off their recycling with many knowing that the volunteers would be there at the same time and day each week.

I saw other ways in which women in the Buddhist RICO incorporated the 'environmental mission' of the organisation into their everyday and encouraged others to do so, whether they were in the RICO or not. When eating out with them I was always asked to take the leftovers with me. The women I was with at the time would produce a Tupperware box from their bags for the food to go in so as not to use the plastic boxes offered by the restaurant. Sister J would give me her handkerchief once to carry several boxes (this time plastic) home with me. She also repeatedly asked me to bring the plastic tubs back to the office for recycling when I was visiting next.

Another expression of everyday activism was the use of their bag that contained eating utensils. It was expected that when eating at the office – where lunches and dinners are always provided – each woman would use their individual bowls and chopsticks, making sure to wash them up afterwards and placing them back in their bags. Many of the women would speak of this practice of reusing eating utensils as an expression of 'loving the earth' and listening to the teachings of their Venerable Master who states that each individual has a role to play in saving the Earth. When I asked them why they started being vegetarians the women would often speak of how they began gradually, only really committing to it after having undergone commissioner training. They also spoke of it being a 'Buddhist' practice and because they are now 'Buddhist' they had to respect all life, including animals. They also saw it as their mission to teach others about this kind of lifestyle. It was often spoken about as trying to make Chinese society 'less wasteful' in places that it encouraged people to dispose of things quickly. A couple of the women added that this was true of relationships as well and that they wanted to change this attitude. I want to argue that their outward actions are expressions of 'everyday activism' that reflect not just the change that the Buddhist RICO seeks to cultivate in each of its members (see Chapter Four), but also the

creation of a wider public good that will change society for the better.[187] It is not enough to just provide services, the women are part of a larger movement to create change, founded upon the teaching of the RICO (Chau 2019: 157-158). It is with this in mind, that I will now discuss how women's work within RICOs can be seen as a form of *organising* for social change in contemporary China.

7.3. RICOs as 'Organising'?

For Ms. M, our conversation about her career made her reflect on how women may still be the 'bodies' of the organisations engaged in this praxis, but they are often not the 'heads' or 'voices' of those making pivotal decisions. In the previous chapter I discussed the impact of female leadership in RICOs. The organisational structures that were in place when I conducted fieldwork have subsequently changed and women are taking on even more senior roles, especially within the Protestant RICO. Furthermore, despite the difference in traditions that the RICOs are rooted in, each woman spoke of how she understood herself to be part of something larger; a movement engaged in the wider aim of social change towards the betterment of not just Chinese society but also societies more broadly (Zwissler 2018: 163-164; see Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019: 157-158).

The everyday activism demonstrated by women in RICOs, at various scales, presents a 'method' through which they are attempting to 'create what they envision to be the good society' (Christensen-Ruffman 1995: 374 as cited in Milwertz 2002: 10).[188] By envisioning themselves (as explored in the previous Chapter) as having *bonds* and *binded* within various communities – local, national and international – they are able to create 'social possibilities [that] can bring about change' (Zwissler 2018: 163-164). Their micro-expressions are switched at various scales, from international partnerships to localised knowledge and vice versa, in order to inform and shape one another. The women viewed themselves as being able to enact change because they could start from their own person in order to reach out 'to the world' through the causal relationships *in* and *through* the spaces created by their RICO in a process of 'concentric […] movement' (Weller et al. 2017: 123). All of the women spoke of how their 'small actions' would build up and develop over generations in order to create 'real change'. Their expressions of 'everyday

[187] A change that reflects the Buddhist RICO's views of the 'public good' (Wu 2017; Weller et al 2017; Chau 2019).

[188] Whilst this definition is drawn from literature that discusses Chinese women's movements from the early 2000s onwards (Hsiung et al. 2001; Milwertz 2002; Judd 2002), it provides an entry way into looking at specific forms of organising done by women even if this is within an organisation that a) has male members and b) does not specifically work on 'gender issues'.

activism' through an ongoing process of 'cognitive praxis' means that a frequent consequence of their work is that they address gender issues in society, with many of the women demonstrating a higher awareness of the problems facing women in China and abroad since joining their RICO (Milwertz 2002: 10).[189]

Due to the secular biases in wider feminist literature on Chinese women's movements, the voices of religious women are often ignored or marginalised (Jaschok 2003). This means that scholarship discussing potential women's movements in China often ignore religious organisations and spaces (Judd 2002; Milwertz 2002; Howell 2003; Hong-Fincher 2018).[190] Women's work and ongoing 'cognitive praxis' in RICOs offers us a view into how a women's movement for social change can be done outside (secular) social organisations. I do not wish to over claim the impact of this work might have on recent scholarship observing an increasingly critical environment for feminist movements and public forms of resistance (Hong-Fincher 2018). However, it does inform literature that explores the 'grey space' that RICOs inhabit, and the potential impacts women can have within these 'space[s] of action' (Wu, 2015: 130; see also Palmer 2008; Yang F 2012; Weller et al. 2017).

7.4. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the way in which women in RICOs are part of an ongoing 'cognitive praxis' that seeks to develop new forms of knowledge and practice (Hsiung et al. 2001). By exploring the women's varied forms of 'everyday activism', I was able to demonstrate some of the 'creativity, innovation and change' that emerged from it (Pink 2012: 4-5). This adds to the existing literature that seeks to understand the impact of RICOs, whose increasing presence and importance in Chinese society and internationally makes them an important site of study (Weller et al. 2017; Wu 2017; Fielder 2012; 2016; 2019a; 2019b). It also provides new insights for scholarship that often ignores the voices and experiences of religious women due to the secular biases found within feminist movements (Hsiung et al. 2001; Shui 2001; Milwertz 2002; Judd 2002; Jaschok 2003; Jaschok & Shui 2011: 12).

[189] See also Hsiung et al. 2001.
[190] See the work of Jaschok (2003) and Shui (2001), as well as their co-authored work (Jaschok & Shui 2011) for examples of female-led religious spaces and how they have examined the same debates in 'official sites' in China.

8. Conclusion: RICOs as 'Opportunity Spaces'?

This concluding chapter is divided into two sections. In the first, I will outline the research conclusions of this thesis by summarising my answers to the three interrelated research questions that have shaped it. This will include reflections on a central component of my theoretical lens where I positioned RICOs as 'Opportunity Spaces' (Fielder 2019a: 77; Yavuz 2003). The implications of this thesis in relation to wider scholarship are also considered. In the second section, I will highlight the questions and areas of future research that this thesis has generated.

8.1. Research Conclusions and Implications

My first research question was: *'why are women choosing to work for RICOs in contemporary China? And in what ways does this work take place?'* This research question was explored in all discussion chapters and played a pivotal role in starting this thesis but also how it came together in the end. In Chapter Three I focused on my participants 'narratives of conflict' that centred on feeling a 'lack of purpose' in their everyday. This feeling had come from their perceived failure to live up to a 'feminine ideal' and/or the discrimination and alienation experienced in 'the workplace'. I argued that it was these 'arising conflicts' that ignited their initial motivation to search for meaning beyond their current 'everyday'. It was also these 'arising conflicts' that begun their search for their RICO. In doing so, I argued that their entry into their organisation acted as a form of 'retreat' where they have a 'fluid negotiation' between the 'hearth' and 'temple' (Jaschok & Shui 2011). This provided important insights into *why* women are choosing to work for RICOs in contemporary China. This is an important and original contribution to the study of religion and women's lives in contemporary China. By using a spatial analysis that is grounded in the everyday, I was able to pay close attention to the 'gendered terrain' that women must navigate in their daily lives (Massey 1994; Knott 2005a). This meant I was able to bring together discussions of self, family and work in order to fully understand their motivations. The implications of this finding are twofold; 1) it asks scholars of religion in China to centre women's voices and experiences in their analysis, rather than it being an add-on to another theme; and 2) it adds a valuable contribution to the study of religious women's lives in China by asking for the secular/sacred divide to be 'disrupted' and for analysis to lie in the 'everyday'.

Chapter Four investigated this question further. By exploring the process of 'interconnection' that women experience through their work, and in particular their

embodied practices of care, I argued that this relationally shapes their religious subjectivities. This process is driven by their want to alleviate the expectations of the 'feminine ideal' and encounter workplaces that provide 'value' and 'meaning' to their everyday. RICOs provide women with the ability to do this 'regardless of whether they are committed to the religious tradition that their RICO is rooted in' (Weller et al. 2017: 133). I also presented in this chapter examples of the quasi-secular (physical) spaces that their embodied work takes place providing insights into the second part of the first research question (Kong & Woods 2017; see Lefebvre 1991). These findings also build on the previously discussed contribution whereby looking beyond 'official sites' of religion, I have been able to demonstrate unique ways that women are developing their religiously subjectivity – primarily through spatial practice that imbues spaces with sacred meaning and purpose. By looking to what some might deem as 'ordinary' and disrupting the sacred/secular binary, I have been able to highlight the ways in which women are engaging with 'religion' in contemporary China.

Chapter Five provided another piece of the puzzle to the first research question. By analysing the organisational culture of RICOs through a framework of *bonds, binds* and *bridges,* I argued that it provides a 'space of capacity' where innovative formations of social capital are being produced. This has specific consequences for the women working for them, providing them with the ability to mobilise older and newer forms of social capital that would not be experienced in other organisational environments in China (Lin 2001). This produced the potential for them to enter leadership positions and act as mentors for younger female staff. This mentorship provides vital representation that the women have not experienced in other workplaces.

The organisational culture of RICOs was also narrated as particularly 'feminine'. Linked with the narratives of conflict shared in Chapter Three, the women were able to work in an organisation where the spatial fractures that had previously occurred in their everyday were overcome and therefore, RICOs were presented as good for women. By not having to choose between the 'inner' and 'outer' spheres of their daily lives, women are able to undertake work that they find valuable for themselves and others. The shared values of the organisation *bonded* the women together and provided them with a work culture where they feel a common identity and shared want for change with others. I argued that the RICOs also act as *bridges* for the women where they are able to work with local, national and international partners to create the sustainable change they envision. Through a process of 'scale switching' they take part in an ongoing 'cognitive praxis' to

provide best practice and continue to be 'pioneers' of this new development knowledge. Examples of how this work took place were considered in Chapter Six by examining the 'incubator' run by the Protestant RICO, and the environmental protection work done by the Buddhist organisation. I demonstrated that this work is an example of 'everyday activism' by the women and provides them with a forum to create change, placing as much importance on their localised micro-expressions as the impact they are having on practice and policy at larger scales.

These findings have significant theoretical and empirical implications. Firstly, by developing a social capital framework that adapted classical theories to include the indigenous Chinese concept of *guanxi*, and importantly the gendered practice of it, I was able to create a new form – *binds*. This meant uncovering not just the ways in which RICOs provide women with access and resources that they don't experience in other workplaces in China, but it also unveiled the creative ways that women utilise this not just for their individual benefit, but for other women. Furthermore, it highlighted the depth and importance of the 'spirit' of the RICOs for the women who work for them and *how* and *why* they are attracting such a large female workforce. Therefore, this thesis provides a new contribution in the theorisation of *binds* that offers future research the potential to have a sociohistorical specific lens through which to explore social capital in China. The empirical findings from this unique theoretical contribution are also paramount for how we understand the lives of women in contemporary China. It offers gender studies scholarship the opportunity to explore beyond the secular bias and examine women's experiences of the workplace beyond feminist theory that 'neglects' the religious (Jaschok & Shui 2011). This is a unique contribution of thesis by providing new insights into the narratives of women in organisations that have, until recently, been overlooked by religious and women's studies scholarship.

Informed by the theoretical considerations in Chapter Two, my second research question – *to what extent do RICO's provide spaces of agency for women working for them?* – was explored in a similar manner to the first question. By theorising what I mean by 'agency' in Section 1.2.3, I made it clear that I would challenge what is meant by 'resistance' in order to highlight 'a whole range of human actions, including those which may be socially, ethically, or politically indifferent to the goal of opposing hegemonic norms' (Mahmood 2012: 9). By 'uncoupling' myself from the wider 'politically prescriptive project[s] of feminism' that had previously shaped my own positionality, I examined how women were relationally shaping RICOs.

This was at times a painful and emotive process where I questioned how I would authentically represent their lives whilst trying to provide confidentiality and anonymity for them. What emerged from this process were the multiple innovative ways that the women shape their RICOs, as well as how their initial want for meaning beyond their everyday sparked this relational dynamic. Approaching this study from other theorisations of agency would have left me closed off from how RICOs act as a spatial 'retreat' in the beginning of the women's journey – a retreat that does not necessarily mean abandoning the 'hearth' as other studies have examined (Jaschok & Shui 2000; 2011). This spatial analysis at the end of Chapter Three inspired the other three. They serve as a representation of 'valuable forms of human flourishing' that these women demonstrated through their experiences, knowledge and the embodied approach to their work (Mahmood 2012). These findings have clear theoretical implications, with it providing a method to analyse expressions and forms of agency that are not currently recognised by feminist theory or other scholarship on religious groups and/or organisations in China. This is especially true for scholarship that seeks to understand women's motivations, experiences and work in RICOs in the PRC.

My final research question – *how does the above reflect upon wider debates on religion, gender and religiously-inspired charitable organisations in contemporary China?* – also shaped each discussion chapter. This final interrelated research question meant that I was able to highlight throughout the thesis the contribution I am making to current scholarship. In Chapter One I outlined the current 'gaps' in scholarship within religious studies, gender studies and spatial studies when examining the Chinese context. This highlighted the 'silences' created when the experiences and voices of religious women in China are not included (Jaschok 2003: 659). I have endeavoured to make sure these 'silences' do not occur and have sought to bring together these diverse literatures in order to fully examine why women are working for RICOs in their search for meaning in contemporary China. Chapter Three reflected on the wider debates outlined in gender studies that examines the impacts of the 'feminine ideal' on Chinese women and how they negotiate this in their everyday. (Hooper 1994; Yang, M.M.H 1999b; Hong-Fincher 2014; 2018a; Xie, K. 2019). I also drew upon the core themes examined in literature that seeks to understand women's changing experiences of family and work in contemporary urban China (Cook & Dong 2011; Cook & Xiao 2014; Zuo 2016; Hizi 2018). These discourses do not currently include religious women's experiences, arguably due to a

secular bias in feminist studies in China and more broadly (Jaschok & Shui 2000; Jaschok 2003).

In Chapter Four I contributed to current debates on why and in what ways people are forming their religious subjectivities in contemporary China (Fielder 2012; Wu 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019). This provided new insights into contemporary forms of 'doing religion' in China, the spaces this takes place in as well as the impact of gender (Kong & Wood 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Vermander et al. 2018; Chau 2019). Building on this in Chapter Five, I argued that women are mobilising and cultivating forms of 'social capital' through RICOs. This contributes to current debates on organisational cultures in China, their gendered implications and what happens when social reproduction is understood *as* the everyday in the workplace (Cook & Dong 2011; Elias & Rai 2019). By maintaining throughout that women in both RICOs are engaged in 'work',[191] I made sure to understand social reproduction *as* the everyday and what this means for women in the Chinese location (Elias & Rai 2019). This meant I was able to add to current debates on the nature of participation in RICOs, which often refer to women's participation in RICOs as 'volunteering' and, thereby, reinforce certain gendered stereotypes (Cavaliere 2012; 2015).

A core component of my theoretical lens[192] positioned RICOs as 'vehicles of activism and the dissemination of meaning, identity and cultural codes' for women in contemporary China (Yavuz 2003: ix, as cited in Fielder 2019: 77). This thesis demonstrated that identities constructed through and disseminated by RICOs when understood as 'opportunity spaces' are formed through the values and 'frames of reference' provided by the organisational culture. This is unknowingly 'internationalised through socialization and becomes politicised […] in relation to desired ends and a changing social context' (Yavuz 2003: 21). The identity-formation process that occurs in RICOs is 'contingent and relational'. Its formation is dependent on differences found in relation to an 'other' that helps define the self. However, this 'other' is not necessarily constructed in an 'oppositional' manner, but rather as a 'constituting element' of one's identity (ibid). It is through RICOs, as 'opportunity spaces', that the women in this study understand that their sense of self can be found within community where production and

[191] The women in the Buddhist RICO narrated themselves as 'workers' for the mission of their RICO. Several women spent time going over the important differences between what they do and what is normally considered 'volunteering'. This was taken into consideration when constructing my theoretical lens in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

[192] As outlined in Chapter 2

social reproduction *as* the everyday can express an identity that is about 'defining and living "the good life"' (ibid: 31; Weller et al. 2017; Fielder 2019a). Therefore, this thesis highlights how working for RICOs provides women with the possibility to define their own identity, as well as to 'resist the policies of the state or the market' and to change the meaning they draw from their everyday (Yavuz 2003: 24).

By framing RICOs as 'opportunity spaces' in my spatial analysis, I was able to highlight the possibilities they hold for the meaning-making practices of Chinese women. This was further illustrated through my framework of *binding* and taking 'organisational culture' seriously in my analysis. From these findings, I would argue that RICOs provide not just an organisational culture that considers the needs of women, but also the resources for their personal development. Furthermore, I would argue that this thesis provides evidence for how RICOs provide an organisational space where women can create and develop meaning-making practices through their work. All of the women spoke of a want to 'create meaning' in their lives and saw their work as a way to achieve this. Their goal of aiding the creation of a 'good society' was only seen as viable through their RICO. Unlike other secular charitable organisations, their RICO provided a *bind* that others couldn't. It offered them the ability to discursively develop their views and practice and, I would argue, in a gendered way with the 'feminine' upheld as powerful and essential to progress. This argument makes a contribution to current scholarship that examines women's sociocultural and economic development in contemporary China. It shines a light on to organisations and women's experiences that would normally be discounted due to a secular bias. It also does this by showing the 'activism' and 'agency' can be conceptualised outside of overt resistance. The everyday activism and cognitive praxis that the women in this study undertake demonstrates an alternative path to their development, and the advancement of women's social status and roles in contemporary China. In doing so, this thesis makes a new contribution to our understanding of Chinese women's lives in urban, middle-class China and how they are *organising* for social change.

This thesis makes a clear contribution to the study of women's lives within RICOs in China by drawing together these different findings through a spatial analysis that was purposefully constructed for this research process. By developing other spatial theories, as well as theories of gender and agency *in* and *through* space, I was able to consider and centre the lives of the women in this study. By centring their narratives that are so often 'silenced' in scholarship – particularly within feminist studies – this thesis makes an

original contribution that highlights their voices, their needs, their wants and their practices. Their stories and experiences are not an add-on in a way that they are in other scholarship on religiously inspired social welfare (Weller et al. 2017). This contribution is strengthened by this study being purely focused on the PRC context. This provides unique insights into how being 'socially located' in the PRC has shaped the development of the RICOs and their work, but also highlights how women's religious subjectivity are spatially shaped by this location. This uncovers a gendered understanding of how 'religion' is embodied in contemporary China with women at the centre of this practice. The ongoing negotiation of 'location' by both the RICOs, and the women who work for them, unveils the innovative ways in which they are operating and flourishing in the PRC, unlike many other organisations – social welfare and religious alike.

8.2. Areas of Future Research

The experiences, work and voices of the women involved in this study did not just shape the direction of this thesis, they also prompted new questions and ideas that were beyond the scope of this project.[193] Since conducting fieldwork, there has been a plethora of new literature that seeks to understand the role of RICOs in contemporary China, including the nature of participation in these organisations (Wu 2017; Weller et al. 2017; Chau 2019; Fielder 2019). This scholarship informed this thesis, but it also propelled further questions that could be explored. For example, despite 'being part' of the women's WeChat during, and after, fieldwork I did not explore how this forum could act as a 'third space' for women in RICOs (Huang, W. 2017). The impact of 'virtual' spaces (Vermander et al. 2018: 180) on women's experiences of 'doing religion', as well as a form of 'everyday activism', would be a thought-provoking area to explore in future.

My priority was to always place women's experiences and narratives at the centre of this thesis, especially because they are so often ignored in wider scholarship (Jaschok 2003; Jaschok & Shui 2011; Jia et al. 2014). On several occasions I found women 'shocked' that I wanted to speak to them, or that my research project solely focused on their experiences.[194] Many women reflected near the end of the project that our discussions allowed them to reflect more deeply on how they had come to work for their RICO, as

[193] New questions emerging from the data could not be asked due to ongoing sociocultural sensitives and considerations for the women's safety. I was also not able to travel back to the PRC for further fieldwork in part for financial reasons, but also because of personal health concerns. Alternative forms of communication, such as Skype and email, were not viable post-fieldwork. The reasons for this are discussed more broadly and in detail in Chapter Three.

[194] This prompted Ms. F's reaction of 'am I even a woman?'

well as what this meant for them now and their searches for meaning in contemporary China. Ms. M in Chapter Six shared with me that my research project had ignited conversations amongst the women there and made them 'think more closely about issues facing women today'. On the days that I struggled to write, I would remember them saying this and persevere. However, how I went about communicating this more widely to each of the RICOs meant that very few men in the organisations showed interest in speaking with me.[195] Moving forward, a future study could comparatively explore the experiences of women and men in RICOs and the gendered consequences of this. It would provide valuable information about the ways the 'feminine culture' of RICOs (as narrated by the women in this study) is experienced by its male employees. It would also provide new insights on whether current constructions of masculinity in public and official discourse in China shape their initial connection with the RICOs and/or the nature of their participation (Hird 2017).

Given how this thesis has challenged my own assumptions of 'feminism', it would be interesting to develop further insight into the connections (or lack of) between RICOs and organisations specifically working on issues of gender.[196] This is of particular interest as RICOs grow in relevance in achieving international development agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where gender equality is a key objective. The work to examine and recognise the work of faith actors and/or religion in delivering the SDGs has begun in earnest in the past few years (Sidibe 2016; Dodds 2016; Tomalin et al. 2019). The internationalisation of RICOs and the pivotal role that women play in the organisation's ongoing 'cognitive praxis' means that there is a need to include their voices in these emergent literatures.

Even though these research areas present exciting potential for further study in the future, this thesis provides a unique view into the lives, experiences and work of women who are the 'bodies of the organisations' that are increasing relevant to the socioeconomic development of Chinese society (Fielder 2019a; 2019b). By placing the voices of women at the centre of my analysis, this thesis makes an essential contribution to scholarship that normally 'silences' them. Furthermore, by conducting a spatial analysis of RICOs, I was able to provide new insights in specific forms of female agency and religious subjectivity

[195] This was not always the case, but it was a minority.

[196] Chapter Six begun to explore some of these themes and utilised theoretical work done by scholarship that has examined the Chinese women's movement in contemporary China (Hsiung et al. 2001; Milwertz 2002; Judd 2002; Howell 2003).

in contemporary Chinese society. This allowed me to explore how women are relationally shaping and driving forward the work of RICOs. As a result, this thesis makes a unique contribution to scholarship on the Chinese location where religion continues to be a relevant force in society and gender social roles are being reinterpreted, negotiated and enforced by various actors and discourses. It also shines a light on the women who are entering, reinterpreting, negotiating and innovating RICOs into *spaces of their own making* in China today.

Appendix

1.1 Social location of women 'named' within thesis

Name[197]	Age Range[198]	Marital/Family Status	Education	Study/Work Abroad	Level of English
Sister N	40-50	Unmarried, no children	Undergraduate	Y	Fluent
Sister J	35-45	Married, one child	Masters	N	Fluent
Sister X	45-55	Married, one child	Doctorate Level	N	Fluent
Sister H	50-60	Unmarried, no children	Undergraduate	N	Fluent
Ms. F	50-60	Married, one child	Undergraduate	Y	Fluent
Ms. M	35-45	Married, one child	Undergraduate	Y	Fluent
Ms. Y	35-25	Unmarried, no children	Masters	Y	Fluent
Ms. Q	30-40	Married, one child	Undergraduate	N	Fluent
Ms. W	45-55	Married, one child	Masters	Y	Fluent
Dr. X	25-35	Unmarried, no children	Doctorate	Y	Fluent
Ms. K	25-35	Unmarried, no children	Undergraduate	Y	Fluent

[197] Pseudonym given to provide anonymity to participant
[198] Age ranges have been used instead of precise age to provide further anonymity

1.2 Example of Image Used in Group Interview

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