

## *Spatial Modernity, Party Building, and Local Governance: Putting the Christian Cross-Removal Campaign in Context\**

Nanlai Cao

### **Abstract**

While Christianity is among the fastest growing religions in the reform era, state-led sporadic demolition campaigns have targeted unauthorized church structures and sites in order to contain massive Christian growth, especially in regions where there is a high concentration of Christian population. Such campaigns often stir heated international concerns about China's religious freedom violations, naturally making church-state relations the recurring central theme of both public and academic discourses on the church in China. However, a heightened emphasis on church-state tensions and religious persecution may obscure the cultural and spatial dimensions of local church development. Focusing on the case of the recent campaign against rooftop crosses in Wenzhou—the most Christianized Chinese city, I go beyond the one-dimensional framework of church-state relations by offering a

---

**Nanlai Cao** is Director of the Religious Studies Program and Associate Professor in the Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Religious Theory at Renmin University of China. He is author of *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, Power, and Place in Contemporary Wenzhou* and co-editor of *Religion and Mobility in a Globalizing Asia: New Ethnographic Explorations*. Correspondence should be addressed to ncao@ruc.edu.cn.

\* The work was supported by a grant from the National Social Science Fund of China (project code 14AZJ004) and a grant from the Hong Kong Research Grants Council (project code 740712). I wish to acknowledge the research assistance of Gu Jingqin, a graduate student at Renmin University. The views expressed in this article are entirely my own.

multifaceted analysis of the local religious scene in the political economic contexts of contested spatial modernity and of central-local relations amid the party-building process. In so doing, I methodologically place Chinese Christian studies at the center of contemporary China studies.

Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, the condition of the Chinese Christian church under atheist Communist rule has constituted a highly contested subject. While Christianity is among the fastest growing religions in the reform era, state-led sporadic demolition campaigns have targeted unauthorized church structures and sites in order to contain massive Christian growth, especially in regions where there is a significant Christian presence.<sup>1</sup> The high concentration of churches and Christians in the city of Wenzhou (温州市) in coastal Zhejiang Province (浙江省) has made the city known internationally as "China's Jerusalem" (中國的耶路撒冷 *zhongguo de yelusaleng*). The recent provincial campaign to demolish or remove rooftop crosses from church buildings has exposed Wenzhou once again in the spotlight of the world's media. Hundreds of towering red church crosses in the Wenzhou region have been removed by force since the operation began systematically in early 2014. Although government officials deny any order to crack down on Christianity by citing building code violation as the sole reason behind the removals, this scene seems to prove valid the habitual division of state versus religion, which considers Chinese Christians as resisting the reach of the atheist state.<sup>2</sup> Yet, a closer and more contextualized look at the event will tell a different story. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork research conducted in Wenzhou over the past decade, I attempt a multifaceted analysis of the campaign and frame the local church scene in the larger political economic contexts of contested spatial modernity and of central-local relations amid the ongoing process of party building.

## 1. A New Mode of Regulating Chinese Christianity?

On 28 April 2014, despite the resistance of the Christians coming from different parts of the city, the local authorities of Wenzhou tore down the Sanjiang 三江 Church, which spanned an area of about 10,000 square meters in Oubei 甌北 District on the outskirts of Yongjia 永嘉 County. The official reason cited by the authorities was that the church