

In the World But Not Of the World: Governing Christian Charities in China

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Protestant Christianity has flourished throughout China in the last few decades of economic reform. It is particularly popular in local and regional spaces along the coast where the state established special economic zones in the early 1980s and withdrew from direct intervention in the private economy and other spheres of life thereafter. In recognition of Christianity as a source of moral values in society, the state has provided much greater space for the expansion of Protestant activities and structures than for the staging of popular religious events and practices, which still bear the stigma of superstition. This paper explores the development and governance of grassroots Christian charities in contemporary China. It focuses on a moral discourse of accountability associated with the church's practice of charity. Modern Chinese evangelical Christians seek to be in the world but not of the world. However, they have to constantly struggle with a binary opposition between an individuated faith and the social gospel approach. In this paper I show how the idea of religious philanthropy can both be informed and reshape the highly ambiguous way Chinese Christians position themselves and engage the secular world.