From Houses of Worship to Worship in Houses

The Social Construction of Sacred Places in

Early 21st Century China

Yi Zhang

TECHNISCHE
UNIVERSITÄT
DARMSTADT

From Houses of Worship to Worship in Houses:

The Social Construction of Sacred Places in

Early 21st Century China

Vorgelegt von M. Sc. Yi Zhang

Referent:

Prof. Dipl.-Ing. Wolfgang Lorch, Fachgebiet Entwerfen und Baugestaltung,
Fachbereich Architektur, Technische Universität Darmstadt

Prof. Dr. Anna-Maria Meister, Fachgebiet Architecture Theory,
Fachbereich Architektur, Karlsruher Institut für Technologie

Affidavit

I hereby affirm that I have completed this dissertation without the help of third parties only with the stated sources and tools. All passages and/or information from sources are marked as such. This work has not been submitted in the same or similar form to any local authority.

Yi Zhang

Darmstadt, August 2023

Author Email: zyarchi@qq.com

Acknowledgment

Abstract

While the concept of worship in houses can be traced back to the Christian house church places in Dura Europos between 233 and 256 AD during the Roman Empire, after the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, this kind of church spaces began to appear all across the country. Characterized by the absence of a formal iconic church building or interior, existing types of secular architectural spaces (apartments, offices, basements, etc.) were rented by the Christian community and converted into sacred spaces.

Space is susceptible to manipulations caused by human actions. Now what happens if space is manipulated to house not merely a different function but transcendence? As French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre's argument in *The Production of Space* (1991), space is not only a social product but also a complex social construction, based on values and the social production of meanings, which affects spatial practices and perceptions. An existing space, he says, may outlive its original purpose and the raison d'étre which initially determined its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus, in a sense, become vacant and susceptible to being diverted, re-appropriated, and utilized for a different purpose than its original intent.

With my analysis of the worship places of urban house churches in early 21st-century China from the perspective of urban context and architectural space (foregrounded by the development of informal church space in the historical context of Chinese society and politics), this research shows how religious metaphors function as the productive mediators in the process of knowledge transfer between architectural and other professional discourses by bringing back social imagination to the politically neutral spaces of every day; de facto reconstructing the social through transduction of the metaphor of informal spaces.

Content

1 Introduction

The year 2018 marked the 40th anniversary of China's pivotal reform and opening-up policy, a milestone that underscored the remarkable economic, ideological, and cultural transformations over the past four decades. A noteworthy cultural phenomenon arising from this period is the significant evolution and growth of Christianity in Chinese society, receiving attention from both governmental and non-governmental entities. The dichotomy between official churches (known as Three-Self churches) and unofficial house churches sheds light on the adaptation and evolution of transnational cultures within a dynamically changing Chinese society.

This study delves into the complex interplay between religion and its social milieu in contemporary China, focusing specifically on the spatial strategies employed by Christian groups and individuals within house churches, operating outside the traditional legal parameters of church building. Despite their resource limitations compared to the well-endowed church edifices in continental Europe, these house churches—often marginalized in formal church architectural history—provide valuable perspectives to enrich the discourse on church architecture.

These house churches have adopted a unique approach, discarding the visible external religious identifiers and embedding the spiritual essence within secular spaces not initially designed for religious activities. This prompts several questions: **What happens when space is manipulated to harbor not just a distinct function but transcendence? When domestic dwellings transform into places of worship, how do individuals bridge the divide between the sacred and the secular? How can everyday spaces be elevated to evoke a sense of sacredness? How does the sanctity of space alter post-service? How do private and public, individual and collective, temporary and permanent interplay within these spaces?** Addressing these questions requires understanding the impact of societal factors on

creating these spaces.

This study reframes the architectural discourse, shifting focus from abstract form to the lifeworld[1] it represents. It positions the debate surrounding the Christian spaces within their socio-historical context and core function as sacred places. The impermanence and adaptability of complex religious systems become apparent as they migrate between regions and cultures, integrating and adopting new characteristics.

The house churches in this study, accommodating between twenty to over a hundred individuals, are situated in the urban spaces of China's economically developed eastern region, known for its relatively lenient local religious management. Analyzing these cases offers fresh insights into the everyday practice of deconstructing and tentatively reconstructing physical and spiritual spaces. These investigations demonstrate how ordinary materials can be transformed into vehicles for religious ideologies, shaping the respective, localized concepts of truth that imbue the space. By considering the multifaceted influences of social, political, and religious systems that support these Chinese house church spaces, we can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the dominant expressions that shape these spaces.

This research is structured around several key aspects. Firstly, it contextualizes the worship spaces of Chinese house churches within the historical arc of Chinese society from 1949 to the present and within the academic debates surrounding sacred space, thereby contributing to the ongoing discourse on this phenomenon. Following this, a case study of Chinese house churches elucidates four elements of architectural discourse that localize social strategies: the rearrangement of spatial sequence, the reconfiguration of spatial power, the redefinition of spatial identity, and the reshaping of the spatial atmosphere. These four discourses involve instigating and reinforcing a

---

[1] The concept of "lifeworld" refers to the ordinary experiences, actions, and meanings we tend to overlook because they are so familiar. We often take for granted that this is just how life is, and we ignore the lifeworld unless something about it changes significantly. As a result, we may not even realize how much it shapes our daily existence. (Seamon, 2017)

religious spirit in transforming the secular into a sacred space. These aspects are elaborated on below.

1.1 Worship Places as a Social Strategy

Chinese house churches emerged as a religious proposition after the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, prompted by differing views on the relationship between politics and religion. Not a theological sect in the strictest sense, these churches function independently of the government, a soft rejection of the central government's united front work. They counterbalance mainstream values, representing marginal ones instead. Besides religious activities, the church place is a social strategy to mediate this state-religion tension.

Post-1949, Christian organizations in mainland China were incorporated into the central government's united front as cooperative forces. The "Three-Self Patriotic Movement," born of this cooperation, aimed to disengage Chinese churches from foreign missions, transforming the very nature of Chinese Christianity. Some Christian groups consciously maintained political distance to preserve ideological independence, refusing to join the official church under the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. These churches formed the nascent house churches.

Political movements sweeping the country in the 1960s and 1970s brought all religious activities to a halt, forcing church activities underground. Churches, official or unofficial, lost their legal status during this period. They retreated from urban public spaces into rural areas with less administrative intervention. Gatherings of this period bore the characteristics of the modern house churches' meeting places: hidden, mobile, and introverted. Yet, virtually no images or tangible records from this time remain, a substantial loss for studying the evolution of Chinese Christian spaces under the post-1949 socialist regime.

After the political turmoil of the 1970s, religious activities resurfaced in mainland China, and Christianity saw a surge in popularity. Unofficial house churches coexisted with the legal-status-regained official Three-Self church. The modernization and evolution of Christianity in China were propelled by urbanization during the 1980s reform and opening-up period, leading to a significant rise in the Christian population. Though numbers from official and non-governmental sources differ, there's no denying the considerable increase in the Christian population. Conservative official statistics suggest that between 1978 and 2018, the number of Christians in China grew from fewer than 3 million to 38 million, a population proportion rise from 0.29% to 2.7% (White Paper on China's Policies and Practices for Guaranteeing Freedom of Religious Belief, 2018; Yunfeng & Chunni, 2016). With the rapid urbanization process of Chinese society, by 2010, most Christians had migrated from rural to urban areas (Duan, 2012).

Despite Christianity being seen as a representation of modernity during a time of social transformation, its acceptance often conflicted with Chinese cultural identity and tradition due to its Western cultural background. As Christian establishments became more visible in public spaces, they became negotiating tools and mechanisms for tension mediation in Chinese ideological discourse.

Church buildings of the official church faced ideological and cultural collisions due to their architectural image when inserted into Chinese urban space. Neo-Gothic churches became a symbol of Christian religious identity in the urban public space, highlighting a homogeneous community united by shared beliefs (Kan, 2015). These churches set themselves apart from the non-Christian majority, resisting public space encroachment. Yet, the dominant mainstream ideology often criticized this sudden divergence, sparking conflict between government, politics, people, and culture. To ease the tension, these official churches attempted to incorporate traditional Chinese architecture and cultural symbols into their architectural appearance (Kan, 2015; Su,

2018; Wang, 2018). Still, these attempts had limited effect in alleviating the tension between marginal and mainstream values. When the church appears in the urban space as an entity, it has already been recognized by the public as representing an inserted foreign culture and ideology. In the eyes of those cultural nationalists, they are considered a challenge and pollution to the spatial representation of continuous traditional culture and mainstream ideology (Duan, 2012; International Confucian Organization Appeals: Oppose the Construction of a Christian Church in Qufu, 2011).

Urban house churches took a different approach. They avoided ideological and cultural debates, minimizing the government's concerns about potential opposition to public power and threats to their authority by conducting their activities in secular architectural spaces. This reduced disputes over religious ideology in the public domain. This external self-restraint allowed these house church groups to reach a certain level of tacit agreement with local governments, affording them a social space for survival and relatively independent development (Cheng, 2003; Yang, 2005). Guided by a unique set of Calvinist theology, these house churches focus on introverted representation in place-making, fighting differences through creating an emotional field rather than form.
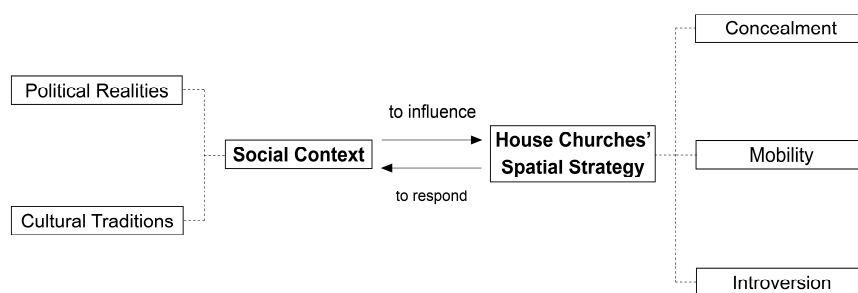
Fig. 1.1
Worship places of house churches as a spatial strategy in response to social reality
Source: illustration by author

In essence, the worship space of house churches acts as a spatial strategy (Fig. 1.1) in response to political and cultural realities in the Chinese social context. Its concealment, mobility, and introversion characteristics provide house church groups with flexibility in

site construction and allows them to cope with limited resources and space conditions not tailored for worship. At the same time, it helps them deal with the risk of instability that may make church grounds unsustainable. These sites are the strategic response of church groups to the social mechanism, effectively representing Christianity under the specific social and political reality.

The locations of these house churches challenge traditional boundaries, blurring the lines between the sacred and the profane. To understand this in the context of religion as a social force in a secular world, we must examine the academic discourse surrounding the epistemology of sacred space and explore visions and operations beyond official spaces. Further, it is essential to investigate the practical application of this non-traditional sacred space's production strategies. This would address how the form of religion as a social strategy emerged in secular places. In the following introduction, these ideas will be further elaborated upon.

1.2 The Social Production of Sacred Space

The essential nature of the worship places within Chinese house churches can be understood as spatialized social strategies emerging from ideological conflict. These conflicts originate, unfold, and are ultimately resolved within the spatial context. Social factors are integral in shaping these places of worship, intertwining the secular with the sacred and blurring the boundaries of sacred spaces.

This comprehension of the spatial context of worship is rooted in the philosophy of French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who perceived space not as an inactive background of social life but as a product of social relations, politics, and culture (Lefebvre, 1991). Critics have questioned Lefebvre's abstract approach as unfeasible in specific empirical scenarios (Brenner et al., 2012; Parker, 2015; Tonkiss, 2005). Nonetheless, his interdisciplinary methodology has been applauded for its

challenge to conventional perceptions of space and its inclusion of spatial concerns within broader socio-political discourses (Harvey, 2000, 2012; Middleton, 2013; Soja, 1996; Springer et al., 2016; Stuart, 2004). Lefebvre's work has profoundly influenced multiple fields, from urban studies and geography to sociology and cultural theory (Daelemans, 2020; Goonewardena et al., 2008; Low, 2016; Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2020; Stuart, 2004).

In the realm of religious studies, Lefebvre's concept of socially produced space serves as a valuable theoretical tool, particularly in comprehending the symbolic and cultural aspects of sacred spaces (Hayden, 1997; Kong & Woods, 2016; Lane, 2002; Metcalf, 1996; Shields, 1999), examining religious rituals and practices (Binte Abdullah Sani, 2015; Jones, 2019; Kilde, 2008; Knott, 2005, 2010, 2015; Roberts, 2013), and scrutinizing religion in urban settings (Elazar, 2018; Livezey, 2000; Metcalf, 1996). His abstract model might not always align seamlessly with case studies, yet his spatial theory offers a robust theoretical framework to understand the interconnections between space, society, and religion. This has sparked innovative research ideas concerning the study of house churches and their places of worship. As the religious practices of house church congregations shape these spaces, these places of worship can be understood as spatialized social strategies. Therefore, this research explores how religious space, as a social strategy, is constructed within a non-religious context, bridging theoretical and practical perspectives.

First, scholarship concerning the nature of sacred space creates a robust foundation for gratifying the intricate sacred spaces found within Chinese house churches. In three distinct academic generations - substantive, situational, and comprehensive - the conception of sacred space has been refined and developed. Mircea Eliade's influential work, *The Sacred and the Secular* (1959), provides an initial understanding of sacred space, exploring how cultures and societies recognize and express the divine presence in various locations. Eliade proposed that sacred spaces are distinct areas

where an objective, transcendent force exists. These spaces become centers of religious activity, creating a vertical axis that connects the divine with the secular. Simultaneously, a horizontal axis divides the landscape into sacred and profane territories. This external manifestation of the divine through rituals, materials, and architectural signs is termed "hierophany." This view is considered "substantive" because it emphasizes the presence of the sacred as a substance in pre-existing spaces due to the supernatural's reality (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995). For instance, in the Roman Catholic tradition, the consecrated bread and wine during Communion are viewed as the tangible presence of God, and the church is considered a locale of divine presence. Essentially, for him, a sacred place is firmly anchored in a location and represents a stable sphere of power without any doubt.

Contrarily, another school of thought posits that a perspective linking sacred space to gods or supernatural entities is narrow, for it is rooted primarily in the viewpoint of religious insiders (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; Holloway, 2003). From an outsider's perspective, sacred places are established and maintained through social intervention, where society confers meaning upon spaces, rendering them sacred (Eade & Sallnow, 2000). This situational conception of sacred spaces asserts that sacredness is not inherent but imbued through human efforts, resulting in religious significance. For example, religious rituals unify individuals into a community, bestowing an extraordinary character onto a shared space, making it sacred, and reinforcing this sanctity through repetition (Durkheim & Swain, 2008). Religious practitioners often construct sacred spaces based on their spiritual interpretations. However, it is essential to note that these interpretations do not necessarily denote supernatural entities but rather reflect emotional states or shared sentiments. Like many Chinese house church Christians maintain that the elements of the Eucharist, the bread and wine, do not physically embody divinity. Nevertheless, they regard the communal observance of the Lord's Supper as an act of collective emotional engagement, carrying substantial religious implications. Therefore, the conception of sacred spaces is not invariably tied

to fixed locations but is characterized by portability. Scholars of this school have also noted that conflict is a significant catalyst for creating sacred spaces, with the struggle for space between differing groups intensifying the significance and sanctity of these places (Chidester, 1994).

Such a viewpoint of sacred space has substantial implications for studying non-traditional sacred spaces, including Chinese family worship places. The academic community has begun acknowledging the possibility of conversion between the secular and the sacred (Holloway & Valins, 2002; Knott, 2005, 2010, 2015; Wilford, 2012). Moreover, there's a heightened discourse on transnationalism within the religious domain. This discussion has brought attention to Christian places outside Europe and how they navigate conflicts with their respective societies (Elazar, 2018; Kong, 1993, 2001, 2002, 2010; Woods, 2013; Yeh, 2022). These places of worship serve as the locus for negotiating secular notions and identity ideals of Christianity within particular sociocultural contexts instead of merely serving as bridges between tradition and modernity.

The concept of sacred space has been the subject of academic discussion, with two distinct definitions presented. However, the substantive definition, which emphasizes the transcendence of sacred space, and the situational definition, which highlights its social aspect, fail to capture its complete essence. For example, in Protestant house churches, while communion and baptism are regarded as commemorative ceremonies, the pulpit service is considered God speaking through the speaker's mouth. This cannot be defined as the actual existence of God or abstract religious meaning. A perspective emphasizing complex simultaneity has been introduced to understand sacred space more dynamically. The individual emotional experience becomes a link between material and spiritual, bridging the negotiation between different viewpoints. From this perspective, sacred space is a potent location created through the combination of emotion, habit, and practice. It acts as a gathering point for diverse

objects, individuals, stories, and memories, open to blending cultures and religions and redefinition of boundaries and identities (Dora, 2018). This more dynamic cognitive framework acknowledges the transcendent emotional experience of insiders while also paying attention to the effect of social forces and maintaining focus on the sacred-secular conversion process of the material (Kilde, 2008; Finlayson, 2012). This systematic perspective, which synthesized and developed the views of the previous two generations, expanded the scope of sacred geography and reshaped the understanding of the relationship between religious and secular while helping to discover the divine potential of these house church places of worship as bridges between emotional and different discursive. Based on this theoretical foundation, the study further reviews practical research. Through correlation research, I continue to sort out the complex relationships in the sacred space of these Chinese house churches in referent the related cases, considering these places' material specificities, performative encounters, effects, and numinous and emotional geographies from an everyday perspective.

Drawing from Lefebvre's triadic theory presented in "The Production of Space" (1991, pp. 32-33, 38-39), the space of the house church can be understood as a representational space, defined by the user's lived experiences. It emerges from the reuse of pre-existing space, whereby its occupants both dominate and passively experience it. This space is a living entity that allows for the manifestation of time. Lefebvre bifurcates the production strategies of this space into two categories: appropriation and diversion. The former refers to modifying a natural space to meet the demands and potentialities of a group's usage – a dynamic and temporary spatial intervention. Conversely, diversion refers to transforming a space whose purpose has surpassed its original intent, resulting in a use that significantly diverges from its initial function. This process is a negotiated and long-term one.

Jones (2019) employs these concepts to comprehend the creation of Muslim sacred

spaces within everyday environments, delineating two categories of sacred spaces, makeshift and contingent. He interprets them as spatial outcomes of appropriation and diversion, respectively. Building on this foundation, my research explores the spatial characteristics of house churches by further distinguishing these two types of spaces based on their functionality. Makeshift spaces are characterized by the church group's partial time and functional possession of a place. Over a given period, these spaces serve dual functions, accommodating both church-related activities and everyday life, such as office work and residential use. On the other hand, contingent spaces refer to the church group's complete occupation of a site over a specific duration. These places exclusively cater to church-related activities, thus providing the church group with more spatial autonomy. In both scenarios, readily available spatial material is used, and other materials are integrated into unique ways to construct a representational space collaboratively.

In the context of non-traditional Christian spaces, ecclesiastical groups employ a reduced approach to spatial intervention, employing both the abstraction of space and the shaping of place. The narrative of these spaces is adjusted by applying non-architectural structural elements such as furniture, lighting, and decor, which alter both the spatial configuration and the perceived image of the place. Empirical evidence from secular-sacred space conversion practices and related research supports the efficacy of this strategy (Binte Abdullah Sani, 2015; Debuyst, 1994; Langmaack, 1949; Ulrich Pantle, 2003). The combined effect of these modifications gives rise to visual and semantic differences, which engage the senses, evoke emotions, and influence individuals' perception, interaction, and recall of the space. These transformations thereby serve as identity markers for the place, contributing to the collective memory (Anders, 2014; Finlayson, 2012). Case studies of religious sites, where there is a divergence between form, structure, and function, provide valuable insights into the multifaceted roles of objects and elements in creating sacred spaces, both makeshift and contingent. This deeper understanding underscores the complexity of spatial

11

production in such contexts.

In summary, this work constructs a comprehensive epistemology of house church worship spaces, incorporating theoretical and empirical dimensions. This approach positions such a space as an intersection of social, personal, and religious facets and a conduit between the material and spiritual realms. It acknowledges the materials and methodologies deployed in its construction while also appreciating its capacity for effective functioning (Fig. 1.2). Consequently, this provides a holistic understanding of the complex dynamics underpinning the creation and utilization of worship spaces within the context of house churches.
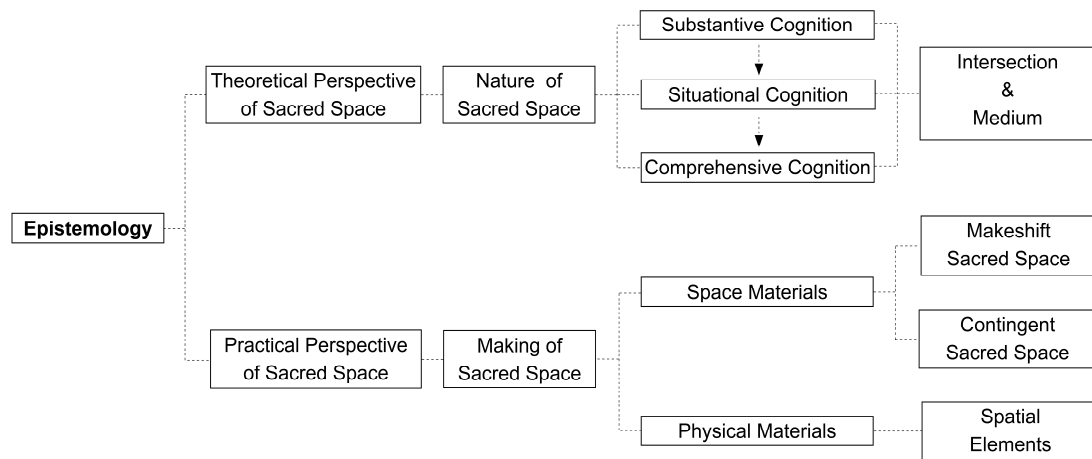
Fig. 1.2
Epistemological basis of the house church sacred space
Source: illustration by author

This study explores the place-making practices within Chinese house churches and their significance in the ongoing evolution of Christianity in China. A field survey scrutinized eight distinct house churches and their worship spaces to achieve this. The research investigates explicitly the tactics and materials used by these religious communities to transform secular areas into sacred spaces, and it delves into how these modified spaces accommodate religious liturgy, cultivates a sense of community, and engender spiritual ties within the congregation. Understanding the strategies and

techniques utilized to generate significant sacred spaces in non-traditional environments is instrumental in grasping the adaptive disposition of these religious communities. Examining these factors offers invaluable insights into how house churches negotiate and flourish amidst the complex social topography of China. This inquiry thus contributes to a more extensive understanding of the dynamic interplay among religious practices, social circumstances, and the built environment.

1.3 Field Investigation of the Place Phenomenon

"The use of the cathedral's monumental space necessarily entails its supplying answers to all the questions that assail anyone who crosses the threshold. For visitors are bound to become aware of their own footsteps, and listen to the noises, the singing; they must breathe the incense-laden air, and plunge into a particular world, that of sin and redemption; they will partake of an ideology; they will contemplate and decipher the symbols around them; and they will thus, on the basis of their own bodies, experience a total being in a total space. […] In cloister or cathedral, space is measured by the ear. […] It is in this way, and at this level, in the non-visible, that bodies find one another."

(Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 220–21, 225)

In his description of the cathedral, Lefebvre shifts attention from the ontology of space to the bodily subjects that participate in it. His description of the architectural phenomenon liberates the focus on church architecture from the spatial form under visual determinism and replaces it with the holistic experience of the body with the multi-sensory and spiritual dimensions of the built environment—the synaesthetic quality-related architectural phenomenon (Daelemans, 2020). A group of architects interested in phenomenology also called for attention to this kind of architectural bodily experience (Böhme, 2014; Griffero, 2014; Holl et al., 2006; Pallasmaa et al., 1994; Zumthor, 2006). For example, American architect Steven Holl (2006) emphasized,

"Only the architecture itself offers the tactile sensations of textured stone surfaces and polished wooden pews, the experience of light changing with movement, the smell and resonant sounds of space, the bodily relations of scale and proportion (p. 41)." Therefore architecture needs a person's body to be perceived and lived, and the actual concrete experience can only be found here and now. During the case studies, I entered the worship places of these house churches, aiming to obtain first-hand information through personal experiences and then analyze the transition process from daily spaces like homes to religious use spaces. This transformation, shaped by China's unique cultural and political background, is a significant focus of this research.

As mentioned earlier, as a social strategy, Chinese house church groups have chosen to abandon the representation of external forms in the production of places of worship; in the representation of the interior, they strive to deal with the interior space of the place in a sparing and effective intervention to accommodate the individual body and help unite as a collective body. In these inhabitants' and users' spaces, spaces are "dominated—and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change." As actual users, ecclesiastical communities "overlay physical space, making symbolic use of its objects (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39)." Unlike spaces conceived by architects, these spaces belonging to users tend to be non-verbal symbols and signs that cannot be deciphered but must be lived to be understood at a deeper, embodied level. Derived from historical and theoretical context reviews, I evaluated these spaces' construction and operational mechanisms through spatial transformation, symbolism and meaning, functionality and adaptation, communal identity and belonging, existential and emotional experiences, and the broader cultural and social context.

Concerning case selection, although house churches abound, their information remains elusive to locate via maps or internet searches. Typically, a recommendation from a church member is required to access them. As a result, the selection of cases

proves more restricted than that of official churches. To accommodate the research requirements, I aimed to retain as much flexibility in the case selection scope as feasible while confining it within reasonable bounds. My specific research focused on worship places that urban Chinese Protestant house church groups have repurposed from other spaces, such as residential areas, and which host regular worship activities on Sundays. The objective was to observe and analyze places within a relatively uniform social context, theological backdrop, and mode of worship.

Given the intricate interplay between humans, objects, and buildings in these spaces, a phenomenological research approach is proposed to analyze and clarify their relationship forms. Originating from philosophers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology serves as an interpretive exploration of human experience. It may provide a deep comprehension of architectural and local aspects, aimed at revealing phenomenon of the built environment to examine and elucidate human situations, events, meanings, and experiences that "spontaneously occur in everyday life (Von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 3) " and "a rigorous description of human life, reflected in its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 5)" to promote conscious awareness of architectural and place aspects. This facilitates understanding the multi-faceted relationships and interactions in these form-structure-function misaligned worship places. Utilizing a phenomenological approach to elucidate the spatial phenomena in Chinese house churches' worship places allows an exploration of how architectural spaces are experienced in consciousness through prototypical human experiences. Moreover, it offers an understanding of the role of human factors in shaping the sense of place, creating architectural embodiment, and establishing environmental ambiance.

Therefore, regarding a specific methodological framework (Fig. 1.3), I utilized and developed a three-pronged approach discussed by Seamon (2000) in architectural and environmental phenomenological research methods: **first-person, existential,** and

hermeneutical approaches[2]. In my research, the process includes researchers' in-depth participation and observation records of the phenomenon, interviews and investigations of individuals or groups involved, and explanation and evaluation of the above experiences.
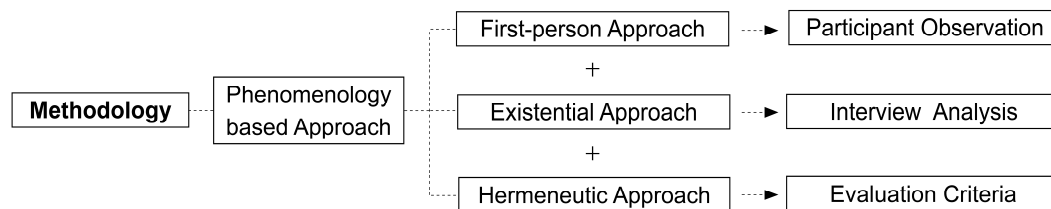
```
                              ┌─────────────────────┐  ┌────────────────────────┐
                          ┌···│ First-person Approach│··►│ Participant Observation │
                          :   └─────────────────────┘  └────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────┐ ┌──────────┐:            +
│ Methodology │─│Phenomenology│┤ ┌─────────────────────┐  ┌────────────────────────┐
└─────────────┘ │based Approach│:···│ Existential Approach │··►│   Interview Analysis   │
                └──────────┘:   └─────────────────────┘  └────────────────────────┘
                          :            +
                          :   ┌─────────────────────┐  ┌────────────────────────┐
                          └···│ Hermeneutic Approach │··►│   Evaluation Criteria  │
                              └─────────────────────┘  └────────────────────────┘
```

Fig. 1.3
Methodological basis of the house church case study
Source: illustration by author

The first-person approach involves direct participation in house churches' worship activities and community life. This method allowed for immediate observation and experience of these spaces' physical and social dynamics, leveraging the immersive and sensory qualities of architecture to analyze the transformed spaces' material elements, spatial forms, and identity features. Drawing inspiration from the works of Daelemans (2020), Holl, Pallasmaa, Perez-Gomez (2006), and Theis-Evensen (1989), I evaluated foundational elements such as floors, walls, and roofs, observing how their redefinition catalyzes the emergence of novel spatial forms. Central to this analysis is the application of Norberg-Schulz's (1971) spatial perception system and Edward Casey's (1994) concept of "place as the central ontological structure," which illuminate our interaction with space and the establishment of new perceptual patterns therein.

---

[2] **First-person approach** aims to gain direct and experiential insight into a phenomenon by profoundly engaging with it. This immersion provides a unique perspective based on the researcher's experience and allows for a thorough examination of the phenomenon's specific characteristics and qualities;
Existential approaches entail drawing broad conclusions from the experiences of specific individuals and groups in real-life scenarios and locations. Researchers must gather detailed accounts of respondents' encounters with the phenomenon and meticulously scrutinize them to pinpoint similarities and trends;
Hermeneutical approach involves delving into the meaning of a creator's work beyond what is explicitly stated or expressed by understanding the surrounding environment. This approach allows for various interpretations of space, departing from the conventional subject/object interaction model and adopting a more adaptable approach to find common ground among different explanations (Seamon, 2000).

Moreover, by integrating Gaston Bachelard's (2014) poetic of space and insights from other scholars (Grafton, 2014; Steffler, 2002; Taylor, 2004) on the symbolic significance of space and objects, I discerned the role of decoration and materials in molding spiritual experiences within these house churches and in nurturing community identity. My active participation in worship and other community events facilitated immersion in these spaces, capturing these house churches' emotional resonance, spatial dynamics, and pragmatic adaptations. Due to privacy considerations, the dissemination of photographs was limited, thus necessitating the creation of 3D models to communicate my findings effectively.

The existential approach involves systematically collecting and analyzing individuals' and groups' personal experiences and narratives using these worship spaces. I sought to understand architecture through the lens of everyday individuals, primarily focusing on those not professionally trained in the field, such as house church members. Their experiences suggested that the atmosphere, rather than architectural forms and details, played a more significant role in their interaction with space. Though elusive, the 'architectural atmosphere' concept is instrumental in shaping moods and experiences. To gain a deeper understanding, I conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to express their typically unconscious responses to the environment. These interviews, initiated with the permission of religious leaders, aimed to comprehend the selection of worship spaces and the congregation's experiences. My approach was open and adaptive; while the questions varied slightly from site to site, they consistently revolved around understanding the respondent's background, the church's context, and emotional experiences within the space. Despite individual variances, common patterns surfaced, enabling a comprehensive understanding of spatial phenomena. In my research, the objective of the interviews was not to uncover causal relationships between objects in space and emotional responses but rather to provide a tool. Through this tool, I could validate and adjust observations and analyses of spatial material elements and spatial forms from an 'outsider' perspective using the

emotional experience model of the participants, the 'insiders' in worship activities. This approach sought a balanced and accurate explanation of spatial phenomena.

The hermeneutical approach focuses on analyzing and interpreting observational and interview data, aiming to reveal meanings that people have not directly expressed or are not fully aware of. This strategy permitted the exploration of the 'lifeworld' of Chinese home church worship spaces, an intersection of architecture, sociology, and theology. I examined the transformation process of a house becoming a church, studying how these changes foster the emergence of a new 'lifeworld' within. Emphasizing these spaces' emotional resonance and ethical implications and their ability to sustain human activity, I used interviews and visual aids such as axial models and pictograms to comprehend these spaces' emotional dimensions and further analyze them within China's broader socio-political context. Through the theoretical frameworks of Edward Relph (1976), Stewart Brand (1995), and Pérez-Gómez (2016), I inspected the 'inside' and 'outside' experiences of these home churches. This approach enabled an evaluation of the impact of architectural elements on the religious worlds they encase, offering a deeper understanding of their significance in nurturing or potentially disrupting human life. Such exploration may pave the way for reimagining structures that enhance religious life and evoke sensations of wonder, imagination, grace, and elegance.

Using the methodologies above, I integrated them into the corresponding aspects of these worship spaces, which had been previously identified. In the preliminary phase, my focus was on spatial transformation, delving into the process by which commonplace homes metamorphose into sacred worship spaces. This necessitated a meticulous examination of modifications in physical layout, furnishings, lighting, and acoustics, thereby laying a concrete foundation for the understanding of these spaces. Following the architectural transformations, I then turned my attention toward the symbolism and meanings these spaces encapsulate. I aimed to decode the perception

of the religious community towards these transformed spaces and investigate how their secular past influences their current sacred utilization. This analysis proved instrumental in unraveling the layered meanings these environments imbibe. Subsequently, I adopted a functional perspective to probe how these spaces adapt to religious worship. This involved grasping the unique challenges these non-traditional worship spaces face and the strategies employed to surmount them. Moreover, I contemplated the dynamic interaction between the worshipers and these spaces, shedding light on their lived experiences. This also entailed the exploration of associated public identities and senses of belonging, with a critical focus on the collective consciousness of the worshippers. I sought to discern how the domestic ambiance of these transformed spaces impacts their perception of their faith community, thus revealing the role of these spaces in nurturing community ties. Stepping back to consider the larger milieu, I accounted for the broader cultural and societal context within which these house churches exist. I navigated the expansive landscape of religious practice in China, illuminating the socio-political factors that might influence the use of these non-traditional worship spaces. Ultimately, the worshippers' personal, existential, and emotional experiences were at the crux of my research. I delved into the subjective experiences of individuals within these spaces, striving to fathom how these non-traditional worship environments shape their spiritual and emotional trajectories. This human-centric approach culminated in a profound understanding, bringing my research journey full circle.

1.4 Practice of De- and Reconstruction of Worship Places

This study examines eight urban house churches in the eastern coastal regions of China. The selected cases represent the two distinct types of sacred spaces previously outlined: contingent and makeshift. When constructing these representational spaces, the categories of contingent and makeshift are not perceived as part of a differential vector. Instead, they are considered spatial materials integral to a broader spatial

strategy. Among the seven contingent cases, one church group rented a small office space, using it as a dedicated, permanent place of worship. Conversely, the remaining six cases involved residential spaces with varying spatial structures. These spaces underwent various modifications to establish long-term, fixed worship sites. The single makeshift case utilized an office space, temporarily repurposed for worship by a church member.

The interviews conducted serve as the foundational basis for discussion and analysis. These conversations, with church leaders or members who create and use these spaces, revealed a certain degree of similarity despite the highly personal religious experiences contributing to the diversity of responses. Patterns quickly became evident within the limited number of interviews, revealing insights into the nature of places shaped by specific social strategies. This parallels the views expressed by Relph in his work *Place and Placelessness* (1976), where he posits that a place's essence is located in its inhabitants' largely unconscious intentions. He proposes that these intentions define a place as the primary locus of human existence. Drawing from this concept, it can be surmised that the sense of place within these house churches stems from an authentic reflection of its members' social, economic, cultural, and religious lives as manifested in the form of the place. These factors significantly influence these worship places' shape, form, contours, dimensions, and materials. This reflection can be purposefully designed or naturally emerge from actual living and use. In analyzing interviews with church members (including some non-believers) who participated in the worship service, this spontaneous emergence was evidenced in the following aspects:

Re-arrangement of spatial sequence: Contrasting with the architect-orchestrated assemblies in purpose-built church spaces, the rearranged pulpits and seats in these non-customized worship venues give rise to user-determined forms of gatherings. This reflexive understanding of positioning, grounded in the largely unconscious intentions

of the congregants, reconfigures the focal point and orientation of the space, reflecting their theological cognitions.

Re-configuration of spatial power: The emergent spatial configurations in these worship spaces metaphorically underscore the reconstitution of religious, social, and personal power dynamics within the environment. The resequenced spatial organization effectively bifurcates the area into distinct zones, establishing novel boundaries. The interplay between these zones manifests the embedded religious power structures and hierarchy, thereby underlining the inherent order within these spaces.

Re-establishment of space identity: The leaders of these house churches are committed to creating worship spaces that align with their faith's teachings and progression. They aim to transcend the division and unease stemming from spatial disconnect, isolation, and unstable societal factors by fostering a sense of identity. This, in turn, provides the impetus to promote and sustain unity both in the individual's relationship with God and within the interpersonal dynamics of the religious community. Beyond the physical form of the gathering, imagery, symbolism, texture, and color serve pivotal roles in this transformative process.

Re-shaping the space atmosphere: The Christian spaces within these house churches are not manifested as total territorial occupation or isolation in the form of a protest. Instead, they represent a form of occupation and coexistence within secular spaces facilitated by informal negotiation with local government authorities. For their users, these spaces are often perceived as the worldly embodiment of God's realm. Within these interfaces where the earthly meets the divine, the atmosphere is typically layered and complex, a fusion of the familiar, secular emotion embodied by the home interwoven with the transcendent, sacred sentiment.

Through the records of my research on eight Chinese house churches, I have collected materials that can provide a more detailed insight into various topics. They contribute to revealing the transformation strategy these Chinese house churches utilize to create a safe and protected space for religious expression, despite facing challenges posed by policy adjustments and cultural exclusion. Physical materials (furniture, decoration, etc.) are configured into spatial materials (makeshift and contingent sacred space) through reduced intervention, resetting the above four aspects of space content. In this process, the center and direction of the space are changed, and the zone and order are reset, accompanied by the establishment of new communities and identities, as well as the growth of new emotions and affections (Fig. 1.4).
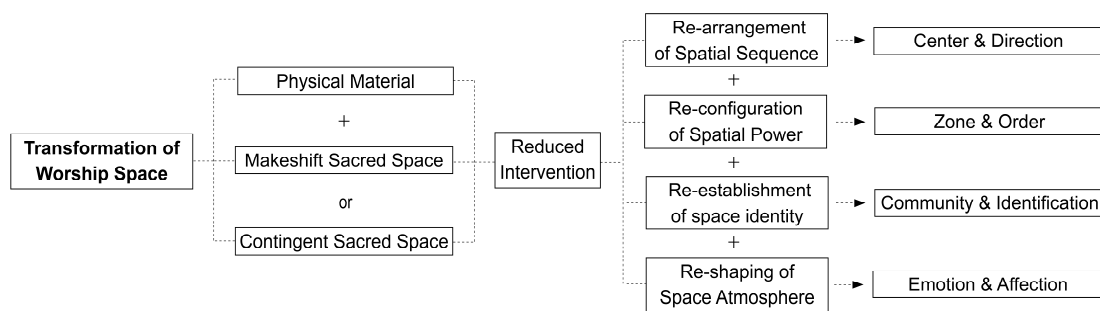
Fig. 1.4
Transformation strategy of conversion of secular spaces into sacred ones
Source: illustration by author

Unraveling these transformation strategies provides profound insight into how Christian congregants from these house churches mold their emotions and spiritual essence by negotiating physical spaces within a context of heightened social tension. This strategy embodies the most fundamental forms of the religious experiences of these groups and individuals. They integrate self, space, and time within these worship spaces, encompassing inspired religious imaginings, generalizing sacred boundaries, and collaborative construction behaviors.

Firstly, these house churches have successfully met the spiritual needs of their growing

community in China by implementing clear spatial structures and utilizing religious symbolism within the context of Chinese society. By reduced but effective material interventions, religious ethics, and power hierarchies behind rituals are expressed as clear spatial structures, activating an inside human character attribute and the human body with a particular reference value and reasoning potential, ending the boundary points of categories such as time and space in the place; these structures are paired with specific textual decorations with direct or indirect links to Christianity. These aids immerse the individual in the religious environment, facilitating the construction of an internal belief identity and engendering religious imagination.; this links certain materials and decorations on this site with more distant religious images, filling the gap in the image of some places.

Secondly, the worship spaces of the house churches examined in this study challenge the traditional dichotomy between the sacred and the secular seen in conventional church settings, blurring the traditionally distinct boundaries between the sacred and secular in conventional church places. These sites incorporate elements not explicitly designed for worship, fostering a comfortable and intimate environment conducive to deep religious connection. The fusion of secular and sacred sanctifies everyday elements, nurturing a unique religious sentiment and creating a sense of 'home' for the congregants. However, this notion of 'home' transcends the simple physicality of a dwelling and embodies the individual's place within kinship relationships deeply rooted in traditional Chinese family ethics. It extends beyond biological connections to include faith-based relationships within a theological context. This shift positions religion within community relationships rather than a specific location, thereby amplifying religious sentiment and reinforcing the internal cohesion of these house churches.

Finally, the creation of worship spaces in these house churches is an ongoing, dynamic process characterized by recurrent patterns of construction and deconstruction. As congregants engage in the spontaneous weekly set-up of their worship spaces, a

rhythmic sequence of time and space emerges. This process becomes an embodied religious practice, subtly aligning the actions of these "church builders" with theological order and infusing the process with an aura of devotion and sacrifice. Echoing the Christian tradition of contemplation, this repeated, ostensibly mundane action matures into a form of spiritual discipline, rooting participants in their faith. Space and faith are reimagined in this context-specific, iterative practice that transcends the physical to foster spiritual growth and a sense of community. Through this persistent ritual, emblematic of the resilience of Chinese house churches, members construct a physical worship space and continually fortify their spiritual edifice.

The emergence of a de-Eurocentric perspective in Chinese house churches' worship spaces occurs when social strategies are transformed into spatial strategies. Through the interplay between worship spaces and various other spatial categories, a unique religious sentiment is established that bridges the Chinese populace's everyday realms and familial concepts, thereby dissolving the boundary between the sacred and the secular. Understanding how Christian frameworks can be integrated and adapted amidst cultural exchanges is critical, particularly given the adaptable nature of house church worship spaces. This study carries considerable implications for the healthy development of Christianity in China, offering invaluable insights into how the religion can navigate and prosper amidst a complex socio-political landscape. Moreover, the findings and lessons gleaned can contribute to Christianity's self-renewal in Europe as it navigates its fluctuating cultural and societal dynamics. By investigating the dynamics of religious spaces and the strategies employed by house churches, this research provides a deeper understanding of the role of faith communities in molding and reenvisioning their environments, ultimately fostering a dialogue on the intersectionality of religion, culture, and societal change.

2 Context

The Chinese house church represents a religious paradigm that arose after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, borne out of divergent perspectives regarding the intersection of politics and religion. Rather than a sect in the theological context, it should more accurately be viewed as a religious proposition that operates autonomously from governmental oversight, seeking a more independent expression of Christianity. The spatial dynamics of these house churches – from the intimate confines of private dwellings to the clandestine nature of their assemblies – are intimately linked with their sociopolitical environment and theological tenets. The circumstances precipitating their inception, firmly anchored in their distinct historical and societal context, have profoundly shaped their religious practices and worldview. Consequently, the academic trajectory from historical contextualization to theoretical interpretation forms a pivotal aspect of this research undertaking, facilitating a more nuanced comprehension of the Chinese house church phenomenon.

2.1 Historical Context: Chinese House Churches after 1949

The year 2018 heralded the 40th anniversary of China's seminal policy of reform and opening-up, commemorating remarkable transformations and achievements over the preceding four decades. This era was characterized not only by economic metamorphoses, as indicated by GDP figures and various other indices, but also by significant ideological and cultural paradigm shifts. A salient feature of this evolution was the recalibration of China's religious policy and its consequent impact on the faith framework of its populace, particularly with respect to Christianity (Wenzel-Teuber, 2020).

Attributable to specific historical and ideological antecedents, primarily variances in doctrinal comprehension and interpretations regarding the interplay between

ecclesiastical institutions and secular governance, Protestantism in China bifurcated into the state-sanctioned Three-Self Church and the unofficial House Church. These present unique representations in their respective trajectories (Yu, 2012). House Churches, as unofficial religious entities that resist registration under the governmental management system, perpetually inhabit a legal gray area within the religious landscape. This circumstance has facilitated these churches in sculpting distinctive self-representations concerning theological discourse, organizational strategies, and spatial management, influenced by shifts in the state's religious policies and societal ideology.

2.1.1 Booming of Protestant Christianity in China

The growing prominence of Christianity in modern-day China is an undeniable social phenomenon. Its significance has transcended mere religious considerations and has become a prominent political and social issue (Kang, 2016; Protestant Christianity is Booming in China, 2020). It is important to note that within the Chinese context, Christianity is often synonymous with Protestantism, which has surpassed Catholicism in terms of numbers and social influence, establishing a dominant position (Albert, 2018; Lopes, 2018). These two sects of Christianity are typically studied as distinct religions in China. Both Catholicism and Protestantism are recognized at the national level among the five officially recognized religions, which also include Buddhism, Taoism, and Islam. The discussion in this study focuses on "Protestantism," known as Christianity, while the debate on Catholicism will only be briefly mentioned. Christianity in the following text also refers to Protestant Christianity unless otherwise specified.

The academic consensus regarding the precise count of Christians in China remains elusive. As per Chinese official data, in 1949, China had 700,000 Christians, comprising 0.17% of the nation's overall population (*History of Christianity and History of Chinese Christianity*, 2005). In 1982, the Communist Party of China's Central

Committee released Document No. 19, titled "Basic Views and Policies on Religious Issues in the Country's Socialist Period," stating approximately 3 million Christians and an equal number of Catholics at that time (*Basic Views and Policies on Religious Issues in the country's Socialist Period*, 1982). In 1997, the State Council Information Office published "Freedom of Religious Belief in China," indicating 10 million Christians, accounting for about 0.83% of the total population (*The Situation of Freedom of Religious Belief in China*, 2000). As of 2005, according to the central government portal website's information, the number of Christians in China had risen to 16 million, with over 50,000 churches and meeting places, nearly 3,000 pastors, 15,000 faculty, and roughly 110,000 volunteers. Given China's population of 1.307 billion in 2005, Christians constituted about 1.2% of the total population (Lu & Zhang, 2016). *The Blue Book of Religion - Report on Religion in China (2010)* presented research findings from the *Chinese Christian Households Questionnaire Survey* by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of World Religions. The study indicated that Christians constituted 1.8% of the nation's population, approximating 23.05 million individuals (Jin & Qiu, 2010). By 2018, the State Council's White Paper titled "China's Policies and Practices for Guaranteeing Freedom of Religious Belief" disclosed that China's Christian population had grown to 38 million, constituting 2.7% of the total populace (*White Paper on China's Policies and Practices for Guaranteeing Freedom of Religious Belief*, 2018). Thus, from 1949 to 2018, China's Christian population swelled by a factor of 54, and the Christian proportion of the populace increased 16-fold.
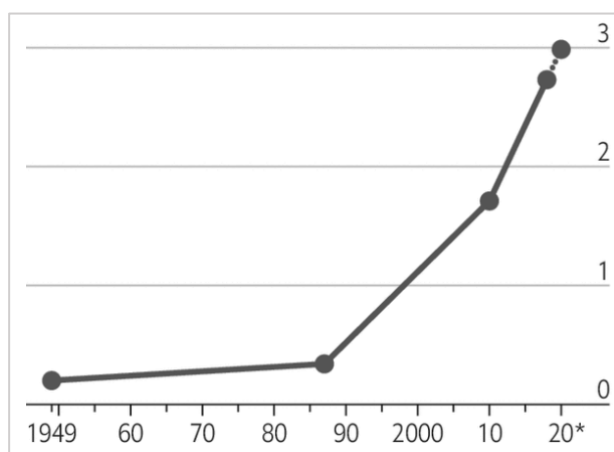

Fig. 2.1
Protestants, % of population in China from 1978 to 2018
Source:
https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/09/15/protestant-christianity-is-booming-in-china

However, a substantial disparity exists between these figures and the estimates offered by overseas scholars and Christian groups. In 2001, Patrick Johnstone and his colleagues projected that China housed 91.6 million Christians broadly defined, including 80 million Protestants (Johnstone et al., 2001). In 2003, David Aikman posited that China was home to 80 million Christians; should this trend persist, a third of China's population could convert to Christianity within the next 30 years, rendering China the most populous Christian nation globally (Aikman, 2006). According to the Pew Research Center's 2011 Global Christianity Report, 5% of Chinese were Christians in 2010, encompassing 58 million Christians and 9 million Catholics (*Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population*, 2011). Joseph B. Tamney quoted Platt's argument that out of mainland China's 1.3 billion population, there were 70 million Protestant Christians, equating to about 5% of the population, implying one in 20 individuals was a Christian (Tamney, 2008). In 2020, two researchers were invited to offer their estimated total count of Christians in mainland China. Carsten Vala, a political scientist from Loyola University Maryland, suggested figures over 100 million, precisely 100 million, or 85-90 million (three different estimates). Fenggang Yang, a sociologist from the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, projected the Christian count at 116 million. Both researchers anticipated an annual growth rate of 7% (Vala) or 7.3% (Yang) for the Christian population in China (Wenzel-Teuber, 2021).

The extensive disparity in statistics is not merely a research problem of statistical methods and analysis models but is also intimately associated with the unique church form shaped by China's political and social environment and the resultant challenges in data acquisition. Overseas institutions or individuals commonly believe that China's official figures only account for the official churches under the United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee's management, excluding the considerable number of unregistered "underground churches," also known as "house churches." However, it is generally believed that the number of house church members

approximates that of official churches and could even double or triple this number (Huang & Zhai, 2011; Yang & Dong, 2014).

2.1.2 House Church and Policy Changes

House churches (Chinese: 家庭教会; Pinyin: Jiātíng Jiàohuì) represent independent Protestant assemblies in the People's Republic of China. Their defining attribute is their status as unregistered religious bodies that function autonomously from the state-endorsed Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC). Variously classified as autonomous, independent, unofficial, and underground, these entities arise and subsist outside of official sanction (Koesel, 2013). From a local governance perspective, house churches are typically labeled as "illegal gatherings" or unapproved religious activities, per the Constitution stipulations and the Regulations on Religious Affairs. The local religious administrations often employ the term "underground church" to denote their status.

Within the framework of the official Three-Self Church, interpretations of house churches vary significantly depending on factors like time and region. Some members acknowledge the rationality of their existence, viewing them as fellow children of God. In contrast, others perceive house churches as entities in the religious "gray market" or even "black market (Yang, 2006)". The latter group views the existence of house churches as a blasphemous affront to faith. In general, academia defines a Christian house church as a congregation of Christians who engage in religious activities such as prayer, Bible reading, singing, and baptism in a private space or believer's home. They comprise a self-organized religious group of dozens to several thousand people, typically without a fixed pastor or preacher, a fixed meeting place, and no registration with the relevant government departments (Yang & Dong, 2014).

The house church movement in China is widely perceived as a response to the

religious policies implemented following the establishment of socialist China in 1949. The movement's past and present forms exhibit varying relationships with the changes in national religious policy. In her analysis of Chinese house churches, Kang (2016) divided the central government's religious policy from 1949 to 2016 into three phases: strategic tolerance, suppression, and relaxation. I argued that, after 2017, the enactment of the revised Religious Affairs Regulations signified a new era in China's religious policy, viewed as the state's strengthening intervention and guidance compared to the preceding period of relaxation (Chang, 2018; Yang, 2017).

1949-1958

In the early days following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the new Chinese Communist regime needed to "unite all forces that could be united." It consolidated the government's foundation through alliances and consultations with religious leaders, aiming to institutionalize the five recognized religions of Christianity, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism. As a result, religious policy during this initial period was relatively tolerant.

Christianity was drawn into the central government's "united front" work as a unifying force. The main challenge faced by Christianity at the time was considered as its connections with "Western imperialism." To sever these ties between Chinese churches and believers and foreign missions and missionaries, a reform movement was launched within Chinese Christianity in 1950. The objective was to complete the internal transformation of the church by expelling foreign missionaries and promoting the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM; Chinese: 三自爱国运动; Pinyin: Sānzì Àiguó Yùndòng). This led to the establishment of a state-sponsored Chinese church organization that disconnected all external relationships (Kang, 2016, pp. 1-3).

After three years of preparation, the First Conference of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China (Chinese: 中国基

督教三自爱国运动委员会；Pinyin: Zhōngguó Jīdūjiào Sānzì Àiguó Yùndòng Wěiyuánhuì) adopted the Constitution of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee in 1954. This aimed to "unite Christians across the country and promote the realization of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation (Chinese: 自治、自养、自传；Pinyin: Zìzhì, Zìyǎng, Zìchuán) of the Chinese Church" (Wu, 1953). Independent churches were encouraged to cooperate with the central government and register to join the TSPM, often referred to as the "Three-Self Church."

Simultaneously, a group of independent churches led by conservative church leaders like Wang Mingdao, Song Shangjie, and Jia Yuming, who were uninterested in discussing social and political issues, refused to join the TSPM. These churches had distinct management methods that contrasted sharply with the social reformism and modernist theology represented by Wu Yaozong and Ding Guangxun within the TSPM. Operating independently of the system, these unofficial churches formed the prototype for "house churches" that would emerge after 1980 (Chao, 1997, pp. 78-91).

1958-1979

Beginning in 1958, the central government in China tightened its intervention in ideological and cultural sectors, with the religious sector being the first to bear the brunt of this. The Anti-Rightist Campaign (Chinese: 反右运动；Pinyin: Fǎnyòu Yùndòng) launched in 1958 saw Chinese religion squeezed between "revisionist" and "leftist" ideologies. This led to severe curtailment of religious activities, moving towards a state of suppression. Many churches were shut down as public religious expression was further constrained by the policy to "merge the Three-Self Churches" that started in 1958 (Chao, 1997, pp. 107-111). By 1964, the Four Cleanups Movement (Chinese: 四清运动; Pinyin: Sìqīng Yùndòng), designed to promote socialist education, had caused many official three-self churches to cease their activities. As a result, many Christians left the Three-Self Churches and moved to unofficial churches that hadn't joined the three-self system (Chao, 1997, p.160).

The "Cultural Revolution" was officially launched on May 16, 1966, with the "May 16 Notice" or the "Notice of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China." This political movement, with its aim to break the "Four Olds" (Chinese: 四旧; Pinyin: Sì Jiù), that is, "old ideas," "old culture," "old habits," and "old customs" (Chinese: 旧思想, 旧文化, 旧风俗, 旧习惯; Pinyin: Jiù Sīxiǎng, Jiù Wénhuà, Jiù Fēngsú, Jiù Xíguàn), had a profound impact on the country. It demanded that all literature, art, ideology, and other areas incompatible with the socialist economic base be criticized. Religion was heavily criticized, being seen as ideological cancer. In October 1967, the United Front Work Department and the Religious Affairs Bureau were attacked by the Red Guards and dissolved. The Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee also stopped functioning entirely. China's official churches were closed, religious symbols destroyed, and religious leaders were condemned as "ox demons and snake spirits" (Chinese: 牛鬼蛇神; Pinyin: Níu Guǐ Shé Shén). All forms of worship were banned, and numerous church buildings were destroyed or repurposed into factories, warehouses, conference halls, or government offices. Christian activities in public were wholly suppressed and eliminated (Chao, 1997, pp. 182-187; Kang, 2016, p.4).

Fig. 2.2
On August 23, 1966, the Xujiahui Church in Shanghai was attacked by Red Guards, and the door was pasted with the slogan "Beat to Idealism."
Source:https://www.bannedbook.org/bnews/lishi/20190302/1089931.html

However, this intense pressure on religion didn't extinguish Christianity. In fact, during the Cultural Revolution, traditional religion, which had long held a dominant position in Chinese society's religious ecology, was destroyed, thereby inadvertently providing more room for Christianity to grow (Duan, 2010). Repressed as the official church was, unofficial religious activities persisted, particularly in rural areas where religious management was comparatively lenient. Worship and other activities moved from public spaces to private homes of believers.

Forced to be cut off from Western churches and operate in secret, Chinese house churches had the opportunity to develop their unique style and theology. The merging of churches and forced severance from Western missions dissolved the denominational background of the Chinese church. This led Chinese house churches to transform from a Western church-institutionalized organization into a non-institutionalized faith group. Particularly in rural areas, activities with Pentecostal characteristics, such as miracles, healing, and banishing evil spirits, became the central focus and attracted large followings (Kao, 2009).

1979-2017

In 1976, the tumultuous Cultural Revolution ended, and the Chinese government started to re-establish order. In 1978, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) forwarded the *Report on The Request for Instructions of the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee on Two Policy Issues Urgently Needed to be Resolved in Current Religious Work*. This report emphasized the earnest and comprehensive implementation of the policy on freedom of religious belief stipulated in the Constitution while highlighting the need to distinguish between different contradictions and manage religious activities. The core objective was to rectify past lines and restore religious freedom (Cheng, 2020). As a result, religious activities were allowed in China once more. Religious institutions were re-established, and religious practitioners resumed their public religious activities. Official churches

under the Three-Self Patriotic Movement reopened for public worship, and some believers who had previously worshipped at home returned to these churches. Nevertheless, several Christians, aiming to maintain their faith's purity, preferred to remain removed from politics and continued their worship activities at home, refraining from joining the Three-Self system (Chao, 1997, pp. 333-337).

Fig. 2.3
The Three-Self Church on Mishi Street in Beijing reopened to the public in April 1979
Source: A History of Christianity in Socialist China 1949~1997 (Chao, 1997)

In 1982, the CPC Central Committee published The Basic Views and Policies on Religious Issues in China during the Socialist Period (Document No. 19), which is seen as the foundation of China's religious policy in the new era and the socialist religious theory with Chinese characteristics. Christianity was acknowledged as an "objective social phenomenon," and the religious rights of citizens were assured. In particular, the document explained, "As for Christian gatherings at home, religious activities should not be allowed in principle, but should not be forcibly prohibited. Instead, patriotic religious personnel should work to persuade believers and make appropriate arrangements." However, religion was still viewed as a potential adversary that could challenge the state's authority. While granting freedom of belief, the state also restricted the locations and manner in which religious activities could be conducted (Chao, 1997, pp. 302-305). This was perceived as a form of "localization" of the religious system, with religious activities confined to specific areas (Li, 2006).

Fig. 2.4
Worship of a rural
house church in
Henan in the 1980s
Source: A History of
Christianity in Socialist
China 1949~1997
(Chao, 1997)

The religious policies of this period primarily adhered to the guidelines outlined in Document No.19. Influenced by the Color Revolution in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, the central government issued a series of regulations to regulate the administration of religion. These included the *Regulations on the Administration of Sites for Religious Activities*, *Regulations on the Administration of Religious Activities of Foreigners within the Territory of the People's Republic of China*, and *Regulations on Religious Affairs*. In November 2008, the Development Research Center of the State Council and the Pushi Institute of Social Science, Beijing, jointly organized the 'Workshop of Christianity and Harmonious Society - Chinese House Church Symposium.' This workshop aimed to study and discuss the desensitization of house churches, hoping to depoliticize the issue of house churches, viewing them as social phenomena rather than political ones and guiding them towards legal registration. Although house churches still faced pressure to register, the religious policy of the central government during this period was still considered relatively relaxed against the backdrop of social transformation, economic liberalization, and political openness (Chao, 1997, pp. 528-531; Cheng, 2020; Yu, 2012).

With the state transitioning to market economy development, local society's oversight of religious and political matters decreased. Local governments prioritized showcasing their ability to foster economic growth over supervising religious activities (Lim, 2020).

This gave house churches a relatively large and flexible operating space. They were even permitted to meet openly or establish their places in some areas. The locations of house church gatherings extended beyond homes. In addition to a few newly built dedicated worship places, most house churches rented or bought office buildings or even old factory buildings. Local governments adopted a relatively tolerant stance towards such practices (Kang, 2016; Li, 2010).

2017 onward

The Regulations on the Administration of Religions, which were revised and adopted by The State Council in June 2017 and implemented on February 1, 2018, signify a shift towards a more comprehensive intervention and guidance policy regarding the administration of religions (Chang, 2018; Yang, 2017).

Contrasting with the 2004 version, the updated regulations place a heightened emphasis on potential security threats posed by religious networks, thereby imposing stricter and more standardized management on the form, location, and scope of religious activities (Chang, 2018). This shift from the previous stance has prompted local governments to prioritize dealing with religious matters as part of their regular agendas. This change has significantly impacted the operation of house churches, curtailing large and relatively public gatherings. In response, some churches began redesigning their organizational structures and gathering arrangements, breaking larger communities into smaller groups. They maintain activity through solid connections between these groups or cells, and the venues have been mainly shifted to private residences and apartments (Kang, 2016, 2019). The COVID-19 outbreak in late 2019, and the subsequent government management of public gatherings, further limited the space for church activities, thus accelerating this transformation (Mandryk, 2021).
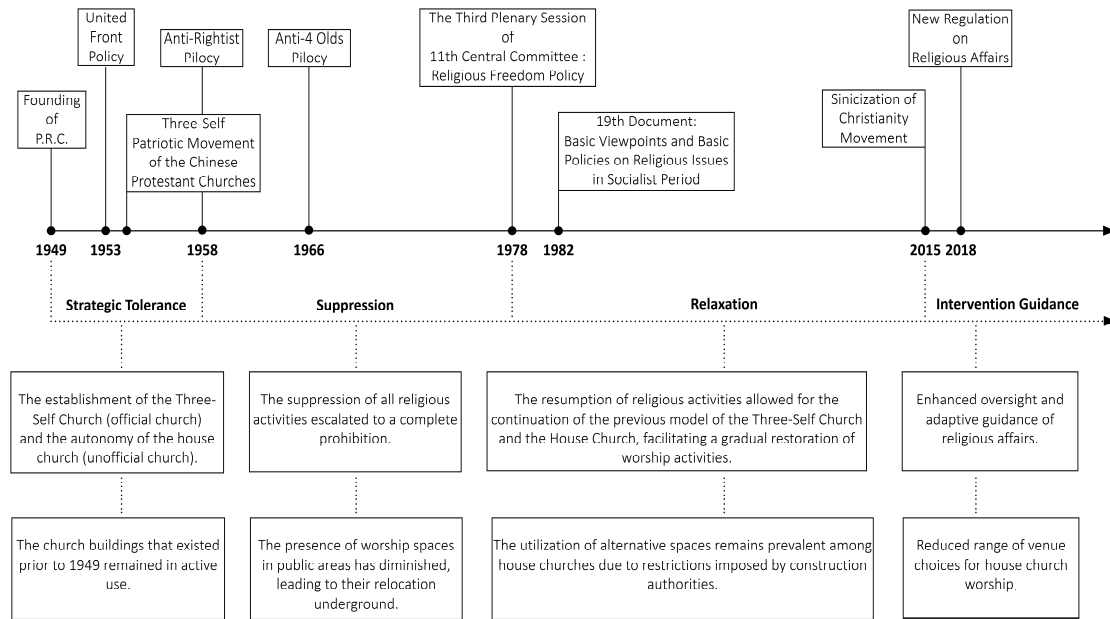
Fig. 2.5

Policy changes in China after 1949 related to the development of Christianity

Source: illustration by author based on Chao (1997) and Kang (2016)

2.1.3 House Church and Urbanization Movement

The process of urbanization, beginning in 1978 and particularly intensifying after 1996, stands as a significant characteristic of China's societal shifts. This development contrasts Weber's assertion that Protestant (primarily Calvinistic) ethics fostered the conditions for commercialization and urbanization. In her study on Chinese house churches, Kang (2016) proposed the contrary in the Chinese context. She argued that the rapid urbanization process in China has, in fact, molded the novel characteristics of contemporary Chinese Christianity (p. 12).

Urbanization transformation of Chinese society

Since initiating economic reforms and open-up policy in 1978, China has undergone a rapid and sustained urbanization process, leading to significant societal transformations. For instance, the urban population escalated from 172.54 million in 1978 to 831.37 million in 2018, marking an average annual increase of 16.47 million. Conversely, the rural population diminished from 790.14 million to 564.01 million during

the same period, corresponding to an average annual decrease of approximately 4.9 million. China's urbanization level surged from 17.92 percent to 59.58 percent, representing an average annual augmentation of 1.04 percentage points. Notably, since 1996, China's urbanization process has witnessed a dramatic acceleration, with the yearly growth rate averaging 1.32 percentage points between 1996 (30.48 percent) and 2018 (59.58 percent). This growth rate was 1.8 times higher than that observed from 1978 to 1996. In 2011, China's urbanization level surpassed 50 percent for the first time, indicating that the number of permanent urban residents exceeded rural residents. This transition marked the termination of a centuries-long, predominantly agricultural society, culminating in a newly urbanized landscape (China, 2019).
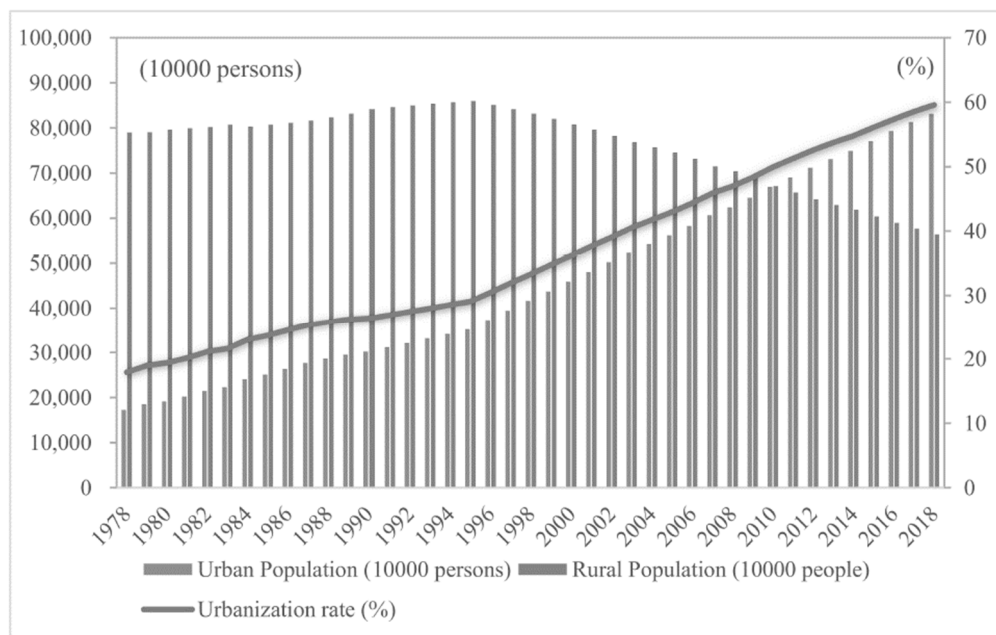

Fig. 2.6
Changes in urban and rural population distributions in China 1978–2018
Source: *The Integration of New-type Urbanization and Rural Revitalization Strategies in China: Origin, Reality and Future Trends* (Chen et al., 2021)

Christian transformation in the context of urbanization

The rapid urbanization process China has experienced since the initiation of reforms in 1978, notably since 1996, has significantly altered the country's social fabric. Huang (2012) has shown that the trans-local flows of rural integration into urban centers since

the late 1990s have caused a noticeable decline in the rural church. A significant contributor to this decline has been economic migration. Young villagers, predominantly men, have joined millions of migrants from different parts of China, seeking employment and improved living standards in urban areas. This movement has led to the gradual depletion of the rural Christian community, shifting the composition of Chinese Christians away from a rural majority. The majority of rural Christians, previously constituting 80% of the total Christian population, have moved to cities and towns, and Chinese Christian demographics have shifted correspondingly toward urban populations (Duan, 2012).

Simultaneously, urban Christianity in China evolved under various social and political issues in the 1980s to 1990s, globalization trends, and the market economy. Scholars such as Gao (2005) and Yang (2004) note that Christianity, for some Chinese citizens who aspire to globalization, has evolved from being seen as a foreign and potentially imperialistic Western religion into a symbol of progress, liberation, urban modernity, and cosmopolitanism. This perception shift has led to a section of urban dwellers, disillusioned with social movement and communist ideology, seeking Christianity as a source of religious and moral certainty. New urban Christian converts are increasingly from Chinese society's elite strata, comprising successful entrepreneurs, scholars, and professionals.

These socio-demographic shifts, involving rural-urban Christian migrants seeking urban modernity and increasing urban elite Christian groups, have reshaped Chinese Christianity's characteristics. This evolution has enabled Chinese Christianity to shed its previous "Superstition - Backwardness" image, transitioning towards a "Christianity – Modernity" narrative. Cao's (2010) research on Christian entrepreneurs in Wenzhou highlights this transition. Cao describes how migrant workers, participating in Wenzhou Christianity, interact with local urban residents within the church and assimilate into urban modernity. He argues that Wenzhou Christians, unlike their rural counterparts,

represent an urban-focused group that more closely symbolizes Western modernity than redemption or resistance.

In her research on house churches in Linyi, Kang (2016) provides a more nuanced understanding of these transformations. She disputes Madsen's (2011) view that Chinese Christianity maintains a transcendental framework similar to Medieval European Christianity's magical world, characterized by belief in miracles and supernatural forces. Instead, Kang argues that China's rapid urbanization and the recent acceleration of capitalist development have catalyzed the emergence of modern, city-based Christianity. While rural Christianity in China, which developed during the Cultural Revolution, aligns with Madsen's Pentecostalism-tinged characterization, urban Christianity veers away from this ecstatic form (Kang, 2016, p.247). Urban church leaders take a more rational, less ritualistic, education-based approach, with members primarily embracing "new life" through studying and understanding Biblical texts, exhibiting Calvinist characteristics (Kang, 2016, pp. 142-144).

As articulated by Kang (2019), localized Calvinism within urban Chinese house churches exemplifies several distinct characteristics. In terms of political stances, Chinese Calvinism does not actively champion political and social reforms. Instead, it underscores the importance of personal morality and piety and subtly discourages overt political expressions. The churches studied by Kang construe the authority of China's Communist government as divinely endowed, a perception that steers them towards refraining from direct opposition and maintaining a certain degree of distance to secure greater autonomy. Secondly, Chinese Calvinism has forged a systematic theology that upholds the Bible as the paramount authority. The theological instruction within these churches has engendered a holistic belief system centered around reason, consequence, and action. Thirdly, in organizational models, Chinese Calvinism deviates from the egalitarian structure espoused by American Calvinism. It instead appears to lean towards a more hierarchical arrangement, akin to the Presbyterian

model. Lastly, in stark contrast to early European Calvinists, Chinese Calvinists exhibit a potent sense of assurance regarding their redemption, firmly believing in the divine orchestration of their lives. These convictions contribute to a worldview that accentuates obedience to collective discipline and does not preclude business-oriented thinking. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on inner growth and personal morality.

In conclusion, localized Calvinism exhibits distinctive characteristics as manifested within urban Chinese house churches. These include a focus on personal piety over political reforms, the establishment of a theology that revolves around the Bible, a preference for a hierarchical church organization, and a deep-seated belief in divine predestination. These factors foster a worldview that underscores obedience to collective discipline, integrates business thought, and accentuates personal morality and inner growth.

2.1.4 House Church and Cultural Debate

Unlike its cultural positioning within European society, Christianity in the East Asian cultural context often faces an unavoidable label as a "cultural other." Christian ideology and its cultural representations frequently encounter challenges and inquiries based on interpretations of cultural identity and tradition (Löffler, 2018). Especially in China's modern history, as Christianity developed, cultural conflicts persistently surfaced.

The arrival of Protestant missionaries such as Morrison in the early 19th century signified a pivotal shift in the evolution of Christianity within China. The missionary movement proliferated during the late Qing and Republican periods (1911-1949), setting up a multitude of Christian institutions, including churches, schools, and hospitals. However, the swift propagation of Christianity also incited apprehensions

about its impact on traditional Chinese beliefs and value systems. These concerns intensified with the escalating influence of Western powers via unequal treaties, thus stoking xenophobic and anti-Christian sentiments within the Chinese populace. A notable historical incident embodying these tensions was the Boxer Rebellion (Chinese: 义和团; Pinyin: Yìhétuán) spanning 1899 to 1901, which aimed its aggression toward foreign missionaries, Chinese converts, and foreign embassies. Missionaries were perceived as conduits of foreign imperialism, and Chinese Christians were labeled cultural traitors. Numerous Catholic and Protestant churches, Christian schools, hospitals, and other establishments were destroyed or damaged during this period. The extensive damage inflicted upon Christian institutions during the Boxer Rebellion considerably impacted the Chinese Christian community (Bays, 2011; Esherick, 1987).

As mentioned, another remarkable anti-Christian movement occurred during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The reform and opening-up policies instituted during the 1980s created conducive conditions for Christianity's development in China, and it progressively garnered acceptance across a more extensive range of social classes as a symbol of modernity. Nevertheless, Christianity is often seen as an alien religion that stands at odds with traditional Chinese culture and values. The values and behaviors it espouses can collide with indigenous religious belief systems like Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, as well as practices such as ancestor worship that are deeply entrenched in Chinese culture and society. Consequently, pockets of suspicion and resistance towards Christianity persist among specific population segments, leading to cultural misunderstandings and tensions between Chinese Christians and non-Christians. For example, Chinese society heavily emphasizes family and social harmony, and some perceive conversion to Christianity as disrupting these relationships. Newly converted individuals may face pressure from their families or communities to adhere to traditional beliefs and customs or even renounce their newfound faith. This intricate social and historical backdrop has made it challenging

for Christianity to achieve widespread acceptance or be entirely integrated into the fabric of Chinese culture (Bays, 2011; Esherick, 1987).
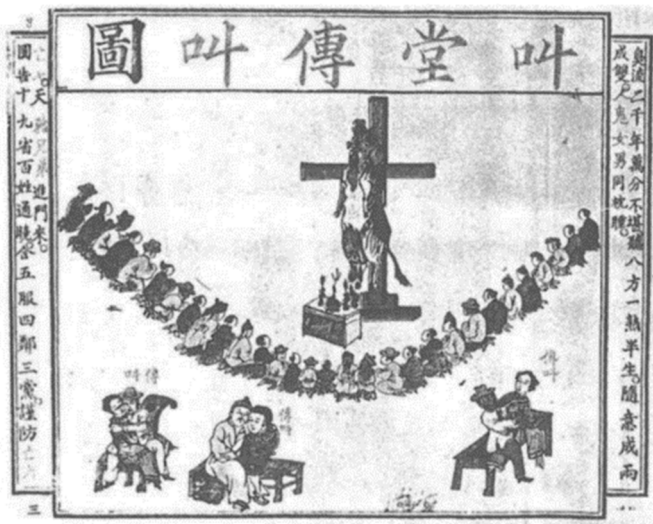

Fig. 2.7
Anti-Christian propaganda cartoons during the Boxer Rebellion. It depicts that when the church was spreading heresies, the Boxers believed that the church was spreading false rumors to deceive the public, but the missionaries took advantage of the opportunity to seduce women. Source:https://exchristian.hk/forum /viewthread.php?tid=3791

Fig. 2.8
Anti-Christian propaganda cartoons during the Boxer Rebellion. This painting adopts the theme of trial, shooting and beheading "pig" (Chinese homonym for Lord) and "sheep" (Chinese homonym for foreigners). Source:https://exchristian.hk/forum /viewthread.php?tid=3791

In summation, the trajectory of Christianity in China is punctuated with periods of growth and accompanying challenges. The proliferation of Christianity during the missionary era elicited resistance and antagonism, as it was perceived to undermine traditional ideologies and symbolize foreign imperialism. Although Christianity has

garnered broader acceptance in recent decades, it remains stereotyped as a foreign religion that conflicts with indigenous cultural values, generating cultural misunderstandings and fostering tensions between Chinese Christians and non-Christians. The complexity of China's sociocultural and historical landscape has posed barriers to the more comprehensive acceptance of Christianity and its assimilation into Chinese society. In light of these challenges, both official and unofficial Christian communities and leaders have sought innovative strategies to incorporate Chinese characteristics into Christian doctrines, develop local leadership, and strive to mitigate cultural heterogeneity.

In response to this cultural phenomenon, the government intends to guide Christianity towards compatibility with the Chinese cultural, social, and political backdrop through a series of religious policies enacted under the "Sinicization of Christianity." This initiative aims to enhance Christianity's adaptability to Chinese culture and socialist society while minimizing foreign religious organizations' influence. Several related aspects in the practice of the official churches include but are not limited to:

1) Localized Christian Theology Development: This encourages the cultivation of Chinese Christian theology that blends elements of Chinese culture and values, such as Confucianism, Taoism, and socialism. 2) Integration of Chinese Art, Music, and Architecture: This can manifest in utilizing Chinese instruments and styles in liturgy, incorporating Chinese art and calligraphy into religious texts, and designing churches that reflect traditional Chinese architectural aesthetics. 3) Emphasis on Family Values and Social Harmony: This may involve adjusting Christian teachings to underscore the significance of filial piety, respect for authority, and maintenance of social order. 4) Patriotism Promotion: This mandates Chinese Christians to exhibit patriotism and allegiance to the Communist Party. Encouraging church and religious leaders to foster patriotism within their congregations can involve integrating elements of patriotism into religious services and activities.

Fig. 2.9
The January 2019 cover of Tianfeng Magazine, China's official Christian publication. The cover depicts the story of five loaves and two fish in Mark 6:30-44 in the form of Chinese traditional painting.
Source:
https://news.cts.com.tw/cts/intern
ational/201911/201911051980098.html

The Sinicization of Christianity policy has elicited disparate reactions from Chinese Christians and international observers. While some perceive this as a necessary adaptation to facilitate the thriving of Christianity within the Chinese milieu, thus fostering broader acceptance of Christianity in Chinese society, others argue that it strays from the main axis of the religion's tenets (Lim, 2017; Madsen, 2021; Vermander, 2019; Zheng, 2017). Contrary to the government's decisive intervention and guidance through policy, Chinese house churches typically employ more nuanced approaches to reconcile cultural conflicts and peripheral values. These methods generally do not confront the faith's core teachings; instead, they concentrate on the contextual refinement of peripheral and core values of the doctrine. This usually encompasses:

1) Contextualization of Teachings: Numerous house churches amalgamate Christian teachings and practices within the Chinese cultural framework, blending elements of Confucianism, Taoism, and other aspects of Chinese culture with Christian theology

and practice. 2) Contextualization of Core Values: House churches frequently underscore core Christian values such as love, compassion, forgiveness, and social justice, which resonate with many facets of traditional Chinese culture. House churches can bridge cultural disparities and foster connections between Christianity and Chinese society by focusing on these values. 3) Promotion of Personal Transformation: House churches emphasize personal transformation and spiritual development. By encouraging believers to establish a profound personal relationship with God, house churches can assist believers in surmounting cultural barriers and striking a balance between their Christian faith and Chinese heritage. 4). Establishment of Close-Knit Communities: House churches often nurture close-knit communities, providing mutual support and encouragement to believers as they traverse cultural conflict. These communities can offer a platform for believers to exchange experiences, deliberate challenges, and learn from one another.

Confronted with cultural clashes, most house church leaders eschew confrontation in their beliefs. Instead, they equip believers with a space to practice their faith harmoniously with their cultural identity (Lambert, 2006; Lian, 2010; Starr, 2016; Yang, 2011). In conclusion, the scenario of Christianity in the Chinese sociocultural context epitomizes the unpredictability inherent in the shifting of complex religious systems across regions and cultures. Unlike European Christian communities, which have accrued historical identity, transcendence, and political and legal clout, Chinese Christian communities are engaged in encountering, adapting, adopting, and reinterpreting both Chinese and Western cultures.

2.1.5 House Church and Place Struggle

Contrasting the capitalist countries' primary endeavor to reconfigure space through commodification, the production of socialist abstract space emphasizes consolidation and controllability (Elazar, 2018). This process, in relation to China, has been

characterized as follows: Socialist space was engendered through the tightening of administrative lines extending across the nation and infiltrating local communities, lines establishing a hierarchy of administrative spaces and tethering remote locations back to the central hub in Beijing (Yang, 2004). The Three-Self churches and house churches occupy divergent positions within this intricate administrative space that extends from the central government to local administrations, delineated by pronounced organizational lines. They elicit distinct spatial representations in negotiating the environmental tensions inherent to their respective positions.

Three-self Churches：Initiatives Towards the Sinification of Christianity

Within China's administrative governance framework, spatial production is primarily managed by the state authority. Recognized official churches within the Three-Self system, subject to the state's regulatory oversight, have the privilege to apply for land to construct church buildings. This authority subsequently transforms into a place-based strategy for the central government to manage these religious communities. Article 41 of the revised 2017 *Regulations on the Administration of Religions* stipulates that religious activities cannot be organized by non-religious organizations or educational institutions or conducted in non-religious venues or undefined temporary activity sites. Irrespective of a religious organization's structure, any religious activity must occur in a designated worship site registered for religious purposes and conform to government-approved conduct (*Regulations on the Administration of Religions*, 2017). Consequently, in the operational paradigm of China's official Christian churches, the management and emphasis of religious regulations on Christian activity venues have enabled venues under the Three-Self system to fulfill actual church organization functions. This has led to the scenario where the "place" of the official church supersedes the "church organization," becoming the focal point of religious activities. This accentuates the spatial identity of Christians but weakens the community identity (Li, 2006).

This enhanced spatial identity positions these church buildings, replicating traditional European churches' construction logic within the typology framework, as territorial, cultural contestations challenging mainstream socialist values. From governmental to non-governmental discourses, numerous debates have emerged on constructing church buildings within China's sociocultural context (International Confucian Organization Appeals: Oppose the Construction of a Christian Church in Qufu, 2011). The new religious management regulations in 2017 advocated the "Sinicization of Christianity," echoing the "Indigenization of Christianity Movement" dating back to the late 19th century. Through cultural integration and remodeling, it is hoped that Chinese Christianity will discard its foreign cultural attributes and image as an "alien religion," developing an expression rooted deeply within Chinese societal and cultural soil. On the one hand, the authorities encourage efforts to inherit and revive the 19th-century Indigenization Movement's architectural forms. By incorporating cultural symbols, these churches visually mitigate the "Western Christianity" image, thus establishing an emotive and value identity based on local cultural forms (Kan, 2015; Su, 2018; Wang, 2018). On the other hand, by limiting the presence and influence of church buildings in urban public spaces, hoping to resolve somewhat the conflict between Christianity and Chinese societal ideology (Elazar, 2018; Ying, 2018).

Fig. 2.10
The traditional Chinese roof of Protestant Church in Sanyuan
Source: *Make Church Buildings Take Root in the Soil of Chinese Culture* (Kan, 2015)

House Churches: Endeavors to Secure Spatial Advantage through Invisibility

Within the State's Religious Affairs Ordinance stipulations, churches that are not affiliated with the officially recognized Three-Self Patriotic Movement are deemed illegal. Consequently, house churches, in the majority of cases, lack the privilege to apply for land to construct church buildings. Although in certain regions, such as Zhejiang Province, where local religious administration was comparatively lenient, local governments occasionally turned a blind eye, permitting individual house church communities to construct churches through alternate application methods. However, this has become an increasingly rare occurrence following the enforcement of new religious management regulations in 2017. Numerous church buildings that once belonged to house churches now face the risk of demolition orders (Elazar, 2018; Makinen, 2014).
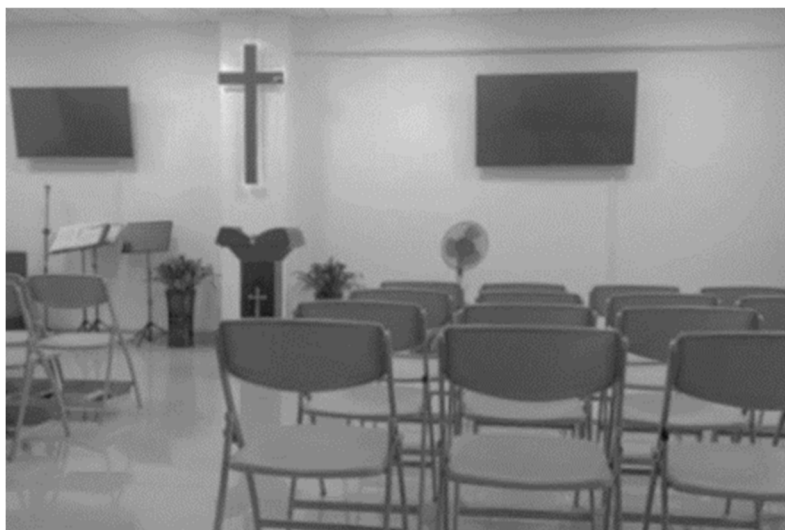

Fig. 2.11
The worship venue of a Chinese house church
Source: https://www.msa-it.org/freedom-news20200321/

In general, house churches have sustained the modus operandi established during the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, retreating from public urban spaces and remaining hidden from public view. They opt to lease space within secular buildings, such as offices, meeting rooms, and residential properties, subsequently remodeling or rearranging them into worship spaces. By confining themselves to non-public spaces, these evangelical Christians tacitly engage in an informal understanding with local governments, trading visibility for living spaces and autonomy (Elazar, 2018). This

opportunistic place-making strategy, efficacious in most areas, is an integral part of the Christian tradition in China. As a flexible and non-aggressive spatial strategy, the places of worship utilized by these house churches, albeit under local authorities' supervision and without legal status, enjoy substantial autonomy and expansive potential for growth. Consequently, this method of congregating is widely accepted by their attendees (Cheng, 2003; Yang, 2005). It is pertinent to note that, according to my field research conducted in 2021, subsequent to the enforcement of the new religious regulations in 2017, and particularly after the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, residential space has become a more favored choice for house churches due to its superior versatility and flexibility.

In these house church worship spaces, converted from secular architectural domains, the term "church," signifying a physical building, is eschewed. Instead, the notion of "home," symbolizing an intangible relationship, is emphasized. The church is perceived as the spiritual home of its believers. On the one hand, the home concept serves as a primary relational model within these churches, reinforcing the centrality of prayer, community, and fellowship. On the other hand, the idea of home is incorporated into the religious lives of church members as an activity paradigm - encouraging more informal, often celebratory forms of interaction, distinctively different from those experienced in official worship places. Lastly, the notion of home becomes the emotional foundation for place construction. The church and house are interconnected, blurring the boundary between the sacred and the mundane, and the place's identity extends beyond physical limitations, taking on a more dynamic form (Elazar, 2018; Yeh, 2022).

2.1.6 Summary

Space itself is not only a product of various social processes and human actions but also a tangible force with the capacity to reciprocally influence, guide, and delimit

possibilities of activities and modes of human existence in reality (Wegner, 2002, p.181). Consequently, power struggles frequently center on space, leveraging it as a manipulable instrument (Yang, 2004). The present global era has introduced significant challenges to China's realm of spatial production. It is a period wherein traditional governance models are becoming antiquated, and the resurgence of both new and revitalized local identities coupled with traditional territorial customs threaten national sovereignty as they disrupt the perception of a single, unified socialist national spatial image (Elazar, 2018). However, as others have noted, as a transient, rootless religion, Evangelical Christianity is highly compatible with the non-territorial nature of the global era (Juergensmeyer, 2006, pp.144-58; Poewe, 1994, pp.247-49). This allows these evangelical house churches to flexibly produce space and shape places, tear a crack in the micro-spatial struggle of Chinese society, and thrive within it.

Indeed, China's economic liberalization and societal modernization have set the stage for the growth of Christianity in China, leading to a dramatic expansion of the religion since the 1980s. However, given China's unique political, social, and cultural backdrop, Christianity, as a marginal ideology, faces a multitude of challenges in China, primarily political and cultural. From a political standpoint, the Chinese government has institutionalized the management of religious institutions and activities, including Christianity. Churches are obligated to register with a state-sanctioned religious organization, such as the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement. However, house church groups perceive this management as constraining their autonomy and ability to practice and propagate their faith, facing tension with religious governance. Culturally, Christianity is inevitably regarded as a foreign or Western religion within Chinese culture, potentially invoking resistance or skepticism among specific segments of society. Christian groups and individual Christians must navigate the complexities of adapting to Chinese culture while preserving their faith and biblical principles.

During different historical periods after the Communist Party of China gained power, as informal religious activities without the approval of state religious organizations, house churches constantly updated their internal structure and external form in the social space of mainland China to adapt to the changing context reality, which is considered as a soft resistance to the religious laws and regulations of the government. This kind of compliant defiance is not a challenge to the state power, but according to the different political realities at the local level, in a flexible and unobserved way to practice and communicate in the informal and non-public field to keep the distance from religious management to gain greater autonomy in religious life. They negotiate with the local government in some areas that are particularly important to the central government but may be considered less important by the local authorities, hoping to obtain the acquiescence and protection of the local government to expand the living space in the system (Reny, 2018).

The contemporary Chinese house church is believed to have undergone a modernization transformation of its internal structure. Contrary to the process of Protestant ethics shaping the modern urban ideology in Europe, the swift urbanization process in China provides the context for the current transformation of Christianity in contemporary Chinese society. The relaxation of religious policies and the rapid, expansive urbanization process post-1980s have redirected the majority of Chinese Christians from rural to urban areas. The modern societal transformation, the nation's remarkable technological, educational, and politico-economic international rise, and the individual work and discipline required to achieve it within a few decades have permeated the populace, including these immigrants. This has prevented a form of Pentecostal-like Christianity that emphasizes charisma, miracles, and sense-based religion, influenced by social movements and developed within a rural context in the 1960s and 1980s, from taking root in contemporary urban China. Conversely, Calvinist theology, which emphasizes a so-called rational focus on biblical theology, has attracted an increasing number of Chinese elites, particularly urban intellectuals, who

comprise the majority of current urban house church leaders. A Calvinist theology with Chinese characteristics has developed and disseminated among Chinese urban house churches, becoming mainstream.

However, despite the economic liberalization of the 1980s providing a cultural platform for the spread and development of Christianity in China as a foreign religion, Christianity still struggles to shed its heterogeneous cultural identity. This is attributable to the historical era during which Protestantism was introduced into China at the start of the 20th century and China's deep-rooted historical, cultural form. Hence, the official Three-Self church and the unofficial house church seek solutions to this dilemma. Contrary to the culturally solid interventions of the official churches, house churches generally adopt a moderate approach in terms of culture, typically seeking common ground in abstract cultural domains of values and morals rather than engaging in fierce debates and transformations. This soft strategy helps to avoid cultural clashes in the public sphere. It cultivates a sense of belonging and identity within Chinese society for its members by nurturing inherent morality in Calvinism with Chinese characteristics.

This approach is also apparent in the handling of worship spaces. House churches have inherited the spatial patterns from the rural context period, confining their activities to private spaces such as homes and avoiding clashes in the public sphere through interpersonal networks (Reny, 2018). Unlike the Three-Self Churches that construct physical expressions of their faith through church buildings, house church Christians attempt to separate the construction of places from such one-time, constructed representations of material space. Instead, faith is subtly but persistently inserted into everyday space to reshape the place, and the emotional resonance and identity of the place are maintained through public services.

Current academic research on Chinese house churches overwhelmingly concentrates on the intersections of house churches with Chinese society, politics, and theology,

discussing both the micro level of practice and the macro level of ideology, including the historical roots of house churches (Chao, 1997; Cheng, 2003; Wang, 1997), their development (Duan, 2010, 2012; Gao, 2005; Lim, 2020; Madsen, 2011), the organizational model (Cao, 2010; Kang, 2016; Liu, 2009), the evolution of theology (Chow, 2014; Kang, 2019; Kao, 2009), the socio-market context (Elazar, 2018; Vala, 2012; Yang, 2005, 2006), and the legal-political basis (Chang, 2018; Reny, 2018; Yang, 2017; Yang & Dong, 2014; Yu, 2012). Building upon this, I will focus on the spatial level, exploring the spatial operations of Chinese house churches in greater detail. More specifically, my interest lies in the process of spatial production involved in transforming secular space into sacred space within China's contemporary social context.

Several critical questions emerge from this spatial perspective. What occurs when space is manipulated to harbor not simply a different function but transcendence? During the transformation from "dwelling-domestic space" to "church-worship space," how can the divide between sacred and secular be bridged? How do house churches convert the mundane into the extraordinary and the every day into the sacred within these rented dwellings? What happens to the sacredness once the church service ends? How is the relationship between private and public, individual and collective, temporary and permanent, negotiated? These fundamental questions can guide future research on the spatial dynamics of house churches in China?

2.2 Theoretical Context: The Social Production of Sacred Space

The Chinese house church movement perceives their gatherings as an extension of the Chinese Christian tradition, which is generally accepted by its participants (Cheng, 2003; Yang, 2005). These church communities self-regulate their activity sphere, withdrawing from urban public spaces to alleviate fears of being considered potential adversaries of the dominant ideology, thereby challenging its authority. This religious and social practice presents a decentralized reflection on how the environmental milieu shapes the conditions under which various religious communities are cultivated within specific social substrates, their presence interweaving novel spatial narratives (Woods, 2013). They restrict the gathering sites to non-religious edifices, restrain the spatial identity expression, and deliberately embrace secular adornments to circumvent the contentious debates prompted by the outward manifestation of religious belief. They establish an interface between the fringe and the mainstream, cloaking the sacred otherness in a secular guise.

The unorthodox practices of Chinese house churches in transforming residential areas into worship spaces are deeply ingrained with social influences. Their incongruity of form, structure, and function renders them uniquely intricate subjects. The history of church architecture demonstrates a dynamic essence that veers from European paradigms and trajectories. Contrary to Max Weber's assertion that Protestant ethics form the ideological foundation for the modern transformation of European society, China's modern transformation offers a fertile ground for Christianity's growth within Chinese society (Kang, 2016, p. 12). As Christianity assimilates into the modern fabric of Chinese society, the tensions between socially, politically, and culturally embedded facets of Christian ideology and religious tradition give rise to the rapidly evolving production methods of house church worship spaces. This dynamic poses a considerable challenge for those wishing to augment their comprehension of Chinese Christian spaces through traditional European intellectual structures such as worship edifices. One of the aims of this research is not to repudiate tradition but to distill a

fresh understanding, a suite of queries and categories from the productivity and production mode of traditional Christian sacred spaces. This could guide a systematic analysis of such non-conventional Christian sacred spaces.

The inspiration and method of my point of view come from the passion and hope for analyzing space itself within Henri Lefebvre's concept of space production. Specifically, he posits that space is not a static backdrop against which social life unfolds but is actively produced and shaped by social relations, politics, and culture (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre's work is acclaimed for its interdisciplinary nature, particularly the amalgamation of philosophy, sociology, and geography. Many scholars regard him as a pioneer in conceptualizing space as a socially produced phenomenon. They value his theory because it challenges previous spatial understandings and integrates spatial issues into broader sociopolitical analyses (Harvey, 2000, 2012; Middleton, 2013; Soja, 1996; Springer et al., 2016; Stuart, 2004). Although some critics argue that his approach can be overly abstract and philosophical, making it challenging to apply to specific empirical situations (Brenner et al., 2012; Parker, 2015; Tonkiss, 2005), it is undeniable that Lefebvre's spatial theory has made an impact in various fields of study, such as urban research, geography, sociology, and cultural theory (Daelemans, 2020; Goonewardena et al., 2008; Low, 2016; Manzo & Devine-Wright, 2020; Stuart, 2004).

In religious studies, his concept of social production of space is considered a valuable theoretical tool, especially in understanding sacred spaces' symbolic and cultural dimensions (Hayden, 1997; Kong & Woods, 2016; Lane, 2002; Metcalf, 1996; Shields, 1999), examining religious practices and rituals (Binte Abdullah Sani, 2015; Jones, 2019; Kilde, 2008; Knott, 2005, 2010, 2015; Roberts, 2013), and analyzing religion in urban spaces (Elazar, 2018; Livezey, 2000; Metcalf, 1996). While his abstract model does not always translate well when applied to case studies, his spatial theory provides a general theoretical framework for understanding the interrelations among space, society, and religion. This aids in deciphering the complex relationships and dynamics

between worship, space, humanity, and the divine and making sense of the decisions that emanate from such an understanding. Thus, Lefebvre's spatial theory can bring new insights and research questions to the study of religion and, more specifically, the examination of Chinese house churches and their unique configurations of sacred spaces.

To be more precise, considering that these spaces are not just passively used by house churches but are actively generated and shaped by the religious activities of house churches, these places of worship should be considered as a spatialized social strategy. This section, therefore, focuses on how religion as a social strategy takes shape in a secular place. This includes two aspects, how social factors participate in the decision-making process of sacred space and how this spatialization strategy is represented in specific sacred places. The first question entails a shift in the epistemological perspective concerning sacred space, along with an exploration of how social factors engage in producing such spaces. The second aspect contemplates deploying material resources when a secular space is co-opted for religious purposes under social factors and its consequential impact on behavior, emotional responses, and, potentially, individual and collective identities.

2.2.1 The Social Production of Sacred Places

Essentially, the worship spaces of Chinese house churches are a spatialized social strategy under the influence of ideological conflict and struggle. Since the 2000s, religious scholars from different regions have been focusing on the struggles in public spaces, battles between different religious groups (usually in a multicultural context), disputes between secular states and religious petitioners, as well as conflicts between religious groups and atheists opponents (Knott, 2010; O'meara, 2007; Stump, 2008; Yang, 2004). As Lefebvre (1991) noted, such a struggle is generated by space, waged in space, and ultimately requires the manipulation of space to resolve:

"Space is becoming the principal stake of goal-directed actions and struggles
[…] it has now become something more than the theatre, the disinterested stage
or setting, of action […] its role is less and less neutral, more and more active,
both as instrument and as goal, as means and as end (pp. 410-411)."

Drawing on the views above of Lefebvre, Kim Knott (2010) advocated for the application of a spatial approach to examine the place of religion within secular structures, viewing religion and its practices, discourses, and material implications as co-constructed by religious actors within their traditions, social relationships, history, geography, and political contexts. From such a social constructivist perspective, there is a need to identify tools and resources for researching encounters, disputes, and debates that arise when the profound experiences and performances of religion and other actors come into contact with or require negotiation. It should be noted that although debates have taken place about the meaning and relationship of the terms "space" and "place," many scholars use them interchangeably (Knott, 2010, 2015), which is inevitably reflected in this article.

Examining the essential link between social factors and sacred space primarily revolves around transforming sacred space. Since the early 1970s, European academia has experienced a multidisciplinary surge of interest in space studies, challenging and surpassing the notion of space as an empty and passive container depicted by early geometric concepts derived from Euclid and later Descartes (Knott, 2010, 2015). Space is no longer perceived as lifeless, rigid, non-dialectical, or static. Instead, the focus has shifted towards understanding social and physical space, prompting a reevaluation of the fundamental relationship between space, time, and society. This intellectual phenomenon, known as the spatial turn, flourished in the 1980s and reached its zenith in the mid-1990s. Scholars in various related fields responded differently to the social impact of spatial strategies. These theories

emphasize spatial practices and representations, underscore the significance of power and spatial production, and convey a fundamental concept of space as both a product and a force. It is influenced and molded through diverse social processes, and in turn, it affects, guides, and constrains human activities and their ways of existence (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986; Foucault & Rabinow, 1982; Harvey, 2012, 2020; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989, 1998; Wegner, 2002). The influence of the spatial turn has extended to religious studies and other disciplines within the social sciences and humanities from the mid-1990s onwards. In religious studies, the most notable contribution of the spatial turn has been the transformation of the profound debate surrounding sacred space into new avenues of research. Previously, the discourse on the sacred and space predominantly centered around ontological themes such as pilgrimage (Chidester, 1994; Eliade, 1959; Otto et al., 1958; Smith, 1978). While the research after it includes but is not limited to exploring competition and conflicts arising from cultural and social diversity in a post-secular context, investigating the changes in the religious landscape within an increasingly complex and fragmented non-secular environment influenced by globalization, and examining the relationship and positioning of religion within secular society and cultural domains (Dora, 2018; Knott, 2015; Kong, 1990, 2001, 2010). In the subsequent section, I will delve into this area to provide an epistemological foundation for studying Christian house church spaces as social strategies, drawing upon nearly three generations of scholarship on sacred spaces.

Substantive Cognition

The traditional debate on faith and sanctity is based on *The Sacred and the Profane* by the Romanian philosophical and religious historian Mircea Eliade (1959). Eliade's theory describes how a religious person sees the world. For him, sacrality is sacred self-expression. And religion, in general, rests on a clear and substantial distinction between the sacred and the profane: one is conscious of the sacred because it manifests itself as something quite different from the profane (1959, p.11). He believes

that sacrality is both the characteristic and the foundation of religion. Religion revolves around sacrality, and without sacrality, there is no religion. However, sacred is not the same as religion. Religion is only a way of interpreting sacred by human beings. The most primitive and developed religions are made up of HIEROPHANY[3] through the true self-representation of the sacred. This distinct existential self-representation of the sacred is part of the "reality" that constitutes the world instead of the profane. For Eliade, the sharp distinction between the sacred and the profane is created in the characterization of space—the profane being the space of everyday life, while the sacred being the space of profound events, repetitive rituals, or religious symbols. He considers sacred space as a substantial part of the territory ontologically given. But Eliade still emphasizes its making, namely that to become visible, sacred space must be revealed or sanctified—the space of everyday life is homogeneous; In contrast, the sacred space is the product of sacred manifestation events, which are sudden interruptions on the uniform surface of everyday life. He believes that every sacred space implies a hierophany. A sacred intervention and destruction that separates a territory from its cosmic surroundings and makes it qualitatively different (1959, p.26). Thus, Eliade conceptualized the sacred space as a self-defined secular representation entity through transcendental models and universal symbols fixed around an axis of mundi (Fig. 2.12) in the territory (1959, pp. 52-58).
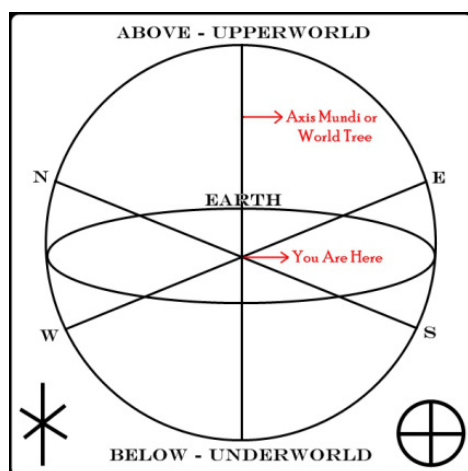
Fig. 2.12
Axis-Mundi, which represents the connection between Heaven and Earth
Source: https://paradelle.wordpress.com/2021/02/06/axis-mundi/

---

[3] Hierophany is a manifestation of the sacred. It refers to the outward appearance of the sacred by the profane as distinct from its essence. The word is a formation of the Greek adjective hieros (Greek: ἱερός, 'sacred, holy') and the verb phainein (φαίνειν, 'to reveal, to bring to light') (*Hierophany*, 2022).

It is usually expressed in geometric terms such as boundaries, paths, and thresholds. For example, elements such as the walls and thresholds of a church or temple both limit physically and reproduce a sacred space because they physically and symbolically separate it from the rest of the world. The thresholds that divide the church's interior and exterior indicate the distance between the two modes of being—secular and sacred (1959, p.25).

Similar to Eliade's concept of the "real" of the sacred space ontology are van der Lew's "power" and Rudolf Otto's "holy (German: Numen)" (Chidester, 1994). In his work about the phenomenology of religion, *The Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Gerardus van der Leeuw imaginatively explores the meaning of his substantial definition of sacred as power in space (Van Der Leeuw et al., 1986). That is to say, in his view, "sacred" can only be achieved by becoming a location—an important, valuable, and even liberating place carved out of a vast space. He claimed that sacred power had created its place for itself, and thus sacred places are places where power and its effects are repeated (1986, p.47). He believed that sacred must have a form because it must be "partially" visible or felt in space or time (1986, p.447). If this were the case, humans would be unable to choose or build sacred sites. Because such places cannot be made, they can only be found. Once found, it can never be lost, even if forgotten or ignored. This is because the divine power will continue to hold on to those positions, waiting to be rediscovered (Chidester, 1994). Otto described it from the aspect of the quality of the sacred space itself. In his *The Idea of Holy*, Otto argued that while the concept of "holiness" is often used to convey moral perfection—and does contain it - it has another unique element outside the ethical realm, for which he coined theologic-based terms. Based on the Latin word numen, which means sacred force, he interprets the divine spatial presence as an experience or sensation not based on reason or sensory stimulation, representing " wholly other (German: ganz Andere)." Otto points out that it has the ineffable quality of producing a sense of what he labels a mystical flora (Otto et al., 1958):

"The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its profane, non-religious mood of everyday experience (p. 12). "

Chidester and Linenthal (1994) refer to this kind of cognition associating sacred space with otherworldly beings as a substantive definition of sacred space. It conceptualizes sacred space as a territorial container for the 'extraordinary,' which is a location that is itself considered sacred rather than being sanctified. The sacred space is thus conceived as an awe-inspiring, powerful representation of reality imbued with ultimate meaning.

However, Chinese house churches renting secular spaces as sacred spaces challenge the above substantive perceptions of sacred spaces by demonstrating that the sacred is not confined to specific or specially dedicated locations. In the mentioned perception, sacred spaces possess an inherent "numinous" quality—a divine presence or sacred force—that distinguishes them as "wholly other," inducing a deep sense of awe and reverence. In contrast, Chinese house churches create sacred spaces within everyday, secular environments, suggesting that sacredness can be contextually and socially constructed rather than inherent in specific spaces. These house churches do not rely on the distinct, set apart, or otherworldly ("wholly other") nature of space to evoke a sense of the divine but rather on the gathered community's faith and worship practices. In the house churches' worship places, the divine presence, or "numinous" quality Otto describes, arises from communal acts of worship rather than the physical or inherent qualities of the space itself. This practice challenges the notion of sacred spaces as fundamentally separate or different from profane spaces. It suggests that the divine can be experienced anywhere and that sacredness can be invoked in any space

through communal acts of worship, contradicting the concept of the sacred as inherently and substantially different from the secular. In this way, the rented secular spaces of Chinese house churches represent sacred spaces defined by communal religious practice and experience rather than by inherent, substantial characteristics. This challenges the substantive understanding of sacred spaces as innately set apart and fundamentally different from the profane.

Scholarship within the substantive framework has been more poetic, focusing on interpreting the symbolic power of religious landscapes. For example, in his studies of liturgical order and church design, Hackett was concerned with some of the divine order's self-expression in the religious landscape. For example, the Christian cathedral's focus on the eastern location goes beyond the spatial function configuration of the celebration ceremony. It reveals an explicit Christian cosmology of liturgical significance, using the direction of the rising sun to symbolize the risen Christ and his final coming in the last day glory (Hackett, 2011, p. 49). However, Chinese house churches typically occupy rented, secular spaces not custom-designed for worship. Therefore, these spaces usually lack the inherent symbolic power and liturgical significance associated with purpose-built religious structures. How, then, is the symbolic void in these spaces filled? And through what alternative means is the sacred significance shaped? To answer these questions, we first need to focus on another path concerning the cognition of the sacred.

Situational Cognition

The above substantive cognition penetrates sacred spaces' awe-inspiring, uncanny, disturbing character, considering sacred space as the space of profound events, repeated rituals, or deeply religious symbols. In contrast, secular space is non-religious and everyday space, and the cultural or scientific field is opposite to religion. However, the boundary between "sacred" and "secular" spaces has been increasingly questioned by a group of researchers influenced by postmodernism in the 1990s

(Badone & Roseman, 2004; Holloway, 2003; Knott, 2015). Because this rigid dualism is increasingly unable to explain the diverse religious landscape in the post-secular era， especially since it excluded non-traditional holy sites from traditional sacred history (Della Dora, 2011). It has been seen as an attempt to replicate an insider's evocation of certain experiential qualities associated with the sacred. It has been criticized for taking the isolation of the sacred too far, mainly by portraying the mundane as a "formless expanse" or "absolute nonbeing" (Tuan, 1978).

This kind of reflection has triggered a turning trend of thought about sacred space, and the perspective of outsiders and social factors have been brought into the discussion. Chidester and Linenthal (1995) refer to this type of academic view as a "situational" definition of sacred space, as opposed to the "substantive" idea. Unlike substantive definitions, which are based on the perspective of religious insiders, situational definitions start from the perspective of religious outsiders. It moves away from an ontological definition of the sacred, arguing that nothing is inherently sacred. Instead, it locates the sacred in the connection between human religious practices and social projects. As Lévi-Strauss proposed, the sacred is "a value of indeterminate signification, in itself empty of meaning and therefore susceptible to the reception of any meaning whatsoever (Chidester, 1994; Lévi-Strauss, 2013)." Thus, the sacred is no longer imagined as something that exists but as a crossroads of discourse. Along these lines, a section of research shifts attention from the poetics of sacred space to the politics of sacred space, attempting to shed light on religious spaces and the politics behind them. Based on sociological determinism, sacred spaces are no longer seen as manifestations of the sacred itself. They are conceptualized as sites of friction between competing narratives and social practices enacted by different populations (Dora, 2018).

This kind of cognition can be traced back to ideas dating as far back as Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. For him, religion is a collective thing. It is a

unified system of doctrines and rituals relating to distinctive and inviolable items, which unite all who believe in them into a moral community. So sanctity has less to do with profound events and more with the re-creation of rituals. Durkheim believes that diaspora is the form of individual daily life. The ritual gathers the scattered individuals into a community, which is the initiation and enhancement process of collective emotion and collective consciousness. This "unknown power" is so far beyond the control of the individual that it is regarded as something sacred, separate from the individual and everyday things. He also emphasized that repeated rituals can gradually awaken collective feelings in individuals, leading to what was previously called a sacred situation. Therefore, space itself is neutral, secular, and meaningless. The performance of ritual endows space with characteristics and makes it extraordinary and sacred. Without repeated ritualistic manifestations, the sacredness of space disappears (Durkheim & Swain, 2008).

Smith (1978) discussed the different attributes of sacred space on this basis, pointing out that although different types of sacred space have various meanings, in his view, sacredness is situational or dependent on situation or therapy rather than substantive supernatural presence. These places are not inherently sacred but endowed by human beings with the quality of holiness—sacred space is not a supernatural substantive residence but a creation of situations arising from human actions on occupied space based on religious meaning (Kilde, 2008). So sacred space is everywhere and can be found in principle because it is not anchored to a specific location center. God is no longer confined to the temple; he can be anywhere. Sacred places are thus essentially portable situations, whether in a text, a ritual, a meditative practice, a religious calendar, identifying gestures, or intimate contact with the human mind (Chidester, 1994).

Eade and Sallnow (2000) went further in their *Contesting the Sacred*, defining a Sacred space as a container rather than a secular place symbolizing the meeting of heaven and earth into which pilgrims reverently pour their hopes, prayers, and desires. The

practice beneath these expectations and meanings gives sacred space to everyday life. In other words, the sacred space is no longer conceived as the product of the Hierophany but as a social construct of an accidental nature. Thus sacred space is not immutable but in constant flux—it is created through the user's representation and the (often conflicting) meanings they attach to it. Chidester (1994) stepped further and put forward a critical situational analysis, arguing that space is sacred because the important catalytic material is conflict. He pointed out:

"1.) In the politics of position, a place is sacred because the conquest and colonization of space that established its location is contested. 2.) In the politics of exclusion, a place is sacred because it is at risk of desecration or defilement by the very "alien" forces that are excluded. 3.) In the politics of property, a place is sacred because it is at risk of being dispossessed by competing claims on its ownership. 4.) In the politics of exile, a place is most sacred when it is remote, or lost, or experienced as sacred under conditions of extreme dislocation or disorientation (p. 228)."

The turn mentioned above of sacred space greatly challenged the substantive view represented by Eliade of indwelling divinity as a critical feature of sacred space, broadening its conceptual scope and reminding us of its complexity. In many cases, though, as insiders, believers in religious systems reflect Eliade's interpretation of the belief that transcendence exists somewhere. But as outsiders, the unbeliever sees not the supernatural forces within but the human actions that shape the meaning of particular places (Kilde, 2008). This situational cognition of sacred space can offer a unique lens through which to understand the transformation of secular spaces into sacred spaces by Chinese house churches, helping us understand the fluid, evolving, and complex nature of sacred space creation in the context of Chinese society. They underscore the centrality of human action and social practices in imbuing secular spaces with sacredness (Durkheim & Swain, 2008; Lévi-Strauss, 2013; Smith, 1978).

In the case of Chinese house churches, the rental secular spaces, such as homes, offices, or even factories, become sacred not because of their inherent qualities but because of the religious practices, prayers, and worship within them. The continuous gatherings and worship services conducted in these rented spaces infuse them with a sacred significance. Without these practices, the spaces would remain merely secular and ordinary. The ideas proposed by Eade and Sallnow (2000) and Chidester's (1994) critical situational analysis illuminate the complex dynamics of creating sacred spaces by Chinese house church groups. The churches, faced with various challenges such as conflicts, exclusions, and property claims, continuously navigate the complex socio-political landscapes to establish their sacred spaces, which in itself constitutes a source of sanctity.

Religious studies in the situational framework explored essential themes at the intersection of religion and society, including new research perspectives and agendas. Another beneficial effect of the turn in sacred space for understanding Chinese house church worship sites is that related geographers such as Lily Kong have focused on studying sacred space in terms of power, debate, identity, and discourse. These themes reflect a vast new range of possibilities for viewing religious areas. These include, but are not limited to, unofficial sites of spiritual practice, emotional geography of sacred spaces, representations of religion in different historical and site-specific contexts, analysis at different scales, different demographics, dialectics, and morality, and more (Holloway & Valins, 2002; Knott, 2005, 2010, 2015; Kong, 1993, 2001, 2002, 2010; Yeh, 2022). This type of research usually focuses on the conflict between religion and society, which has also drawn more attention to the diversity of Christian sacred spaces.

A very telling study is the effort of Justin Wilford (2012). He explored the premises of a large evangelical church in the US (Saddleback Church, southern California), where attendance continues to grow despite a countrywide trend of declining church

attendance. He focused on how this church fits into and shapes its suburban environment, creating a "sacred" space within the seemingly "secular" suburbs. Wilford argued that Saddleback Church thrives by connecting with the individualistic, consumer-oriented culture of the suburbs and using this to shape its religious teachings. The church did not have a central religious space in the traditional sense but instead consisted of a network of small, home-based groups that met throughout the suburban area. This decentralized structure aligned well with the suburban environment and the individualistic tendencies of its residents. Wilford used the concept of "sacred space" innovatively, arguing that the "sacred" in the suburban context does not necessarily refer to religious buildings or specific geographic locations but rather to the connections and relationships that form between people in their daily lives. Like the small groups of Saddleback Church, Chinese house churches often meet in homes or other non-traditional spaces rather than in dedicated religious buildings. These churches may also form sacred spaces by fostering connections and relationships among their members. However, there are also significant differences. Saddleback Church is a single, highly organized institution, while Chinese house churches are a diverse and decentralized movement. Still, Wilford's work offered valuable insights for understanding the spatial dynamics of Chinese house churches and how they might shape and be shaped by their social and political environment.

Lily Kong's research (2002) examined the challenges house churches face in Singapore as they strive for their religious rights within the constraints of a state that exercises significant control over land use. It sheds light on the adaptive and innovative strategies religious communities employ to establish and maintain their sacred spaces within a secular society and how they negotiate with state regulations and societal norms, which provides valuable insights into the house church phenomenon within the broader political context. Kong looked into how house churches, lacking traditional church buildings, create and maintain their sacred spaces within private homes. These spaces are often subject to negotiation and tension due to the complex interplay of

state regulations, societal expectations, and religious beliefs. One of the significant themes in her study is how these house churches navigate the fluid boundaries between the "sacred" and the "secular." House churches transform secular spaces like homes into sacred ones through religious practices. Still, these spaces must also function as ordinary homes outside of worship times, thereby shifting back into the secular realm. She also discussed how state regulations, which often categorize house churches as informal or even illegal, affect the ability of these religious groups to establish and maintain their sacred spaces. She argued that this tension reflects broader political issues surrounding religious freedom, property rights, and the state's role in regulating religious activities. As for the context of Chinese house churches, Kong's analysis can provide valuable insights. While the specifics of the political and legal situation may differ, Chinese house churches, much like their Singaporean counterparts, must navigate complex state regulations and societal attitudes as they seek to establish their sacred spaces within secular settings. Moreover, although there was no detailed analysis and demonstration of the space transformation process in this study, as discussed by Kong, the fluid and shifting nature of the sacred and secular may be a significant aspect of their religious practice. This provides a reference index for discussing the sacred space of house churches in the Chinese context.

Orlando Woods (2013) studied the phenomenon of house churches in the context of Sri Lanka's Evangelical Christian community. These house churches face tensions in a Buddhist-majority society but create spaces for interfaith dialogue, preserving their identities, which is achieved by turning the residence into a sanctuary. Woods contended that the practice of converting houses into churches signifies a significant shift in the traditional understanding of sacred spaces. This process not only blurs the boundaries between the private (home) and public (church) but also challenges the conventional idea of a fixed sacred site, emphasizing mobility and fluidity instead. Woods used the term 'fission' to describe the tendency of house churches to split and multiply in response to growth, conflict, or other factors. It refers to the division or

splitting of house churches into smaller units. He argued that the process of fission, combined with the mobility of house churches, creates a dispersed network of sacred spaces across the urban landscape, undermining the centralized authority of traditional religious institutions. This common practice allows the religious community to continue growing while maintaining the intimate, familial character of the gatherings. Additionally, Woods delves into the notion of 'sacred networks.' These are the connections between individuals, families, and broader communities that house churches rely upon. These networks transcend geographic boundaries and are vital for sharing resources, support, and religious fellowship. Regarding Chinese house churches, Woods' work offers significant insights. The ideas of mobility, fission, and sacred networks are likely to resonate with the experiences of Chinese house churches, which also operate within societal and regulatory constraints. The strategies of Sri Lankan house churches to create and maintain sacred spaces within secular ones, despite potential opposition or restrictions, provide helpful comparative perspectives for analyzing and understanding the Chinese context.

Gideon Elazar (2018) applied Lefebvre's theory of space production to examine the development of Christian space in Yunnan, China. His research focuses on how Christian communities produce spaces of worship and their strategies for responding to social, political, and cultural challenges. In response to regulatory policies regarding religious activities, these communities negotiate state governance by adapting their spatial strategies and establishing alternative places of worship. Elazar describes this as deterritorialization, where Christian communities in Yunnan transcend territorial boundaries and policy restrictions to establish their presence and respond to religious landscape challenges. They adapt existing spaces, such as private homes and public areas, for worship and create new religious institutions and facilities. Elazar contrasts the practices of Yunnan house churches with the construction of a prominent church building in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, which faced pressure for demolition. He argued that the deterritorialized sacred space of Yunnan house churches successfully

secured living space for the church in this power-unequal competition due to the compatibility between the territorial separation proposed by evangelical Christianity and the state's interests in the religious field. His analysis brought the perspective of space production into the study of the place of worship of Chinese house churches, providing a valuable theoretical and empirical grounding for my study of such sites. It affirmed the positive role of this spatial production model in fighting for the right of survival and development of house church groups in the Chinese social and political context. However, the analysis does not explicitly address the internal dynamics of the house churches that might affect their spatial practices, such as theological features, spatial differences, or way of material intervention. While Elazar's research broadens the horizon, further study is needed to fully understand the diversity of spatial patterns and complex operational mechanisms of house churches in China.

These situational examinations of sacred spaces represent the presence of religious transnationalism, diverging from the concept of homogeneous globalism. According to Lionnet and Shih (2005), transnationalism identifies specific sites of exchange and diversity, challenging the notion of a universal core spreading uniformly. This approach goes beyond the traditional dichotomy of local and global, creating new centers and peripheries that span multiple spaces and timeframes. This decentralization perspective offers a valuable framework for understanding the worship spaces within Chinese house churches. The Christian mission triggers a dynamic negotiation between religion and social reality in the intricate interplay between different traditions and social models. Conversely, social factors provide the backdrop and material for the pluralistic construction of Christian spaces.

The situational cognition approach, which emphasizes the sociality of sacred space, indeed provides a valuable lens to study the worship space in Chinese house churches. However, there are certain limitations associated with this cognition approach. Firstly, while the situational approach focuses on the dynamics of society and power relations,

it may risk reducing sacred space to a social and political construct. This can potentially overlook these spaces' profound spiritual and transcendent significance for individual congregants' spiritual experiences. The numinous or divine aspect of sacred space, as experienced by believers, might be downplayed or overlooked. Secondly, this approach may fail to adequately explore the internal dynamics of house churches, such as theological beliefs, leadership styles, or worship practices, which can significantly shape the nature and use of sacred spaces. Thirdly, it tends to focus on sacred spaces as sites of friction or conflict, which can lead to overemphasizing power dynamics and contention. This could overshadow aspects of cooperation, peaceful co-existence, or adaptation. In conclusion, while the situational cognition approach provides valuable insights into the social aspects of sacred spaces, a more comprehensive understanding of house churches' worship spaces would likely require a combination of approaches, acknowledging both the social/political and the spiritual/divine aspects and recognizing the internal dynamics and changes over time. In the past ten years, a new wave of (mainly phenomenological) experiments in cultural geography has provided more integrated and balanced narratives for understanding different aspects of sacred spaces (Dora, 2011).

Comprehensive Cognition

The above recognition of the contextualization of sacred space broadens the conceptual scope of sacred space and reminds us of its complexity. But due to the transformation of sacred spaces into a simple social force, they are transformed into mere religious capital. This undoubtedly dilutes or obliterates the ineffable part of the spiritual experience of the sacred space, which is why it becomes a type of space independent and different from others. Therefore, some researchers resist or blur the dialectics of poetics and politics in the sacred space under the two cognitive frameworks of substance and situation and strive to balance and synthesize the perspectives of internal and external people (Holloway, 2006; Yorgason & Della Dora, 2009). Synthesizing claims from various perspectives, Della Dora (2018) explored the

potential of sacred spaces as bridges of knowledge, emotion, and discourse between the religious and the secular. As she emphasized, secular places of worship are best not conceptualized as geographically fixed entities defined for secular spaces, nor as empty containers filled with meaning, but as Soja's (1996) third space:

> *"a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings; a space where all places are capable of being seen from every angle, each standing clear; but also a secret and conjectured object, a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood a space characterized by a number of extraordinary simultaneities (pp. 49-50)."*

Or rather, sacred spaces can be understood as rich environments encompassing a layered combination of emotions, habits, and practices. They serve as intersections where various objects, people, things, stories, and memories converge. These spaces are in a constant state of openness, allowing for the ongoing hybridization processes and the renegotiation of cultural and religious identities (Dora, 2018). This comprehensive perspective provides a more holistic approach to studying worship spaces in Chinese house churches, integrating sacred spaces' social and spiritual dimensions. Appreciating these spaces' spiritual significance to believers, this viewpoint simultaneously acknowledges the social and political dynamics that shape their existence and usage. It recognizes these spaces' inherent fluidity and dynamism, viewing them not as static entities but as sites undergoing constant negotiation and transformation. Such a perspective aligns better with the reality of Chinese house churches, which often have to adapt their worship spaces to shifting political, social, and cultural conditions. Furthermore, this viewpoint interprets sacred spaces as intersections where various influences—religious, cultural, and political—converge, serving as sites for hybridizing and renegotiating identities. This particularly applies to Chinese house churches that may blend elements from traditional Chinese culture,

varying Christian traditions, and their unique histories and experiences. Encompassing emotions, habits, and practices, this approach perceives sacred spaces as "rich environments," providing a more nuanced and sensitive understanding of house church participants' experiences in these places. Finally, it contributes to helping explore how these Chinese house churches' sacred places can serve as bridges between the religious and the secular, creating dialogues and interactions that enrich both realms.

The study of religion within this holistic cognitive framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of the complex relationships within study subjects. Some case studies are of reference value for further exploring the rich connotation of places of worship for Chinese house churches. For example, Finlayson (2012) investigated the effective geography of sacred spaces, emphasizing the role of emotions in shaping people's experiences and identities. She examined various houses of worship, highlighting their cultural and spiritual significance. She noted that personal experiences, memories, and social context influence emotional attachments to these places.   This subjective perspective is essential for studying Chinese house churches, as congregants' experiences and interpretations of sacred spaces can significantly vary due to diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and personal histories. She also underscores the role of physical elements and symbols, such as furniture and decor, in evoking specific emotions and enhancing visitor experiences. For example, in the case study on a United Methodist church, she found that kneeling pads around the altar triggered associations with biblical scriptures (Fig. 2.13), contributing to an educational effect (p. 69). This insight is constructive in studying how Chinese house churches utilize these physical elements and symbols to create a sense of sacredness and cultivate specific emotional and spiritual experiences. Finlayson also extends her analysis beyond conventional worship spaces, recognizing non-worship areas as significant for fostering community and belonging. For example, she found that non-worship spaces, like the kitchen, extend the sense of community and home belonging

(pp. 83-85). This perspective can guide researchers in understanding how Chinese house churches maintain and promote a sense of community within the worship space and beyond. Additionally, she identifies houses of worship as platforms for negotiating religious and social identities, an insight that resonates strongly with Chinese house churches. These sacred spaces often navigate complex socio-political contexts, requiring them to continually adapt their religious practices and identities. Finlayson's (2012) research provides a comprehensive framework for studying worship spaces in Chinese house churches, highlighting the integral role of emotional, personal, and social factors in shaping these spaces.

Fig. 2.13
Kneeling pads, Saint Paul's
United Methodist Church,
Tallahassee, Florida
Source: *Spaces of Faith: An
Affective Geographical
Exploration of Houses of
Worship* (Finlayson, 2012)

Another illuminating study is Kilde's research (2008) on traditional Christian sacred sites. By synthesizing the poetics and politics of these places, he identified various factors influencing their operation, with social factors being particularly significant. Kilde traced the historical evolution of Christian church spaces and worship practices, starting from early descriptions in the Christian Bible up to the present day. He also developed a classification framework centered around spatial power as the foundation of cognitive sacred space, consisting of three distinct categories:

" (1) divine or supernatural power, or that attributed to God; (2) social power, or that pertaining to a variety of social, particularly clerical, hierarchies; and (3) personal power, or the various feelings of spiritual empowerment that individuals derive from an experience of the divine (p. 4)."

This approach acknowledges the divine or supernatural power attributed to God and the social power related to social and clerical hierarchies within the worship space. Moreover, it recognizes individuals' personal power from their divine experiences. This comprehensive view of power dynamics within sacred spaces aligns with the diverse experiences of worshippers in Chinese house churches, who may attribute different degrees of significance to these aspects depending on their personal beliefs, experiences, and the social context of their religious practice.

In particular, Kilde's (2008) analysis of the Dura-Europos house churches, which faced similar constraints as Chinese house churches in building dedicated worship spaces, provides valuable insights. With limited resources, they repurposed tight residential spaces, imbuing them with new meanings. The remodeled interior coexisted with the original exterior, creating a unique home-cum-chapel (Fig. 2.14). Within this space, Kilde discussed three powers manifested in material form. The worship area featured a platform at one end, signifying the division between clergy and lay worshipers. This symbolized the standardized distribution of social power within Christianity (p. 24). Another room accommodated the distinction between baptized Christians and catechumens, further reflecting social differences (p. 26). The manifestations of social power in these spaces—such as the division between clergy and lay worshippers and between baptized Christians and catechumens—can guide researchers in examining the social dynamics within Chinese house churches. The place also served as a means of transmitting knowledge and fostering personal spiritual empowerment. Iconography in the baptistery (Fig. 2.15) conveyed educational messages and facilitated an emotional connection with Jesus (p. 27). Using the space for knowledge transmission and

personal spiritual empowerment can also provide insights into how Chinese house churches facilitate religious education and individual spiritual experiences. In summary, Kilde's comprehensive approach to studying sacred spaces, which synthesizes the substantial and situational aspects of these spaces, provides a rich and nuanced framework for studying worship spaces in Chinese house churches. Moreover, it helps to situate Chinese house churches within the broader historical and global development of Christian worship spaces. This perspective can aid in understanding the influences and adaptations of Chinese house churches within the broader Christian tradition.
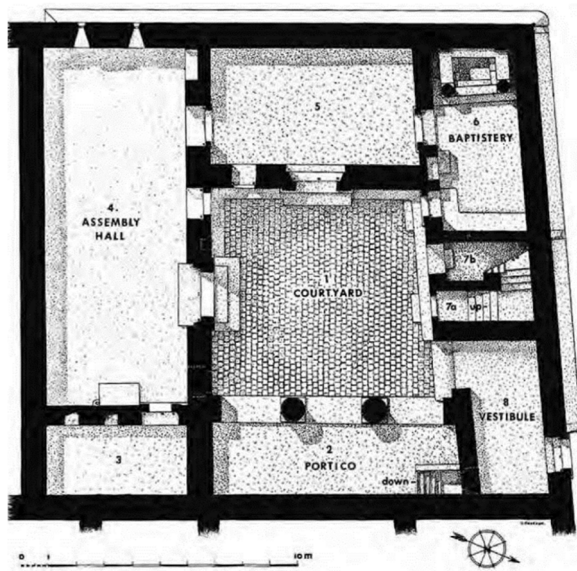
Fig. 2.14
Isometric drawing of the Christian building at Dura-Europos
Source:
https://buildingcatholicculture.
com/a-pilgrimage-to-the-worlds-
oldest-house-church-in-connecticut/

Fig. 2.15
Reconstruction of the Christian baptistery at Dura-Europos
Source:
https://savingparadise.net/files/2008-
08-21-dura-europas-house-church-
baptistery-.html

As I hope this part of the review shows, the three-generation mentioned above epistemology under the sacred space turn and related research under its influence has been very fruitful for studying Christian house churches in China. It combines fields from different disciplines, connecting with traditional domains such as sacred space, pilgrimage, and new realms of practice, experience, emotion, and religious-secular interaction. Moreover, it draws on religious scholarship with very different perspectives, both phenomenological and social-constructivist, and those that focus as much on the poetics as they do on the politics of religion, space, and place. This provides a new perspective on the relationship between religion and the material, social and cultural spheres in which it operates. I agree with Dora's call that part of the challenge of sacred space research is negotiating between these perspectives and using these approaches more dynamically. While retaining the transcendent emotional experience of insiders on the sacred space from the substantive point of view, we must also pay attention to the results of social forces and, at the same time, maintain awareness of the process of material sacred-secular conversion.

The above sorting brings together different perspectives and dimensions, providing a richer and more nuanced understanding of the worship space in Chinese house churches. Specific to the situation of house churches in China, it offers a framework that respects the spiritual significance of these spaces for believers while recognizing the social and political dynamics at play. As explained earlier, in the game of social space, these church groups have chosen a low-key space form to obtain a larger space for activities. This strategy of renting secular space as a religious site is also the choice of many Southeast Asian Christian groups facing space struggles at different levels. In these social contexts, different from those in Europe, at the political level, it has been proven to be an effective means to win the survival and development space in the conflict of power imbalance. However, it cannot be ignored that, as religious places, the worship places of Chinese house churches transformed from secular spaces still undertake spiritual missions. This involves complex spatial mechanisms such as

doctrine and emotion, ritual and body, and power and hierarchy. Especially during the transfer process, there is a lot of tension between the ritual and the space in which it is performed because the sacred and the secular cannot be distinguished and isolated but are entangled. The way and mechanism of material mean to resolve the tension in this complex structure is where the issues are most discussed. In the following topics, I will further explain this problem.

2.2.2 Sanctification of Secular Space

The notion of substantive sacred space, exemplified by Mircea Eliade, primarily influenced a group of architects who cited architectural history and precedent in their work. Their definitions of sacred spaces and shapes were described metaphorically by these architects. However, looking at sacred space from a situational perspective might prompt a question similar to the one asked by Lefebvre (1991),

"What would remain of the Church if there were no churches (p.44)? "

We see a disenchanted reality in Chinese house churches through their sacred space, representing a basic structure of the human-divine encounter characterized by questions and answers, deconstruction, and reconstruction.

Representational Sacred Space

First, I will use Lefebvre's space theory to understand this process better to define and distinguish this sacred space outside the official space. Lefebvre (1991) attacks the traditional dualism of matter-consciousness in his work *The Production of Space*. He criticized this reductionism of spatial thinking between matter and consciousness and proposed a third dimension of social space. He regarded social space as the fusion of matter and consciousness, and based on this, he offered his famous triad of space theory (Table 2-1): Spatial Practice, Representations of Space, and Representational

Space; Perceived, Conceived, and Lived Space (pp. 32-33, 38-9).

Triad of Space			
	Group 1	**Group 2**	**Group 3**
1. Level	Physical Space	Perceived Space	Spatial Practice
2. Level	Mental Space	Conceived Space	Representations of Space
3. Level	Social Space	Lived Space	Representational Space

Table 2-1

Triad of Space of Henri Lefebvre

Source: summarized by author based on Lefebvre (1991)

1) Physical space is the perceived space, also called spatial practice. It is a tool/action/position, a set of fixed production, reproduction, a given place, and a bunch of spaces with specific social characteristics. Both spatial representation and representational space realize themselves through it; 2) Mental space is the conceived space, also called a representation of space. This is the dominant spatial dimension in any society (or mode of production). It is the space of architects, planners, urban scholars, or engineers. They are used to defining the space of perception and experience based on conceptions; 3) Social space is the lived space, the representational space. This is the space of experience belonging to the inhabitants and users. This space is dominated and passively experienced, and at the same time, it is lively and present in which time appears (Che, 2015; Coleman, 2014; Jones,2019; Yang, 2004; Zhao & He, 2012).

This framework has received the attention of many scholars who study religious spaces. It is considered to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the

complex dynamics that shape sacred spaces, spanning physical, social, and symbolic dimensions, and has been cited for application to religion-related spatial analysis (Elazar, 2018; Jones, 2019; Keane, 2007; Low, 2016; Yang, 2004). In this framework, places of worship created by house churches requisitioning and transforming secular spaces belong to the third level: representational sacred spaces.

Given this situation, Jones's (2019) study on Muslim groups' transformation of secular places as their sacred space is a study with reference value. He cites Lefebvre's concept of appropriation and détournement (diversion) to make a subtle distinction between this kind of sacred space. Appropriation involves modifying a natural space to meet the needs of a specific group, while diversion refers to repurposing a space for a use different from its original purpose (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 165). Building upon this distinction, he identified makeshift and contingent spaces as the spatial outcomes of the above two production methods. Makeshift spaces are actively modified in the short term, while contingent spaces result from a negotiated, long-term process.

Based on this, considering the usage of Chinese house church venues, I suggest further elaborating on and differentiating the characteristics of these two types of spaces. The temporary occupation of rented spaces by church groups characterizes makeshift sacred spaces. These spaces host religious activities on Sundays and serve as gathering places for other groups during the week. Contingent sacred spaces, on the contrary, are relatively fixed and temporary, specifically rented and modified to accommodate church-related activities. In summary, the production of representational sacred spaces can be divided into two categories from its production method spatial product, modification mode, and occupancy group (Table 2-2). Clarifying this distinction allows for a more accurate grasp of the interplay of matter and space in making these places.

Production of Representational Sacred Spaces		
	Group 1	**Group 2**
Production Methode	appropriation	diversion
Spatial Product	makeshift sacred spaces	contingent sacred spaces
Modification Mode	active, short-term	negotiated, long-term
Occupancy Group	church & other groups	church groups

Table 2-2

Two types of representational sacred spaces

Source: summarized by author based on Jones (2019)

Both production methods belong to the third level of the ternary space, representing the varying degrees of secular space occupied by sacred purposes. These spaces serve as readily available material that can be incorporated in different ways to produce representational space collectively. The physical material itself does not constitute a difference vector in this context. Because, often, the users of such sacred spaces are not the owners of the spaces. Sometimes, religious practices are not the only uses of the spaces. Therefore, in these places, the religious groups as users usually do not have much control, and their space transformation is generally limited to a small range. These modifications, like the spaces they fill, are often done with readily available materials (furniture, decoration, lamps, etc.) to simplify the materiality to fit the representative space. Next, I will turn to the field of practice and discuss the role of this reduced material intervention in cultivating a sense of emotional sacrifice and realizing a specific ritual of dedication in a particular social reality.

Reduced Means of Sacred Production

As evidenced in previous discussions regarding historical context, the discourse surrounding sacred spaces within official Chinese churches frequently hinges upon the architectural imagery of churches. These churches often lean on external forms to characterize and delineate sacred spaces, establishing boundaries and thresholds to differentiate them from mundane spaces and to sustain their existence. However, the worship spaces within house churches reveal a more microscopic and understated mode of existence. This leads to the question: how can sacred spaces subsist if not anchored in architectural forms? Can they be shaped and preserved in the most minimalistic manner possible? Architect Rudolf Schwarz's (1958) work on church architecture, "The Church Incarnate," offers some illuminating insights. In it, he described what he perceived to be the simplest manifestation of a Christian place:

> *"For the celebration of the Lord's supper a moderately large, well-proportioned room is needed, in its center a table and on the table a bowl of bread and a cup of wine. The table may be decorated with candles and surrounded by seats for the congregation. That is all. Table, space and walls make up the simplest church. [...] The little congregation sits or stands about the table. The Lord is in the center as he promised to be when he said that wherever a few should gather in his name he would be in the midst of them (p. 35)."*

In his delineation, Schwarz contended that the significance of space emanates from its fixtures and furnishings. These, in conjunction with the notions of "location" and "occasion," engender a meaningful "place." Similarly, Susanne Langer (1953) underscored that a place could be crafted using the most minimal means as long as it cultivates a human environment. The quintessence of architecture resides in fashioning an environment that embodies sentiments and meanings. It does not necessarily need to exhibit permanence but should provide shape and expression to human activities. Norberg-Schulz (2013) further noted that the tangible constituents of

a place, including its material substance, shape, texture, and color, collectively contribute to its "environmental quality," molding the qualitative totality of the place. This environmental quality cannot be reduced to any attribute as it encompasses specific qualities that elude analytical or scientific definition.

The connection between spatial objects and the nature of a place has been extensively examined in the fields of interior design and environmental psychology (Hall, 1966). For example, the furniture arrangement can modulate social interaction and individual comfort by establishing suitable interpersonal distances. A furniture positioning or grouping shift can transform a space's focal point, visual equilibrium, and circulation pattern, thereby redefining its zones, rhythm, and characteristics (Alexander, 1977; Mitton & Nystuen, 2021; Tenner, 2015). Furniture and decorative items can communicate specific narratives, cultivating unique spatial identities that cater to individuals' desire for spaces mirroring their tastes (Gosling et al., 2002). The chromatic scheme of a space elicits emotional reactions, with warm hues fostering dynamism and stimulation, cool tones inciting serenity, and neutral shades offering a flexible canvas for accent elements (Elliot & Maier, 2014; Wright, 1962). Materiality, textures, and lighting are also pivotal in determining a space's essence, ambiance, and function (Boyce, 2014; Day, 2002; Gifford, 2007; Pallasmaa, 2012; Veitch & Gifford, 1996). Collectively, these elements mold a space's ethos, atmosphere, and aesthetic sensibility while influencing visual perception, sensory experiences, and emotional reactions. They shape how individuals engage with and remember the space, thus becoming fundamental to its identity and collective memory.

The investigation above into the role of non-architectural components in shaping a place's ambiance furnishes invaluable insights for deciphering and analyzing worship spaces within Chinese house churches. This inquiry unveils potential determinants for how these congregations balance function, form, structure, and sculpt sacred spaces amidst existing limitations. Within the religious sphere, certain scholars have probed

how these elements interact with secular architectural spaces to generate sacred ones, employing case studies as their method of investigation. These studies assist in comprehending the role these potential factors occupy in facilitating the tangible creation of makeshift and provisional representational sacred spaces. This further augments a more detailed understanding of the process of creating worship spaces within Chinese house churches.

Appropriation entails temporarily converting existing spaces into provisional sacred sites through temporal and functional elements alterations. However, a paucity of research exists regarding the physical dimensions of crafting such spaces. A pertinent example is Binte Abdullah Sani's study (2015) on Muslim worship spaces in the Midwestern United States. It elucidated how Muslim congregations transformed Christian worship spaces into temporary Muslim prayer areas primarily by modifying furnishings. This metamorphosis involved rearranging pre-existing furniture, introducing new furnishings, and reorienting the space. Christian symbols were expunged, and pews were displaced to create an unencumbered area. A carpet was placed facing the entrance at a 45-degree angle directed towards the Ka'bah in Mecca. This rudimentary transformation accommodated prayer rituals, converting the space into a Muslim worship area. According to Sani, the immersive experience encompassing bodily and sensory engagements, as opposed to symbols or physical architecture, assumed a principal role in cultivating the religious ambiance. The reconfiguration of space, alignment of bodies, and sensory engagement facilitated the space's conversion and echoed normative ethical and moral propensities.

Sani's research on Muslim worship spaces yields critical insights that could illuminate our understanding of Chinese house churches, particularly the focus on transmuting mundane spaces into sacred environments through spatial reorganization and sensory engagement. These dynamics could potentially hold similar significance within Chinese house churches, where the religious experience is deeply rooted in the

congregants' subjective and sensory experiences rather than the space's architectural properties. Nonetheless, the impact of transient and fluctuating material elements on the functioning of sacred spaces demands further scrutiny within the context of Chinese house churches.

Unlike appropriation, diversion encompasses a religious group's long-term occupation of secular functional space, necessitating relatively permanent material interventions. Several case studies, including the German Emergency Church Program (Notkirche Programm), illuminate this phenomenon. The program responded to the pervasive destruction of World War II, addressing a crisis of faith, a shortage of church buildings, and other societal issues by implementing a "poor but noble" strategy for establishing church spaces during a tumultuous period in Europe. In these exigent circumstances, existing structures, such as barracks, residential buildings, factories, laundries, cinemas, or even stables, were repurposed as church buildings (Anders, 2014, pp. 54-56; Langmaack, 1949, p. 63).

Fig. 2.16
Modular construction of RAD barracks
Source:
http://neuengamme-ausstellungen.info/content/lagermodell/bild168.html
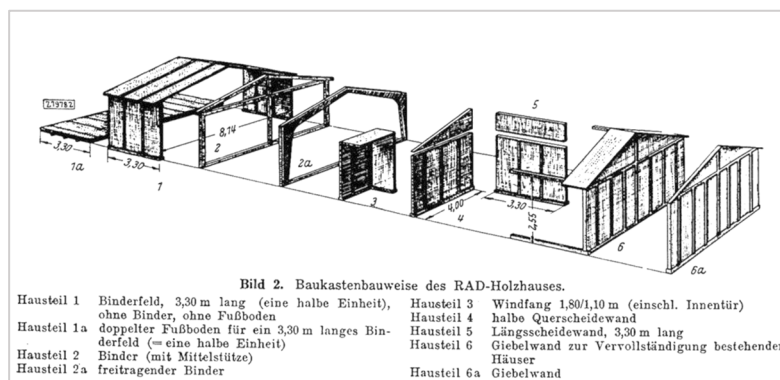
One salient example of emergency churches established within repurposed structures is the Barracks Church, which embodies the period's austere necessity. Military barracks emerged as a highly versatile architectural type, with the standardized RAD (Reichsarbeitsdienst) barracks constructed from prefabricated wooden components becoming particularly prominent from 1943 onwards (Fig. 2.16). These barracks provided a cost-efficient, time-saving solution, enabling facile assembly and mobility.

Since 1938, the military has employed RAD barracks. After the first bombing raid on a German city in 1942, these structures were repurposed as temporary facilities for various functions, including hospitals, transport camps, emergency schools, kindergartens, and churches (Schneider, 1995, pp. 127-128).

The RAD barracks were repurposed as churches either in their original location or after being relocated. One such instance of this conversion process is embodied by the Mariae Himmelfahrt church in Helsa. In 1951, the architect Gross transformed a RAD barracks into a Pius church for the refugee community. The interior and exterior were tailored to accommodate religious functions, incorporating a sacristy and a community space. The church's design retained the original barracks' inherent architectural features, such as the gable roof, ridge turret, and monolithic grey finishes. Internally, the space was consecrated, with an array of furnishings and decorations contributing to a sacred ambiance (Fig. 2.17). These included windows glazed with simple stained glass portraying biblical motifs (Fig. 2.18), a wooden cup-shaped baptismal font (Fig. 2.19), and locally crafted pews. Works of art, such as the wooden sculpture of "Maria Immaculata" adorning the altar wall by Josef Fleck (Fig. 2.20), were donations from the community members. These temporary churches served as swift solutions for communities, and the artworks donated by congregants compensated for architectural limitations, fostering a sense of identity and belonging (Anders, 2014, pp. 73-74).
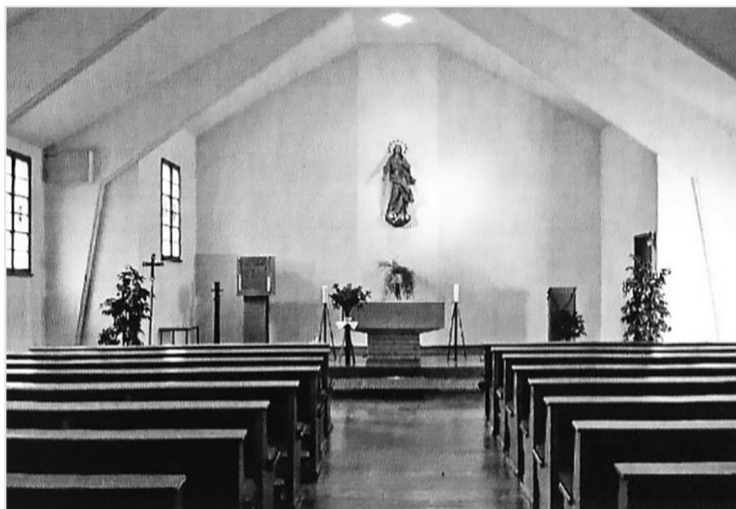
Fig. 2.17
Interior of Mariae Himmelfahrt Church
Source: *Neue Kirchen in der Diaspora* (Anders, 2014)

Fig. 2.18
Window with simple stained
glass depicting biblical motifs
Source: *Neue Kirchen in der
Diaspora* (Anders, 2014)

Fig. 2.19
Wooden cup-shaped
baptismal font
Source: *Neue Kirchen in der
Diaspora* (Anders, 2014)
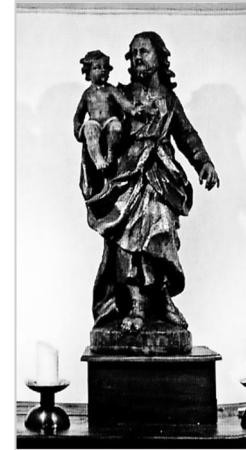
Fig. 2.20
Sculpture of Maria
Immaculata
Source: *Neue Kirchen in der
Diaspora* (Anders, 2014)

The case study of Mariae Himmelfahrt church presents an intriguing example of how a location's inherent architectural features can be assimilated into the design of a sacred space. Within the context of Chinese house churches, this may entail integrating residential or commercial structure aspects into the layout of the worship area. This process could involve repurposing room layouts, windows, and entrances to accommodate worship practices. Concurrently, elements such as furnishings, decorations, and artworks can foster an ambiance of sanctity. This implies that religious symbols, scriptures, furniture, and personal items within Chinese house churches can be essential in nurturing congregants' sense of identity and belonging. Further, the community's engagement in the transformation and upkeep of the worship area can bear significant implications. In the case of Chinese house churches, the active involvement of congregants in cultivating and preserving the sacred space can be instrumental in surmounting architectural constraints and fostering a sense of community and shared identity. It is, therefore, imperative that such factors are meticulously observed and documented in related case studies.

The most representative example of this method is German architect Emil Steffann. In the emergency period, he creatively applied secular places or materials to sacred

places by using local materials, which were highly praised as expressing a robust human existence and naturally opened to worship and public use (Debuyst, 1994). Ulrich Pantle (2003) presented several works of Emil Steffann and commented on his contributions.

In 1938, Steffann designed a temporary place of worship in a fish factory building for the Catholic community in Schlutup (Fig. 2.21). The exterior of the renovated site shows no indication of a church building and still bears the logo of the fish-smoking factory. Inside, the brick walls were painted white and lacked Christian imagery. The expression of religion in the space was minimal, with all attention focused on the altar at the base of the front wall (Fig. 2.22) (p. 30).

Fig. 2.21
Fish-factory-converted church in Schlutup
Source: *Emil Steffann (1899-1968):*
Werk, Theorie, Wirkung (Haus, 1999)
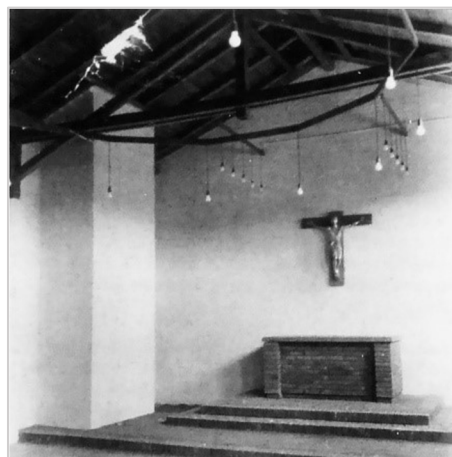
Fig. 2.22
Altar of the church in Schlutup
Source: *Emil Steffann (1899-1968):*
Werk, Theorie, Wirkung (Haus, 1999)

In the same year, Steffann planned the addition of a chapel within an existing house in Travemunde (Fig. 2.23). The site's exterior was slightly modified to reflect its new use, with four tall windows on one side and a small clock above the stairs, incorporating more Christian elements. Inside, the space consisted of a longitudinal worship area with two rows of seating, a pedestal with steps, and a simple table serving as an altar (Fig. 2.24) (p. 31).

Fig. 2.23
House church in Travemunde
Source: *Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie, Wirkung* (Haus, 1999)
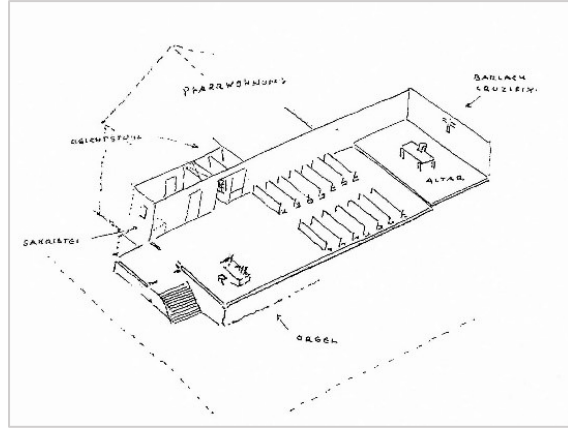
Fig. 2.24
Isometric drawing of house church in Travemunde
Source: *Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie, Wirkung* (Haus, 1999)

A year later, the same model was replicated in a residential building in Moelln. By removing three dividing walls, a larger worship space was created. The existing load-bearing structures were retained, resulting in bumps and depressions in the floor plan that altered the volume of the room. This volume change, particularly the enlargement of the altar area, created a rhythmic spatial effect. The positioning of side windows further highlighted the slightly elevated altar area, enhancing the spatial order and brightness (Fig. 2.25) (p. 32).

Fig. 2.25
Interior of house church in Moellen
Source: *Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie, Wirkung* (Haus, 1999)
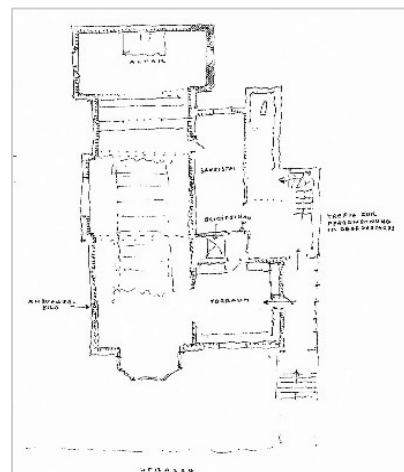
Fig. 2.26
Plan of house church in Moellen
Source: *Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie, Wirkung* (Haus, 1999)

Emil Steffann's architectural undertakings, which deftly transform secular environments into understated, minimalist religious sanctuaries, offer substantial insights for examining Chinese house churches. These projects accentuate the significance of repurposing secular spaces into concealed places of worship. This tactic resonates with the approach of Chinese house churches, which typically maintain their mundane exterior while modifying their interiors for religious functions. The minimalistic design philosophy espoused by Steffann, which centers on primary liturgical elements over comprehensive religious symbolism, echoes the practices observed within Chinese house churches that typically express devotion through fundamental worship components dictated by their requirement for inconspicuousness. Additionally, Steffann's utilization of spatial volumes and lighting to underscore liturgical zones illuminates potential methodologies that Chinese house churches may employ to establish rhythm and concentration within their worship environments. These observations function as a schematic for cataloging and interpreting the essential elements present within Chinese house church case studies.

A contemporary study of particular relevance is Finlayson's (2012) examination of the Unity Church of Fredericksburg worship space. This congregation has reconfigured a rented administrative building into a sacred space. This study emphasizes the significance of individual emotions and their effect on the process of sacralization. Finlayson took note of items bearing simplistic religious symbolism, such as an angel painting, crystal window ornaments, and a table styled as an altar (Fig. 2.27). Her findings suggested that even non-traditional spiritual symbols could ignite collective religious memories. Moreover, incidental architectural features might elicit religious or emotional responses due to their capacity to stimulate associative thinking in users. For instance, she observed that a window in the office bears a surprising resemblance to the church's logo, which she posits as contributing positively to members' place identification (Fig. 2.28). Additionally, Finlayson noted that the spatial height and brightness could foster a more profound spiritual experience. Yet, the church members

professed that their perception of sacredness primarily stemmed from a collective sense of community rather than the building itself. However, it is indisputable that space plays a role in shaping identity and belief—the furnishings within and the quality of the space collectively transform the Genius Loci, thereby creating a link between collective emotion and memory.

Fig. 2.27
Sanctuary of Unity Church in Fredericksburg
Source: *Church in a box: making space sacred in a non-traditional setting* (Finlayson 2012)

Fig. 2.28
Upper window of Unity Church in Fredericksburg
Source: Church in a box: making space sacred in a non-traditional setting (Finlayson 2012)

Finlayson's research concerning the Unity Church of Fredericksburg offers considerable analytical value in understanding the dynamics of Chinese house churches. This study underscores the potency of emotional connectivity, unadorned religious symbolism, and physical elements such as spatial elevation and luminosity in constituting sacred spaces. Chinese house churches adopt analogous strategies, prioritizing a sense of community and shared identity over physical structures through

simplistic spatial arrangements. Finlayson's findings illuminate the often overlooked subtleties of these house church environments. Even inadvertent architectural attributes, along with the collective redefinition of 'Genius Loci'—the inherent spirit of these house church locales—through decor and spatial quality, can serve to foster collective emotion and memory. Consequently, this research offers a comprehensive framework for examining the multi-dimensional aspects of sacred space production within Chinese house churches.

The above case studies are centered on how minimal resources and tactics can convert a secular (or profane) environment into a sacred domain that accommodates specific religious requirements. As I hope these cases demonstrate, in adapting and repurposing these spaces into sacred ones, cost-effective, non-structural interventions, such as furnishing and decoration, play a pivotal role in place-making through their modification capabilities. There is no substantial distinction between the material substances utilized in these two cases. The nuanced difference lies in the fact that, compared to appropriation cases, in the instances of repurposing, besides altering the spatial form, materials also serve as emotional and mnemonic mediums. It is vital to note that encapsulating these architectural practices does not undermine the proactive influence of architectural creation in fashioning sacred locales. Instead, they allow us to comprehend how spaces, extending beyond our conventional definition of "sacred," can respond to and mold locations for religious belief via straightforward and efficacious interventions. The relevance of these case studies for grasping the nature of sacred sites within Chinese house churches lies in their illustration of various facets of object and element participation in creating sacred spaces and contingent, makeshift ones. This includes spatial order, power representation, identity recognition, place ambiance, and the impact of these factors on behaviors, habits, emotions, and memories in their interaction with individuals.

2.2.3 Summary

In my research, the worship sites of Chinese house churches will be thoroughly examined as products of Christianity, Christian groups, and individual Christians within contemporary Chinese society, particularly in the post-reform and opening-up era. These worship places will be contextualized within their social and cultural milieu. They are perceived as outcomes of socio-political realities, strategic spatial maneuvers, and as a medium inhabiting religious practice and belief.

In Lefebvre's conceptualization of space, the centrality of power is paramount. He contends that there exists a dichotomy of knowledge—one that aligns with power and another that resists it (Lefebvre, 1991, p.10). This perspective has been incorporated into the study of religious space by Kim Knott (2015). She posits that dominant ideologies often leverage space as a tool in their exercise of power. Such space is utilized to encapsulate or even obliterate the ideological 'Other.' Boundaries, both constructed and manipulated, are employed to include and exclude. Occasionally, a group orchestrates its space to adhere to the dominant order and, at other times, to resist it. Concurrently, individuals incessantly challenge the imposed order via their quotidian practices, spawning fissures in the system that render spaces habitable (p. 43). This is the genesis of the space of these house churches—a representational sacred space.

From this vantage point, the worship spaces of these house churches can be viewed as a driving force behind the self-realization, development, and perpetuation of Christianity within the Chinese social context. They affect the modes of worship practices, acting as a catalyst for certain activities while impeding others. Concurrently, their form evolves over time in tandem with religious activities. These spaces, far from being vacant as they initially appear, are transient, indefinite territorializations composed of a multifaceted blend of behaviors, practices, emotions, memories, and atmospheres involving people, material objects, and spatial forms. As an architect, I

aim to closely examine how the groups within these house churches manifest themselves within their everyday spatial realms, analogous to the earlier explication of spatial elements within the case studies. More pointedly, I seek to investigate the material forms and strategies they employ in appropriating secular space, their potential impact, and the resistance they encounter or the liberation they bring about. These topics and categories will ultimately be explored within the dual lenses of the poetics and politics of sacred space, aiming to illuminate the comprehensive process and repercussions of transitioning from social strategy to spatial strategy in these sacred places as socially constructed manifestations of religion.

3 Case Study & Analysis

"The use of the cathedral's monumental space necessarily entails its supplying answers to all the questions that assail anyone who crosses the threshold. For visitors are bound to become aware of their own footsteps, and listen to the noises, the singing; they must breathe the incense-laden air, and plunge into a particular world, that of sin and redemption; they will partake of an ideology; they will contemplate and decipher the symbols around them; and they will thus, on the basis of their own bodies, experience a total being in a total space. … In cloister or cathedral, space is measured by the ear. […] It is in this way, and at this level, in the non-visible, that bodies find one another."

(Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 220–21, 225)

In Lefebvre's description, it is not its form, but the meaning of the church space itself is understood on a deeper and more concrete level through the participation of the body. Architect and theologian Bert Daelemans (2020) pointed out that Lefebvre's perspective above on bodily subjectivity reveals a dimension in church space that is often overlooked: the multisensory and synesthetic dimension that interacts with our bodies before we are even consciously aware of it. He urged attention to this aspect in researching and deploying church space. As seen in the previous context review, the Chinese house church worship places respond sensitively to the changing complex power relations between society-religion and community-individual materially. This material response is not just a symbolic or metaphorical spatial representation. It often profoundly participates in its activities through people's senses. It plays the role of spiritual empowerment intermediary in religious services of these house church communities that changes people's views on faith. To fully comprehend the deep meanings behind them, local case studies with engagement and participation are essential.

3.1 Forming of Case Study: Field Research based Approach

The objective of the case study is to analyze the non-traditional worship spaces in Chinese house churches that were initially everyday spaces, such as homes, repurposed for religious use. This transformation process, facilitated by China's unique cultural and political environment, is an area of focus for this study. Based on the historical and theoretical context review, the analysis of revealing these spaces' construction and operation mechanisms takes into account the following aspects:

- **Spatial Transformation:** The study should probe into how homes evolve into places of worship, analyzing alterations in physical layout, furnishings, lighting, and acoustics.

- **Symbolism and Meaning:** Symbolism within these spaces should be uncovered, interpreting how the religious community perceives them and how their secular past impacts their present sacred use.

- **Functionality and Adaptation:** The investigation should explore how these spaces are adapted for worship, their challenges, and how they are addressed. It further delves into the interaction between worshippers and these spaces.

- **Communal Identity and Belonging:** The impact of these spaces on worshippers' collective identity and sense of belonging should be explored. It seeks to understand how the domestic setting influences their perception of their faith community.

- **Existential and Emotional Experiences:** The personal, subjective experiences of the worshippers within these spaces should be investigated, seeking to understand how these environments shape their spiritual and emotional experiences.

- **Cultural and Social Context:** The study should consider these house churches' broader cultural and social context, exploring how their existence fits into the broader landscape of religious practice in China and the socio-political factors that might affect their use.

In the house churches' worship places, architectural space is not a static entity but the interaction between people and space over time. Its identity is mainly shaped by the interactions among different human and non-human actors (Latour & Yaneva, 2017; Yaneva, 2013). The aforementioned items involve the complex categories of interaction between humans, objects, and buildings of these places (Enia & Martella, 2023). For my case study, phenomenological research methods may cover and link these intricate categories well, providing a feasible methodological framework..

3.1.1 Methodological Approach

As a philosophical thought, phenomenology originated from philosophers like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, who speculated on existence. Husserl advocated for the things themselves, emphasizing direct experience over theoretical models. Contrarily, Heidegger called for an existential revision of Husserl's views, interpreting basic structures as fundamental categories of human experience rather than pure consciousness. He stressed the profound significance of the concept of "place" beyond just a tool for manipulating space. Merleau-Ponty expanded on Heidegger's views, emphasizing the subjective role of the body in human experience and developing "body phenomenology." Phenomenology, in simple terms, is the interpretive exploration of human experience. It aims to investigate and clarify human situations, events, meanings, and experiences that arise naturally in everyday life (Von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 3). Therefore, it is also introduced into the study of architecture and its surrounding fields to enhance self-awareness and comprehension of architectural and local aspects (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 5).

Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz (1971) significantly contributed to the knowledge framework of architectural phenomenology, viewing architectural space as embodying "existential space," a stable sensory pattern system

conveyed through a schema consisting of center, direction, and region. American scholars Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore proposed the "body image" theory to explain the fundamental meaning of architectural forms, aligning with Merleau-Ponty's "body-space-perception" structure (Bloomer et al., 1977, pp.31-32). Despite challenges from newer conceptual approaches since the 1980s, the emphasis on perceptual and emotional aspects of architectural experience remains critical to exploring architectural experience's richer dimensions (Seamon, 2000). This is also why some contemporary architectural scholars remain focused on phenomenology, as it helps to understand the deep connections between architecture, its spaces, and human society - what Enia and Martella (2023) referred to as "architectural interactions." Some approach this from an object-oriented-ontology perspective, defending the autonomy of architecture (Harman, 2016, 2017; Bedford, 2020; Gage, 2015). On the other hand, others focus on the actor-network within these interactions, emphasizing the relationality of architectural spaces (Latour and Yaneva, 2008; Shah and Kesan, 2000; Yaneva, 2009, 2013).

This study aims to enhance the understanding of the spatial phenomena in Chinese house churches' "form-structure-function" misaligned worship place cases by adopting a phenomenological approach. According to Otero-Pailos (2012), when phenomenology is applied to architectural research, it can help reveal how architectural spaces as places are experienced in consciousness through prototypical human experiences, such as the sense of body orientation, the perception of light and shadow, or the sensations of wetness and dryness. Moreover, on a cognitive dimension, it aids researchers in understanding the role of human factors in shaping the sense of place, creating architectural embodiment, and establishing environmental ambiance. Specifically for the worship spaces of house churches, this approach can aid in profoundly understanding how individuals shaping and using these spaces experience them. It can help reveal how these individuals perceive and interact with the architectural and local aspects of the worship spaces, thus providing a deeper

insight into human experiences within these unique religious environments. Indeed, social interactions and daily rituals, when occurring within architecture, become an integral part of the architecture itself. A connection exists between the structure of the space and the events that take place within it (Shah and Kesan, 2007).

As mentioned earlier, the worship spaces of house churches involve various interactive narratives, primarily including object and building, human and building, human and object, and human-to-human. In this sense, these places and their participants constitute an indivisible whole, and their construction is relational rather than ontology. Typically, this internal relationship is referred to as "form." "Form" is a term that can denote different things (Forty, 2004). It refers not only to the visual appearance of something but also suggests its internal logic — the correspondences and interactions that construct something from within (Enia & Martella, 2023). Given this situation, architectural phenomenology offers a practical conceptual vocabulary to understand these internal form relationships between places and their participants that disentangles the notion of a fixed or stable relationship between building appearances and their significance. It also moves beyond the restrictions of objective portrayals of structures (Jones, 2000, p. 36). In terms of specific research methods, the integrated research method proposed by Seamon (2000) for how phenomenology is applied to the exploration of environmental and architectural issues is a tool with developmental potential that can be applied to uncover the complex relational form of the house church worship places. It incorporates three phenomenological methodological approaches to architectural and associated environmental issues and proposes a multi-dimensional framework for studying different aspects of the place phenomenon. It includes first-person, existential, and hermeneutical approaches.

- **The first-person approach** aims to gain direct experiential insights into a phenomenon through profound participation. Researchers immerse themselves in this phenomenon, providing a unique perspective based on their lived world,

which allows for a thorough examination of its specific characteristics and qualities. For the case under study, I will directly participate in the house church's worship activities and community life, directly observing and experiencing the material and social dynamics of these spaces. This involves understanding the physical transformation of the space from a home to a place of worship, the practices and rituals that occur within, and the interaction between worshippers and the space. As a result, I will be able to record and analyze the transformation of the space, search for obvious or hidden symbolic meanings, experience as a participant, and observe the interactions between the body and various aspects of the place as an observer.

- **The existential approach** involves generalizing from the specific experiences of individuals and groups in actual situations and locations. Researchers collect descriptive statements of the participant's experiences of the phenomenon and analyze them carefully to determine commonalities and patterns. The existential approach used to study Chinese house church worship spaces will involve systematically collecting and analyzing individuals' and groups' personal experiences and narratives using these worship spaces. Here, the focus is on worshippers' actual life and affection experiences within these spaces, in their exact circumstances and backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews with participants will help to understand the sense of communal identity and belonging within these spaces and individual emotional experiences.

- **The hermeneutical approach** emphasizes revealing meanings that the creators may not have explicitly discussed or expressed by understanding the material environment. In studying Chinese house church worship spaces, the hermeneutic phenomenological method will involve analyzing and interpreting the observational and interview data obtained from the above two methods. This consists in making detailed notes and photographs, creating sketches or diagrams, even building 3D models, and conducting interpretive inductions of the interview records to reveal meanings that people have not directly expressed or are not fully

aware of. Ultimately, these materials will be further analyzed and elaborated upon within the broader Chinese political and cultural context.

The three approaches complement each other and allow for verification between different perspectives to form a multi-dimensional research system within the project, aiming to comprehensively and thoroughly explain the phenomenon. It allows for multiple interpretations of space, moving away from the traditional subject/object interaction model and embracing a more flexible approach that seeks common ground among individual explanations. Regarding its reliability, the phenomenological approach differentiates itself from the positivist social sciences, which bases its credibility judgment on the measurement equivalence of predefined computational scales. As Seamon (2000) points out, phenomenology doesn't separate the research object from the researcher's experience and understanding. Instead, its reliability is obtained through inter-subject corroboration, meaning that its credibility rests on whether the individuals involved can find similarities in their own lives and experiences to the researcher's findings, directly or indirectly. Moreover, Polkinghorne (1984) proposed that the credibility of phenomenological explanations can be evaluated based on four qualities: vividness, accuracy, richness, and elegance. Vividness adds a sense of honesty and realism to the text. Accuracy ensures readers can recognize or easily imagine the situations described. Richness adds depth and emotion to the writing, facilitating intellectual and emotional connections with the reader. Elegance allows for a graceful and poignant presentation of ideas, which enhances readability and comprehension. Thus, the key to the credibility of phenomenology is not subjectivity but persuasion (Seamon, 2000). Its primary criterion of credibility is its ability to engage readers with the researcher's findings and provide them with a deeper, novel understanding of their world or others.

In applying phenomenological research principles to the case study of Chinese house church worship spaces, the first step would be gathering diverse experiences from

various individuals or groups interacting with these spaces. This process forms the research's bedrock, providing the necessary experiential data for analysis. Once collected, identifying patterns and commonalities within the data can be started. These patterns, when shared, have the potential to resonate with the experiences of other participants or readers, reinforcing the reliability of the research findings. However, the real challenge lies in effectively communicating these findings. To this end, vivid descriptions of the worship spaces' physical layout, architectural features, and atmosphere should be produced. Furthermore, the activities and experiences within these spaces should be detailed. These vibrant descriptions bring the case study to life, potentially facilitating a better understanding of the worship spaces and allowing for a relatability to one's own experiences. Additionally, the accuracy of the descriptions and interpretations is paramount, meaning that the portrayals of the worship spaces must closely align with the actual experiences of those who interact with them. This level of accuracy is achieved by providing honest and meticulous accounts based on direct observations and participants' descriptions. To truly capture the essence of the worship spaces, observation needs to venture beyond the physical attributes. A rich, multi-layered exploration of the spaces' emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions is crucial. Such depth adds sophistication to understanding the spaces and allows readers to connect more profoundly. Lastly, the research findings should be presented elegantly. This requires clear, concise, and captivating writing that can draw in the readers and facilitate their comprehension of the findings.

The overall presentation's elegance and the study's vividness, accuracy, and depth could culminate in a compelling and persuasive phenomenological case study of Chinese house church worship spaces. This phenomenological approach, as architectural theorists John Macarthur and Naomi Stead describe, "suggests a direct explanation of how the Spaces we inhabit make us feel" (Macarthur & Stead, 2012, p. 127). In the context of Chinese house church worship spaces, this entails creating a narrative that resonates with readers, giving them a deeper understanding of these

spaces and how they shape experiences. In doing so, such a phenomenological approach bridges the gap between users and professionals, adding to its persuasive power. By these steps, the case study can offer valuable insights into transforming secular spaces into sacred ones in Chinese house churches, illuminating the complex interplay between architecture, experience, and religious practice. In the following sections, each approach will be further elaborated upon, highlighting its specific application and relevance to different aspects of the study.

3.1.2 Study Objects

As mentioned in the last chapter, Chinese society accelerated into modernization and urbanization in the decades following the 1978 reform and opening-up, and the number of urban Christians increased significantly. Under the comprehensive effect of history, culture, society, economy, and religious policy, urban Christian churches in China present two development modes: official and non-official. This study focuses on the worship space of non-official house churches.

Although house churches exist in large numbers in Chinese cities, they remain in the gray area of religious management due to their unofficial status. They generally do not appear in visible urban public Spaces, and their gatherings are primarily held privately. As a result, information about such churches is challenging to obtain using maps or Internet searches. Visits to such churches generally require referrals from members within the church. Therefore, the scope and autonomy of case selection are relatively low compared with the open official church. According to the research needs, I selected cases mainly through the following three criteria to control the general scope to make the selection of cases as flexible as possible on the premise of being able to be studied:

- First, the church must be a Protestant house church so that a uniform standard can evaluate its worship patterns and Spaces;

- Secondly, the church should be located in a local Chinese city so that it can be observed in a unified social context;

- Third, churches should be appropriated from other everyday Spaces, such as apartments, and have a steady and regular worship service on Sundays.
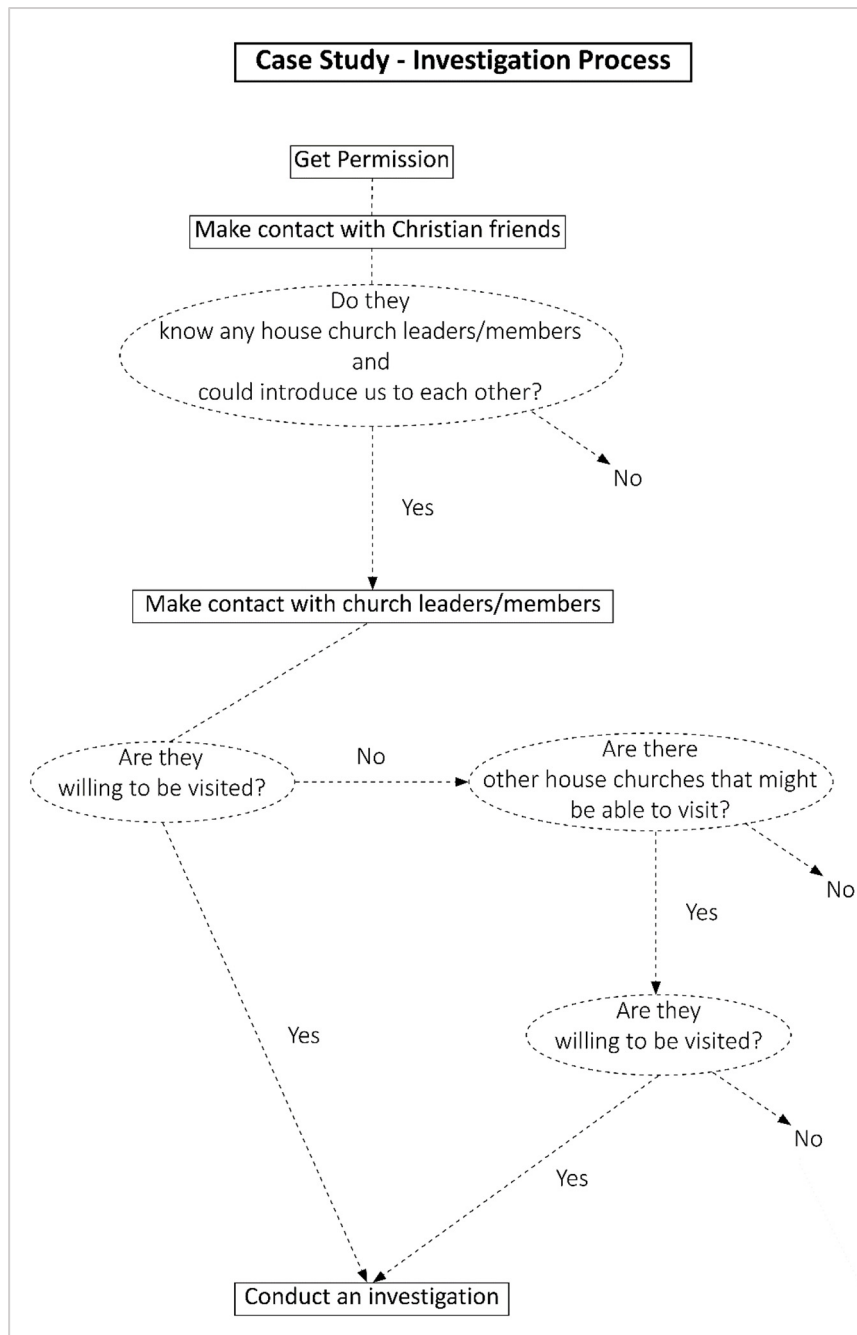
Fig. 3.1

Investigation process: way to obtain permission of visiting house churches

Source: illustration by author

In contrast to the straightforward process of visiting an open church and gaining access to such a house, churches necessitate a more intricate procedure (Fig. 3.1). The prospective visitor must initially establish contact with the leadership or a member of the respective house church. This is best achieved by facilitating a mutual Christian acquaintance, thus ensuring a certain degree of familiarity and trust. Further dialogue with the church members is crucial after establishing this initial contact. This communication not only aids in fostering a sense of rapport but also serves the vital purpose of assessing the suitability of the church as a research subject. At this point, the researcher should consider the pre-established criteria for selecting the churches that will be included in the study. Upon comparing the characteristics of each prospective church against these criteria, those that align with the established requirements are shortlisted. Before proceeding, formal permission for the proposed study must be sought and granted from these selected churches. Which meet the research criteria and provide The necessary permissions will then be formally identified as the subjects of the study. This method ensures respect for these communities' autonomy and privacy while ensuring that the selected objects fully align with the research objectives.

3.1.3 Participant Observation

As a first-person phenomenological approach, the involvement of the human body and its perception is essential in experiencing architectural space. Architect Steven Holl emphasizes the limitations of language in capturing the immersive and sensory qualities of architecture, emphasizing the significance of physical and sensory experiences (Holl et al., 2006, P.41). True and immediate experiences can only be encountered in the present moment, in a specific location. Photos or films cannot fully capture the profound intensity that emerges from a specific place (Daelemans, 2020). As a researcher with a background in architecture, I approached these house churches as a curious outsider. I actively participated in their Sunday worship activities, carefully

observed and documented the redefined worship spaces, and personally experienced the emotions within them. From my first-person perspective, I attended religious services in each location, taking note of spatial elements, evolving spatial forms, and the spiritual empowerment I encountered in these "new" spaces.

As a participant influenced by the architectural knowledge system, observing how the original space is redefined is intriguing. The subversion of the original spatial pattern results in the formation of new spatial forms. My focus on observation and recording primarily encompasses three aspects: the essential material elements in architecture, the morphological structure of space, and the related factors that establish the identity of space.

In observing material elements within the worship spaces of house churches, particular attention is given to the architectural archetypes proposed by Thiis-Evensen (1989). These archetypes include the floor, wall, and roof, fundamental elements shared across architectural styles and traditions. They define the interior and exterior relations of a building, with the floor connecting above and beneath, the wall encompassing within and around, and the roof extending over and under. He argues that these archetypes relate to our shared human experience. They evoke a wide range of emotional responses because they engage with universal aspects of human life, including our relationship to space, movement, and bodies (1989, pp. 89-113). Holl's, Pallasmaa's, Perez-Gomez's (2006), and Böhme's (2006) views on experience and atmosphere in architecture also resonate with it. In the worship spaces of house churches, these essential elements undergo transformations or adaptations by users through simple material interventions. By repositioning the boundaries and altering the relationships between inside and outside, upper and lower, these actions shape the new state of existence within the space. These seemingly straightforward interventions respond to the changing forces and relationships within the space, creating a new place with a distinct function. This transformation carries the "lifeworld" of the new

users and nourishes (or destroys) their faith life, making the architectural space an integral part of their religious experience.

The understanding of spatial form in the context of house church worship spaces is rooted in the phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the embodied experience of the living body about the place. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "body-subject," Casey (1994, p.104) highlights the significance of place as the central ontological structure in the world. Our existence as embodied beings is intertwined with place, and our bodily experiences shape our understanding of space. The physical form of the human body establishes a framework for perceiving and orienting ourselves in space. Concepts such as here-there, near-far, up-down, and left-right are grounded in the body's sensory experiences, creating a perceptual location system based on the center, boundary, and direction. This system, derived from our senses, forms the primary mode of human perception of place (Norberg-Schulz, 1971). In the case of house church worship spaces, the rearrangement of furniture, such as seats, tables, and podiums, reorganizes the everyday secular space. Based on this, with the operation of natural light or artificial lighting, etc., the original internal structure of the space is repositioned and partitioned, resulting in a transformation of the spatial form that establishes a new center, boundary, and direction. This new spatial system creates a framework that influences the body and its movements. It establishes a mapped grid of practices that immerses the body and its senses (Binte Abdullah Sani, 2015). Through embodied worship practices, participants engage with the abstract relationships inherent in the new spatial form and the redistributed spatial power. By engaging in these practices, the body interacts with and is limited by space, leading to a thorough comprehension of spatial dynamics.

The composition of spatial identity characteristics in house church worship spaces is realized through the thoughtful selection of decorations and materials. In his renowned work *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard (2014) delves into architecture's

phenomenological and symbolic aspects. He proposes that spaces possess personal and symbolic meanings intertwined with memory and self-awareness. He further notes that decorations and objects are not merely possessions but contribute to a profoundly unique emotional landscape. The arrangement and perception of these elements shape our moods and perceptions of specific spaces within the house. In the context of places of worship, the material elements play a significant role in enhancing the experience of the sacred and fostering a sense of identity and community. Scholars like Grafton (2014), Steffler (2002), and Taylor (2004) have also investigated and demonstrated that the thoughtful choice and arrangement of materials and adornments in places of worship play a significant role in enhancing the spiritual encounter and collective sense of identity for those who worship there. These elements positively influence various aspects of religious practice, including ritual performance, education, pilgrimage, and devotion. Therefore, when observing the worship spaces in these house churches, elements that do not directly constitute the space, such as decorations and curtains, were also aspects that received significant attention and documentation.

Beyond simply making objective observations, submerging oneself within the phenomenon under study and actively participating in its first-person experiences is fundamental to achieving a more profound understanding. Building trust and respect with participants is crucial for engaging in meaningful interactions and conducting precise analyses. My approach involved assimilating into the group, participating in various activities, and attending numerous meetings. This approach gave me a more comprehensive grasp of the members' experiences and perspectives. For instance, in a house church predominantly attended by students and young people, I participated in their various extracurricular activities, including dinner parties and gaming events. In another case, where a pastor's home served as the worship space, I attended all the day's meetings, ranging from Bible studies to communal lunches.

To further document and disseminate my observations, I captured on-site photographs of each case, including the state of the space before, during, and after the worship service and the process of spatial transformation. However, due to privacy and security concerns, the churches did not permit the release of these photographs. As an alternative, I created 3D models based on the photographs and records, incorporating structure details, interior decoration, and furniture arrangement. These models are valuable tools for conveying my findings to individuals who have not visited these sites.

3.1.4 Interview Strategy

When applying the existential-phenomenological approach, collecting and generalizing the specific experiences of specific individuals and groups in actual situations and places is necessary for studying architectural phenomena. The interviewees of this research are members of the house churches that constructed and utilized these worship spaces, and they are primarily individuals not related to the field of architecture. Unlike the architecture-trained professionals who focus on form and details, Pallasmaa (2014) believed that the atmosphere is the most critical dimension in the general public's architectural experience as non-architects. It is more important for everyday users than visible architectural forms. He argued that every building, regardless of its purpose or significance, can shape our perception of the world and ourselves. The mood and atmosphere created by a space or structure can profoundly impact us, even if we are not consciously aware of it. Pallasmaa suggested that non-architects tend to sensorily focus on the general vibe of a place or building; conversely, emphasizing its visible form indicates the architect's more analytical and theoretical perspective.

Defining and articulating the notion of 'architectural atmosphere' can be challenging, given its intangible essence and unique ambiance that sets a building apart. The architectural atmosphere may encompass a space or area's emotional and unspoken

attributes that evoke a distinct and singular impression (Böhme, 2014, pp. 43,56). It can be conceived as the spatial manifestation of emotions and specific affective traits within a lived environment (Griffero, 2014, p. 37). As articulated by Peter Zumthor (2006, p.10-19), the essence of a building is its atmosphere, which instills a sense of beauty, comfort, and allure. It emanates a profound natural presence and a mystical aura rooted in reality. According to Ban Janson and Florian Tigges (2014, p. 26), atmosphere constitutes the expressive force through which architecture triggers affective experiences in individuals. Through these multifaceted perspectives, it's evident that a building's ambiance plays a crucial role in influencing the mood and experiences of its inhabitants, imbuing it with a personal and distinctive character. Conducting interviews is paramount to understanding a user's experience comprehensively, enabling a more profound exploration that transcends formal architectural knowledge and theory.

Gathering internal users' perceptions of the architectural atmosphere captures their unique spatial experience. It goes beyond the mere accumulation of cognitive and linguistic knowledge, extending to the intuitive, bodily reactions the space elicits. However, the challenge lies in that the 'lifeworld'—as reflected in architecture—is often taken for granted by its inhabitants. This experiential world is usually perceived as a unified whole (Moran, 2005, p. 9), meaning the impact of the spatial environment on individuals' lives often goes unnoticed (Seamon, 2000). Therefore, the crux of the interview strategy for house church members is assisting interviewees in breaking away from their implicit acceptance of the 'lifeworld,' prompting them to bring it into conscious focus and expressively respond to the architectural space acting as its container.

Notably, Merleau-Ponty introduced the concept of the 'body-subject,' underscoring the active, motor dimension of perception and its more passive perceptual aspects. This relates to how our lived bodies engage with their surroundings through action and how

this engagement typically harmonizes with the physical environment in which the action occurs (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Discussing the interplay between place and environmental embodiment, Edward Casey emphasized the mutual relationship between lived bodies and places. He suggested that lived bodies are integral to places and contribute to their shaping, while places are inherent to lived bodies and depend on them. Individuals contribute to a place's formation through human actions and interactions, reciprocally influencing their sense of belonging and identification. Essentially, living bodies and places exist in a symbiotic relationship, mutually influencing each other (Casey, 2009, p. 327). This vital connection between individuals and their surroundings enables the formation of an innate bond with the environment, facilitated through the recurrent coexistence of body and place. While visual elements may influence those unfamiliar with a space, habitual users rely on their multi-sensory experiences and actions to perceive a place's atmosphere (Seamon, 2018). Consequently, in the interview process, questions focusing on detailed feedback arising from interviewees' sensory interactions with the space prove to be a more effective and accurate method of capturing their spatial experience than abstract conceptual questions.

In each case, the interview process (Fig. 3.2) begins with permission from pastors or religious leaders. Meetings and interviews with them can help determine the reasons for choosing a worship space and its purpose and learn more about each church's context and current situation. Also, after building trust, religious leaders can often connect me with people who are highly involved in church or contribute to arranging places of worship. Dialogue with this group can understand these people's personal experiences and emotional encounters when using the worship space to recognize the relationship between the various elements and the atmosphere that constitutes the place and help in the in-depth analysis of the phenomenon.
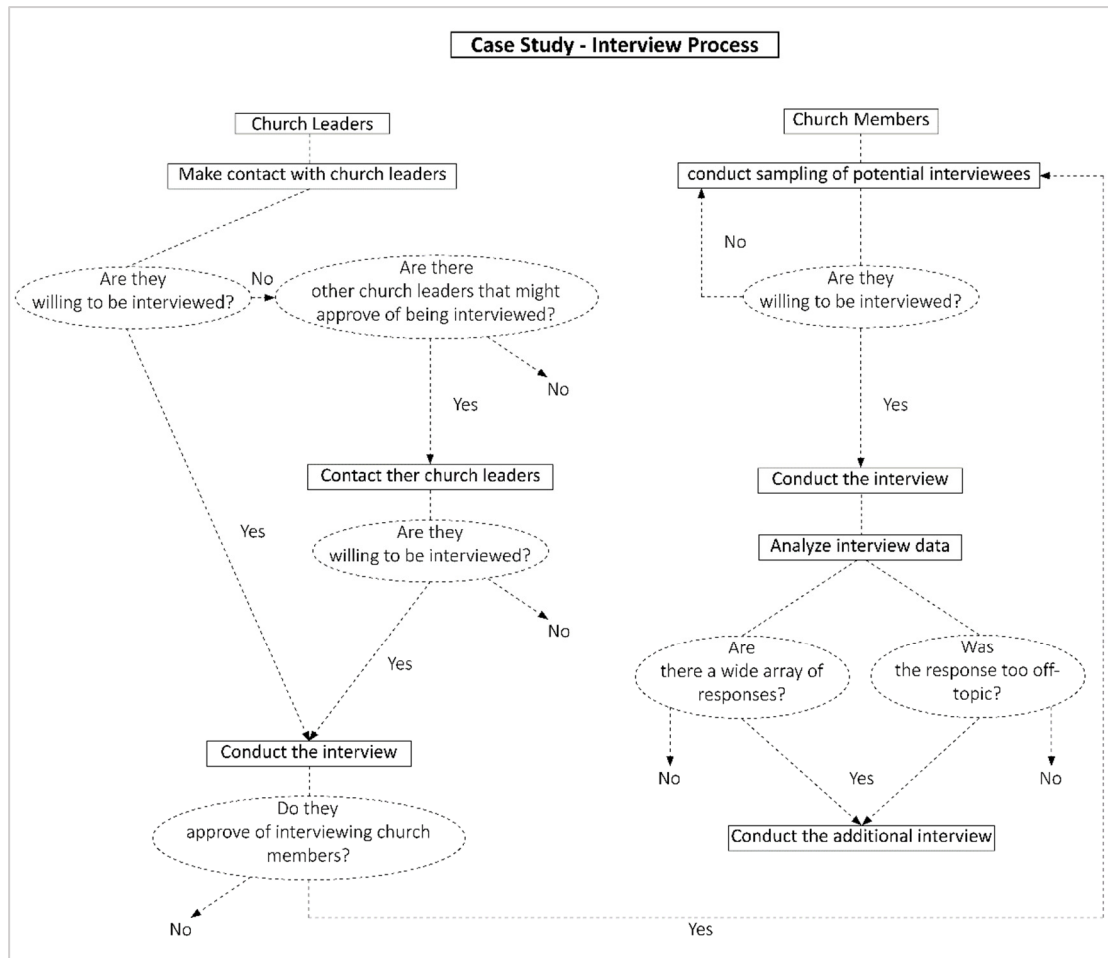
Fig. 3.2

Interview process: way to obtain permission of an interview

Source: illustration by author

The purpose of in-depth interviews is to collect and supplement the best way to describe this phenomenon. As mentioned above, the feelings of non-professionals on space atmosphere are an essential supplement and correction to professionals' descriptions of space phenomena. To gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, it is essential to conduct non-professional interviews in a way that is respectful and responsive to the interviewees. A professional researcher, an outsider, must approach insider interviewees with openness and adjust their questions, tone, and level of interest based on their feedback and the researcher's evolving understanding. The interview structure utilized the semi-structured interview mode of Finlayson's (2012) study on the sacred space of Tallahassee, Florida, based on Seidman's (Seidman, 2006) in-depth interview method of phenomenology. The

interviews were conducted one-to-one, following Seidman's advice on the same topic. The semi-structured interviews were conducted informally according to a broad outline and included four key areas:

- To explain the purpose of the interview, including a discussion of the research topic;
- To understand the pastor and the overall situation of the church, including the reason for renting the current venue;
- To understand the respondent's background, including questions about how long each participant has been a member of a particular church and why they decided to join;
- Their current involvements, such as church service activities;
- Their descriptions of the space atmosphere and the emotional experience in the space.

Although the interviews for each case study focused on the same central themes, each site had its specificity, so the questions posed at each site were slightly different. For example, in a church dominated by young university students, considering that daily activities are an essential way of gathering a sense of community, it is appropriate to consider the everyday use of the venue as an extension of church services and to include interview questions. In a church where the pastor has opened the home as a place of worship, the focus of church services is on Sunday worship services, so more interview questions in this place focus on the spatial experience before and after worship services.

Finally, it should be noted that as Finlayson (2012) proved in the study of the emotional geography of different worship spaces, although highly personal individual religious experiences presented diversity in the interview responses, it was evident from the case studies that the respondents generally discussed these experiences in similar

ways (2012, p.54). Even if a small number of interviews were conducted, it was immediately apparent that the pattern of interview responses was discernible.

In my research, the purpose of interviews is not to explore the causal relationship between objects in space and emotional responses. Instead, through interviews, the dynamic experience mode of participants in worship activities as insiders in such spaces is used to test and correct the observation and analysis of spatial material elements and spatial forms by researchers as outsiders to expect relatively objective and accurate explanations of spatial phenomena.

In alignment with the confidentiality issues, a selection of interview content will be integrated into the analysis, while the comprehensive transcripts will be securely archived. In the interview analysis, participant identities will be represented through initials to maintain anonymity, and their detailed information will be succinctly summarized in an appendix, enabling third parties to understand spatial phenomena more objectively and accurately.

3.1.5 Explanation and Evaluation

When applying the hermeneutical phenomenological approach, it is essential to consider that this research amalgamates architecture, sociology, and theology. These disciplines intersect within the lifeworlds of worship spaces in Chinese home churches. It is also significant phenomenologically that a building and its lifeworld may shift over time: buildings deteriorate physically; their structure, functions, and users may change (Seamon, 2017, p.5).

When a house is transformed into a church, carving out a worship space from the daily living area, key questions to explore are how a new lifeworld is cultivated within it and what it looks like. As Brand (1995) argued, architecture is more successful as a place

only when it can sustain and respond to human life. Similarly, Pérez-Gómez (2016, pp. 21-24) also believes that the focus on the architectural atmosphere should not only be on the image level but should consider whether the built environment can provide positive emotional support to support human moral actions. Therefore, when interpreting these home church worship spaces, interview records are invaluable sources of information. Firstly, the spatial dimensions connected to emotions must be elucidated through an analytical interpretation of the interview data. On this basis, axial models and scene perspectives transformed from photographs, along with the concise pictograms, serve as helpful tools to assist in the textual description and interpretation of these dimensions. Ultimately, all this information should be analyzed and evaluated within the big picture of Chinese politics and culture.

As described in the theoretical context, church buildings express God's presence, provide worship services, and unite communities. Dwelling's architectural elements and spatial form change and give the environment. And can such environments become a place that nourishes or destroy human life within them, whether through everyday, ordinary experiences or intense, extraordinary encounters? A useful model is geographer Edward Relph's interpretation of patterns of experience in different places based on phenomenological assumptions. That is, an environment becomes a place in experience when an individual or group feels an inner sense of life associated with that environment. In other words, they feel secure, comfortable, at ease, and in place (Relph, 1976, pp. 49-55). The opposite lived relationship with place is what Relph identified as outsideness—feeling a sense of separation, discomfort, and even alienation from the place. Relph drew on this outsideness - insideness continuum to delineate several modes of place experience. About architecture-as-place, these modes do not relate to one's "role" or "social status" associated with the building. Instead, they describe the kind and intensity of experience that one encounters via the building as a place.

Concerning this criteria, we can make a more profound judgment on the experience of the place in this worship space - to what extent, on the basis of theological and social factors, do architectural elements participate in and impact the religious lived world they carry? Understanding the worship space of house churches in this way may offer one powerful springboard for imagining buildings that invigorate religious life but also evoke wonderment, imagination, elegance, and grace.

3.2 Case Studies: Documentation of Eight House Churches

3.2.1 Overview of Eight Cases

In 2021, I contacted some urban house church groups in mainland China with the number of people ranging from a few dozen to more than one hundred. They are all located in the urban spaces of China's more economically developed eastern region, also considered an area where local religious management is relatively loose. After learning about the conditions of these churches and obtaining the qualifications to visit, I conducted on-site inspections of eight of them, and they met the case criteria I mentioned earlier.

Among the eight cases studied, Case 1 involved transforming office space into a residential-scale worship venue, while Case 2 directly converted the pastor's residence into a place of worship. Cases 3-5 featured church groups renting residential buildings without significant spatial modifications, using them exclusively for church purposes. Cases 6 and 7 involved extensive interventions by the church groups in rented residences to create dedicated worship spaces. Case 8 represented a temporary worship space within an office converted from a residential property.

Regarding production methods, only Case 8 can be considered a makeshift sacred space created through appropriation, used temporarily by religious groups on Sunday mornings. In Case 2, although the property still serves as a residence, the pastor's ownership rights have led to fixed religious decorations and furnishings, making it a long-term possession by religious insiders. Like the other six cases, it falls into the contingent sacred spaces created through diversion.

House Church 1
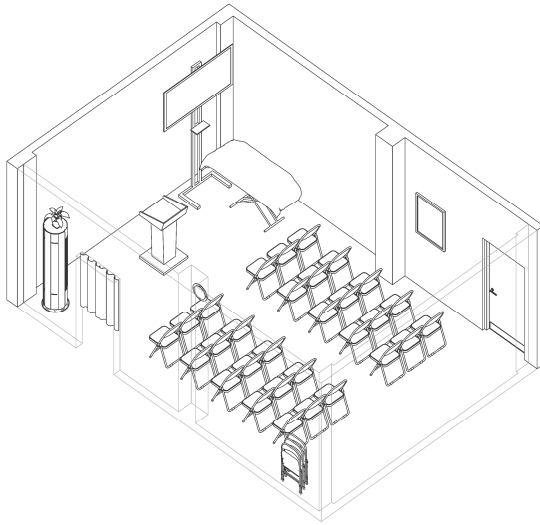
Case No.1 is the venue of a small urban house church. The church community has over 30 members, most of whom reside in the neighboring residential areas. Initially, they gathered in the pastor's home, but as the number of church members increased, the space became inadequate for their meetings. Recognizing this need, the church leader, in agreement with the church board, found a small office space available for lease in a nearby hotel. They decided to rent this space and utilize it as the venue for various church activities.

Case No.1	
Number of members	30~40 people
Composition of members	residents in residential areas near the venue
Original function of venue	office space of a hotel for lease
Size of the worship space	≈35 ㎡

Table 3-1

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

House Church 2
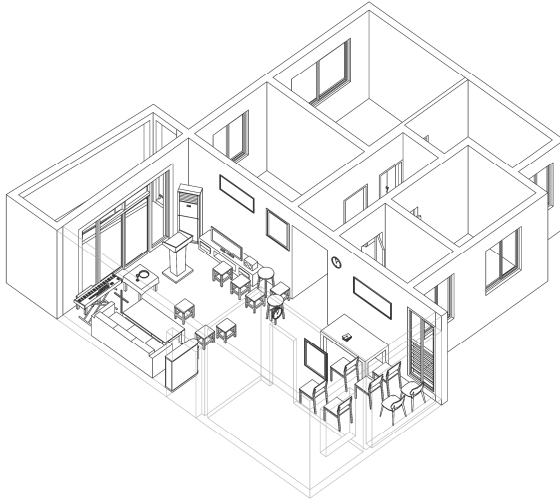
**Case No.2** is the venue of a small urban house church. The church community consists of approximately 30 members, most of whom live in the same residential neighborhood as the pastor. The pastor's residence serves as the venue for various church activities, and it has been opened up to the church community after being purchased. The space is slightly modified and utilized for worship on Sunday afternoons. Interestingly, this church is the only one among the eight cases that retain the weekly sacrament service during its Sunday service.

Case No.2	
Number of members	30 people
Composition of members	residents in residential areas near the venue
Original function of venue	a commercial apartment where the pastor's family lived
Size of the worship space	≈29 ㎡

Table 3-2
Essential information about the church
Source: illustration by author

House Church 3
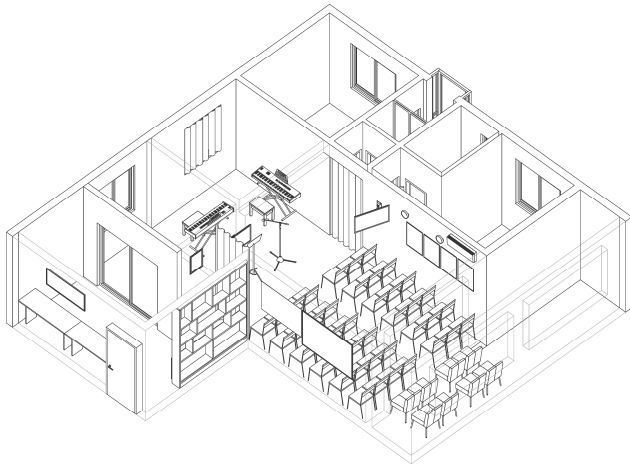
Case No.3 is one of the venues of a large urban church with about 200 members. The church community faced the challenge of finding a new space after their previous venue, an abandoned factory, became unavailable due to contract expiration and urban planning. However, finding a similar large venue was difficult due to religious management and rising rent costs. As a solution, the church leaders divided the congregation into smaller groups and trained members to serve as clergy, leading these groups. They then rented affordable apartments that could accommodate small groups and serve as new meeting venues. Sunday worship and other activities occurred within these smaller groups, and communication between groups is maintained online and offline to foster stronger connections.

Case No.3	
Number of members	200 people（this venue accommodates about 30 of them）
Composition of members	local residents of the city
Original function of venue	a commercial apartment
Size of the worship space	≈32 ㎡

Table 3-3
Essential information about the church
Source: illustration by author

House Church 4
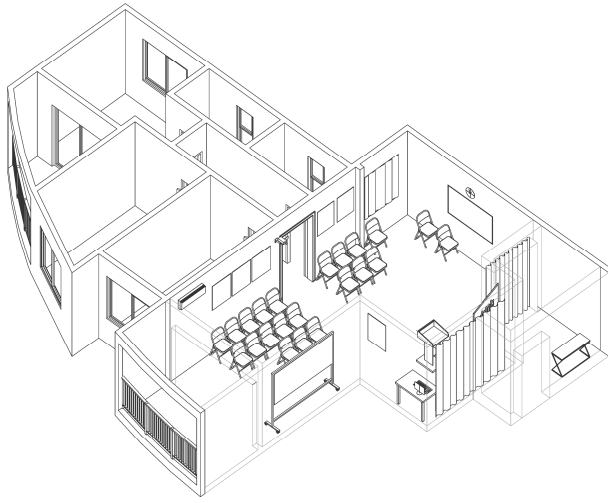
Case No.4 is the venue of a small urban house church with about 40 members. Case 4 and Case 5 church communities chose to rent apartments on different floors in the same commercial-residential building. Individual owners originally occupied these apartments until the church communities leased them. The church groups decided to retain many of the apartment's original interior features, including the exposed surfaces of the floors, walls, ceilings, and all the finishing materials, such as tiles, marble, plastic laminate, and paint. The only modifications were to the furniture, lighting, and decorations, giving the space a new purpose and ambiance while preserving its existing structure.

Case No.4	
Number of members	40 people
Composition of members	local residents of the city
Original function of venue	a commercial apartment
Size of the worship space	≈40 ㎡

Table 3-4

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

House Church 5
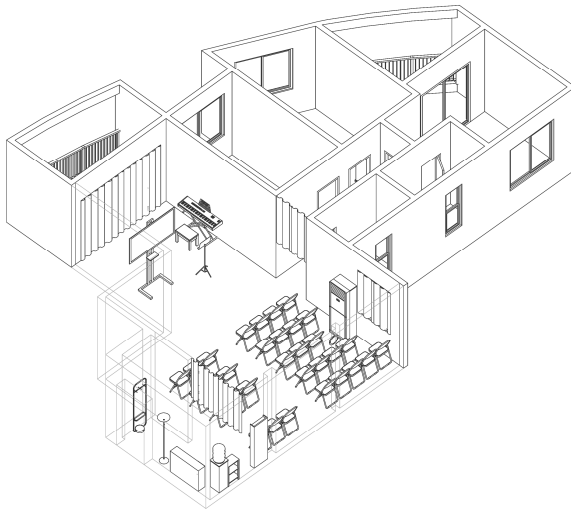
Case No.5 is the venue of a small urban church. The church, consisting of around 30 members, primarily young graduates, and professionals, was originally a college student church established by foreign missionaries. However, the missionaries left China due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and a part-time Chinese clergyman from the community took over. Facing difficulties reaching college students because of the pandemic and with most original members graduating and working, the church relocated from a suburban university town to the city center. Despite these changes, the church remains dedicated to its mission and supporting its members. They rented a commercial-residential apartment that used to be a photography studio. The studio setup was removed, but the overhead spotlights remained for lighting purposes.

Case No.5	
Number of members	30 people
Composition of members	fresh graduates and young white-collars
Original function of venue	a commercial apartment
Size of the worship space	≈40 ㎡

Table 3-5

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

House Church 6
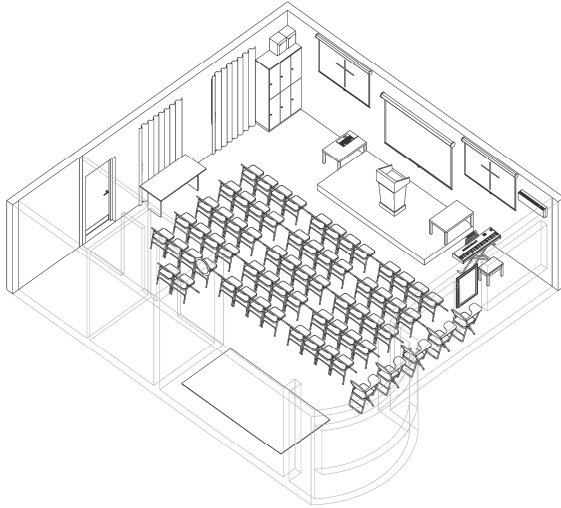
Case No.6 is an event venue for a medium-sized urban church. The community consists of approximately 100-150 members, primarily migrant workers. They have established their venue in a mixed-use apartment building on the city's outskirts, where commercial spaces outnumber residential units. The church group has leased two adjacent apartments on the middle floor of the building. One apartment serves as the church office, while the other has been refurbished and designated for Sunday worship and other congregation gatherings.

Case No.6	
Number of members	100-150 people
Composition of members	migrant workers
Original function of venue	a commercial apartment
Size of the worship space	≈70 ㎡

Table 3-6

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

House Church 7
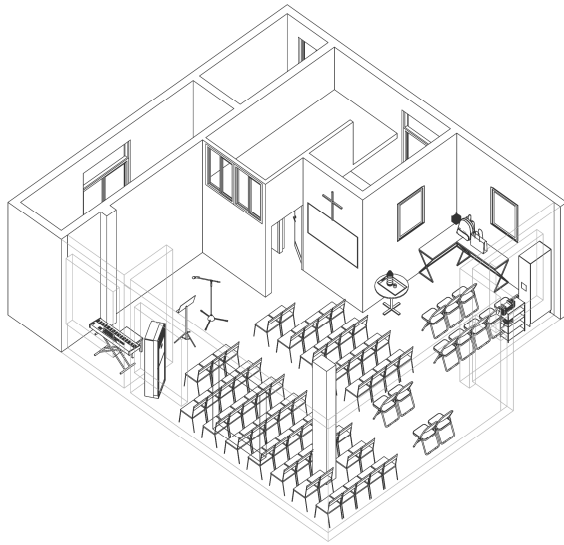
Case No.7 is the place of a medium-sized urban house church. The community consists of approximately 80 members, predominantly migrant workers. They have established their venue on the second floor of a self-designed and self-built apartment in the city's urban village. The apartment has a ceiling height of approximately 4.5 meters, which is higher than the standard ceiling height of commercial residences, typically around 3 meters. Upon renting the apartment, the church community removed some partition walls to accommodate their Sunday worship activities.

Case No.7	
Number of members	80 people
Composition of members	migrant workers
Original function of venue	a self-design and -built apartment in the urban village
Size of the worship space	≈54 ㎡

Table 3-7

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

House Church 8
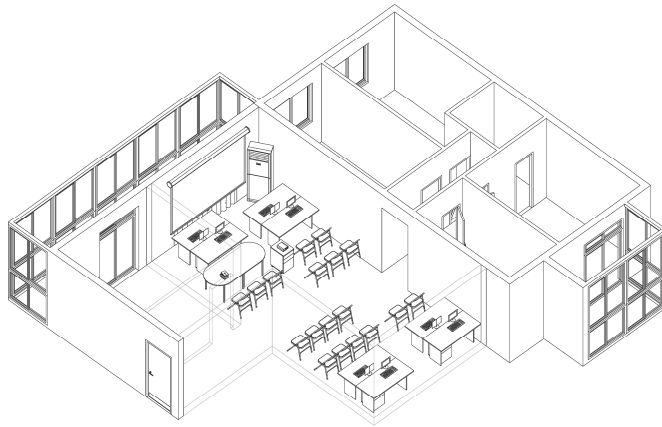
Case No. 8 is one of the meeting places of an urban house church with more than 200 members. They used to rent a large conference hall in a hotel as the meeting place. Due to religious management and other reasons, the conference hall cannot continue to be rented. After that, the church leaders decided to divide into groups of different sizes and conduct gatherings in various venues through online and offline linkages. The venue I visited is a meeting place for a small group of about 20 members. It is an apartment rented by a church member used as the office of his own company. He opens it up to church members every Sunday morning.

Case No.8	
Number of members	200 people (this venue accommodates about 20 of them）
Composition of members	residents in residential areas near the venue
Original function of venue	a commercial apartment rented as an office space
Size of the worship space	≈35 ㎡

Table 3-8

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

3.2.2 Interview Analysis: From Church Making to Place Making

As mentioned in the historical context, China's house churches have grown and developed under the particular social background of China and expanded their unique religious space, which is different from that of Western churches. The worship place in the house is born out of this unique ecclesiastical ecology, forming a unique religious landscape.

Under the background of China's economic and social reform and opening-up, the house church has completed the expansion from the marginal rural areas to the urban hinterland and got rid of the old Pentecostal church tradition in the rural context, completing the modern transformation of the church. To a large extent, this modernity is characterized by a localized Calvinist theology: 1. Emphasize the authority of the Bible, and preaching is the core part of worship; 2. Emphasize establishing an internal system of the individual and keeping a distance from political and social movements; 3. Emphasize organization and management and preference for hierarchical structure.

This theological feature is the practical way that the house church produces the space, and the mental space it creates determines and dominates the physical spatial relation and form related to it. The house church actively withdrew from the public sphere, which the rulers had produced as the supreme symbolic system for the ideological basis of their rule. These churches retreat into the private sphere, where they express themselves—the worship space in the dwelling. The community gathered in a place often considered non-sacred to adopt strategies to revitalize the environment. In that sense, it is the space covered by this representation and belongs to the user; it's the human, imaginative, experiential space. It is not the user's passive understanding of space as conceptualized by architects, urban planners, technologists, or bureaucrats (the intellectual, conceptual space in their minds, a code system that can replace real everyday space). It is a vivid and creative expression of the church members as users of their sacred space.

Therefore, unlike Finlayson's (2012) research on places of different religions, which focuses on discovering users' emotional reactions to places created by third parties, my research expects to find out the cognition and experience of house church users on places they made. It is hoped that the deeper relationships and meanings behind place-creating can be understood by exploring the commonalities among house church groups in the same or similar place-creating strategies. So my case study begins with an analysis of synesthesia patterns in interviews, which is when posed with a particular query, various individuals' responses exhibit comparable or similar attributes.

First, this place strategy is considered an expedient for house churches to strive for activity space under China's religious policy and social reality, so users' emotional reaction to the place (acceptance/rejection) is usually taken as the beginning of the interview. From a material point of view, such places are generally material-limited, temporary, and unstable. Church members often respond to this controversial situation with biblical references, emphasizing that earthly materials are fleeting and worthless because there is a more beautiful and enduring inheritance in heaven. *"...I don't think the conditions are bad. We don't come here to admire the magnificent architecture, but to worship God..." (YW Interview,2021) "...There is one problem we are very clear about, that is, we are sojourners on earth, and our home is in heaven. God promised us a city in heaven..." (AR₃ Interview,2021)* For them, the precariousness and lack of earthly meeting places led to the expectation of eternal and abundant heavenly gathering places. *"… The state of our church is not as favorable as that of the Three-Self Church. Our resources are quite restricted ... But what is the true worth of having the best material conditions on earth? Things on earth are short-lived. Our hope is in heaven. God promises that [we] will have a more beautiful and lasting home in heaven ..." (AR₃ Interview, 2021) "… God tells us that there is suffering in the world. The material problems we are encountering are not too big of a problem … We are accumulating treasures in heaven … " (JP Interview, 2021) "... I've been to Europe and*

visited a lot of cathedrals, and they're gorgeous; that's fine. But none of this has eternal meaning... Everything in this world is fleeting, and material possessions will eventually fade away; only the treasures in heaven are eternal, and this is what we should value and pursue ..." (YW Interview, 2021) In this sense, spatial cognition, under the influence of this concept, seems to break through the physical limitation of the ceiling of the building and connect the immediate physical space of the body vertically with the spiritual domain described by the discourse, which is regarded as eternal and genuinely sacred.

Following the previous question, when asked whether meeting in such "humble" churches affects their perception of the sanctity, church leaders and members agree that physical architectural space is not important because what is truly sacred is not a specific place but the person who believes in God. *"... I often tell my brothers and sisters that the church is not a building but a group of us. The original meaning of the word church is the people who are called out, and the building is just a place for us to gather. The most important thing is to come together to worship God, and it doesn't matter where you meet ..." (BDM Interview, 2021) "... The building has no sacredness; it's just an ordinary house... The people who come here are the point; we are the people of God. It's not the house that makes us different. Instead, we make the house different (laughter) ..." (AR$_3$ Interview, 2021)* Therefore, for them, physical space provides a place for sacred people to gather and worship. *"... I like coming here very much; it makes me feel cozy to get along with my brothers and sisters...I don't seem to have paid attention to what the room looked like before; it's similar to my home...I came here because I wanted to come to meet the family ... " (TQ$_2$ Interview, 2021)* In this sense, meeting in a house is not fundamentally different from meeting in an ornate church. In addition, they also stressed that the gathering itself is not considered a special sacred time but a part of a wide range of sacred times. *"... Coming here to meet is only part of our lives, not all ... you understand? We shouldn't just be Sunday Christians, come to a different place and do something different. We are Christians*

daily; we should live according to God's will because we are holy people ..." (BDM Interview, 2021) "... I agree with what the pastor said. I think because we are holy in ourselves, what matters is how we live each day. As long as we live according to the teachings of the Bible, every minute and every second of our life is sacred ..." (YFM Interview, 2021) They believed that since life itself is sacred, both the time of worship and daily life are part of the sacred itself. As can be seen from the answers to the interview, the spiritual space and time of the individual go far beyond the boundary of the ground restricted by the walls of the building, and the horizontal flow extends into the daily field, which was once defined as secular.

Although the everyday is emphasized as a sacred part, these groups do not deny the importance of the time of worship. They describe Sunday worship meetings as an important way to nurture and reinforce the sanctity of the individual. *"... Of course [Sunday's] gatherings are important, the Bible tells us not to stop gathering ..." (JW Interview,2021) "... [As a pastor], I often encourage brothers and sisters not to stop gathering. Everyone worshiping together and getting close to God is an essential part of our faith life, so that we can be blessed by God through each other and get closer to God ..." (YTL Interview,2021)* When asked about the role of the place of worship in this process, the answers show an exciting hierarchy of unity of opposites. First, in these conversations, the concept of "place" is weakened while the idea of "activity" is emphasized. *"… I don't know if it counts as a church because I never seem to feel like I'm going to a church. The church should be an impressive building for me, like the cathedrals you see in Germany ... But I'm sure this is the common home of brothers and sisters, where everyone worships God and listens to God's words …" (YW Interview,2021) "... The church in my heart? Uh ... At least this place isn't a church, right? This is where brothers and sisters could meet. Of course, having our church [building] would be nice, but I don't think our place is bad (laughter). It is very comfortable to worship here, and I feel very peaceful every time I come here ..." (TT Interview, 2021)* Church leaders have repeatedly stressed that this is not a religious

place but a house of faith. *"... We are very familiar with the police in charge of the area (laughter). They used to come and ask us if we were holding a religious event here, and I told them we did not have a religious service; we were gathering with family members. We were a family of common faith ..." (BDM Interview, 2021)* They also emphasize how faith can change an individual's life. In their narratives, the church is no longer described as a religious organization but as a living body. The physical architecture itself is described as a "dead" construction, and the church community inhabiting it revives the dead building. *"… The church building is dead, but the church community is alive; it is the body of the Lord Christ ... I think it is just the opposite. It is not this place that gives strength to brothers and sisters. However, the gathering of brothers and sisters to make this dead place come alive. ... but we still want to provide the best possible gathering environment so everyone can come here to worship and praise with faith ..." (PL$_2$ Interview, 2021)* In other words, it is not the custom-constructed space that forms the place and shapes the meaning to support the church activities, but the church community's vitality that spontaneously creates the atmosphere and shapes the non-custom space into the place. In this sense, the venue seems to do little to promote the gathering. But at the same time, on the other hand, they also emphasized that these places somehow provide a sense of security and belonging that unites church members. *"… I haven't participated in outdoor worship, and I don't want to ... We still need a house to worship in. Otherwise, it would be too insecure ... Coming to this place makes me feel more belonging. After all, this is a place for our church …" (WL Interview,2021) "... We are not creating a different place with special decorations, but we try to make it comfortable for everyone to stay ... When we decorated the room, we tried to keep some of the worship furnishings unchanged to give everyone a fixed feeling … We'd be grateful if the Lord would allow us to build a real church. I had a vision. (laughter)... If I can build a church, I don't want to create a different place deliberately. I hope we can bring this relaxed atmosphere of loving meeting and worship to the new church..." (LZL Interview,2021)* In addition, although these house church communities kept a distance from excessively religious elements

in the establishment of the place, even some simple furnishings and decorations were mentioned in the interviews of some members as triggering some emotions related to their faith. *"... I like the decorative paintings [calligraphy works] hanging on the wall. These golden verses of the Bible in the paintings [calligraphy works] always remind me of my mission as a Christian ..." (PL2 Interview,2021) "... Red velvet door curtains seem majestic to me. They look like temple curtains, don't they ..." (YW Interview, 2021)* It seems that the so-called "unimportant" of the place means it is not directly related to the sacred and does not participate in the sacred production. However, while these places are not marked with a sacred stamp, they play an active role in responding to users' activities and responding to the content of their beliefs.

When further asked how the church was held together in these sites, the "Christ Jesus is here" concept was repeatedly invoked. The pastors or ministers of different churches unanimously insisted that the gathering here had meaning only with Christ at its core and that the church was a living body with Christ as its head. Without the presence of Christ Jesus, the most magnificent church is just a pile of useless material. *"... I used to gather in a large church for a long time, but then I gradually found out that the content of the pastor's sermons is crying up wine but selling vinegar, which is not in line with the truth ... That church is lovely and gorgeous. But is there any value? God is not there; it is just a pile of building materials ..." (BDM Interview, 2021)* So that everything that goes on here is centered around Christ Jesus. The ministry of ministers is essential for people to know Jesus, so it is considered the heart of the Sunday gathering. In these interviews, pastors are described as messengers of God's message, and through their word, believers receive messages directly from God, reinforcing individual faith. *"... As a pastor, the most important thing is that I must bravely preach the word of God and let everyone know the truth... It's not easy, but as a pastor, this is the most important task ..." (YTL Interview,2021) "... I think the most important thing [of preaching] is to let everyone know that God is here, and God is with us. As long as God is here, it will be glorious no matter how humble a place is. If God is not here, the*

place is not worth it, no matter how beautiful it is ... I think the most important thing is to let everyone know that God is here, that is, to let everyone know the true way of God and the love of God through preaching the truth. The other is to let everyone feel the love of God here through shepherding the church ..." (LZL Interview, 2021) However, the eucharist, baptism, and other services are considered "memorialists" and have no extraordinary, transcendent power. *"... Our church has a eucharist service once a month. Baptism is about twice a year; of course, this depends on the number of people to be baptized ... I know some churches have sacrament every week, which is also very good. We celebrate and memorize the Lord Jesus' death for us by having the Lord's Supper ... Although there is no magic in the ceremony itself, it is important to remember the Lord Jesus himself ..." (PW Interview, 2021)* In this sense, the space here is not what Rudolf Schwarz (1958, p.200) calls a " liturgical instrument." The sequence of worship space is organized to emphasize the authority and influence of preaching rather than centering on worship and ritual behavior. These descriptions also capture the hierarchical clarity of the structure of what Kang (2019) called the indigenous Calvinism of Chinese house churches, what Kilde (2008, p.4) called the power in religious space，and the preaching becomes the center of the place. *"... If there is any difference [compared with ordinary gatherings], I think it should be that we can receive the word of God when we gather here ... I love listening to pastors preach, and I often feel like God is talking to me personally to solve my problems … I feel wonderful that we all come together to listen to the word of God ..." (TZ Interview, 2021)* In the gatherings of these house churches, through the priest's preaching, the individual consensus is gathered, and the connection between heaven and earth, man and God, is established from immanence.

In addition, respondents added that this unity was strengthened in the network of relationships among church members. In addition to building faith consensus through preaching, this unity is also claimed by church members to be felt in their dealings with other members of the church. *"… I was a provincial and people who came here to work*

here, and the first time I was brought here by my neighbors. My first impression was that everyone was very enthusiastic. Everyone was very concerned about me. I felt very warm here .... Here I have a feeling of home ... This is my home in this city ... And then I was baptized here …" (JPQ Interview, 2021) The members interviewed generally said they received care from the pastor and other members and that this love came from "God" as an externalization of their inner faith. *"… I think the love of brothers and sisters makes this place different ... When I'm in a bad mood, I can get a lot of comfort and encouragement here. There are many things that I can't talk about with my family, but I can share them with the brothers and sisters here ... " (TQ$_2$ Interview, 2021)* This love assured them that "Christ Jesus was in their midst." They said they would like to come to these specific places to participate in this worship together; it is an excellent opportunity for them to talk and care about each other. In other words, these Christian places provide more possibilities for building and strengthening this relationship. On the one hand, this collective worship in a small space makes it easier for them to see, hear, and feel each other's presence. *"... I can feel everyone's presence when I worship. [When singing hymns] I can hear everyone's voice...It's not me worshiping, but everyone worshiping God together ..." (LL Interview,2021) "... I feel so close to everyone ... I love the hymn worship, everyone's singing fills the place, it's so beautiful ..." (YZ Interview, 2021)* On the other hand, they can participate in more communal services, such as setting up the podium, arranging the seats, and tidying up the service every Sunday before the worship service. *"… I come in early every Sunday to set up the place with everyone ... I don't feel like it's extra work ... I'm happy to serve with my brothers and sisters ... I think it's setting up God's home, which is also ours. (laughter) …" (LL Interview,2021) "… I used to worship in a large church [a Three-Self church]. When I was there, I just found a seat and sat down. I didn't know the people around me ... Later, a friend introduced me here, and I liked the atmosphere more. Everyone is very close, like a family ... Sometimes, I will come earlier, set up tables and chairs with my brothers and sisters, and chat, which makes me feel very involved ..." (JR Interview, 2021).*

Additionally, interviewees also mentioned that it relaxed their communication in such an informal space and enhanced their contact with other members to some extent. *"… I feel very relaxed coming here. I don't think it's a serious place to be nervous ... I will be more willing to share my life with people around me ..." (YTL Interview,2021) "... I think you can be more presumptive here (laughter). There are few restrictions on gathering here, so it is more comfortable and unrestricted to chat with everyone ..." (TL₂ Interview, 2021)* On the one hand, these places narrow the distance of individuals in the network at the level of physical perception in formal worship due to their own spatial scale and other characteristics. On the other hand, communal service also maintains and promotes the connection of interpersonal relationships in the network. Last but not least, the informal activities and communication facilitated by the place help to supplement the lack of formal religious activities to connect the relationship between individuals from another level, generate the forces to resist division, and bring the gravity to strengthen the network nodes.

Finally, when asked what it was like to attend meetings in these venues, respondents mostly used metaphors to explain their complex experiences in worship spaces that were not in the church buildings. This place experience, or more specifically, the user's overall feeling of the place, was invariably described in interviews as a "feeling of home." However, the intensity of this feeling still varied across venues. *"... Our place is different from a cathedral. We don't want brothers and sisters to feel so reserved, and hope that everyone can feel at home ... From our own small family to this big family with God's presence ..." (BDM Interview,2021) "... I don't think this is a strange place; it gives me a sense of belonging... every time I come here, it's like going home ..." (JL Interview,2021) "... It feels like home here. Even though it's not my own home, I do feel at home here ..." (JR Interview, 2021)* In these interviews, no one used the word "church" to refer to their meeting places but instead used "our home," "our house," or "our family" to describe these places of worship and their territory. *"... I feel that*

worshiping here is very different from gathering in a cathedral. The atmosphere of worshiping in a cathedral feels very sacred and serious ... Maybe worshiping in a cathedral feels more awe of God, and there is some distance from God. But worshiping at this place makes me feel so relaxed, like being at home，and I feel closer to God ..." (PL₁ Interview,2021) "... Don't be restrained and just make yourself at home here ... Here is our common home ..." (JL Interview, 2021) Words such as "family affairs" and "family member" have replaced nouns such as "church affairs" and "parishioner" and are often used in church activities. In response, love, warmth, intimacy, solidarity, ease, security, a sense of belonging, and other qualities associated with home are often used to describe their spatial experience. *"... I don't feel uncomfortable worshiping here ... I feel at home here ... I used to worship at the ** Cathedral. It was so gorgeous, but it made me feel very restrained ... And those seats [pews], maybe they're made to feel uncomfortable on purpose ..." (JR Interview,2021) "... As a migrant worker, it is so wonderful to have a spiritual home in this strange city ... Brothers and sisters love each other, which makes me feel very warm ..." (AR₃ Interview,2021) "... This place doesn't make me feel very far away. On the contrary, the brothers and sisters are very close to each other, and I feel very warm when we get together ... Yeah, it's like a family reunion at New Year, but we do it every week (laughter) ..." (PL₁ Interview, 2021).* In this sense, the time and space of the fellowship seem to be somehow reconciled with the building that houses it. As (Tolia‐Kelly, 2004) asserted, our understanding of "home" can be shaped, debated, and changed.

The collation of interviews shows that the place of worship is somehow separated from the residential space that bears it, despite the unprofessional, spontaneous, and minimal intervention. This separation is not a physical delineation of the sacred-secular territory in traditional church-building strategies but a theological narrative of a non-spatial concept that shapes spatial intentions and affects insiders' perceptions of the place. As a Canadian geographer Relph (1976, p.43) put forward in his *Place and Placelessness* after a systematic investigation of the phenomenon of "place,": the

essence of the place is primarily unconscious in its inhabitants； The intent identifies the place as the fundamental center of human existence. This kind of place goes beyond typology. It establishes a new presence in the emotional dimension.

Unlike worship places in church buildings created according to their types, these sites do not form symbolic Spaces with prominent formal characteristics or strong tension. Instead, they condescend to the form of existing architectural types, expressing their beliefs in a secular form. Although this place of worship is non-custom and often unstable, it still plays a role in building awareness and community spirit among the insiders. Architects represented by Rudolf Schwarz regard the sacrament as a source of unity in church premises and as a key to the church community's consensus and dynamic operation. However, in these worship places of house churches that are not customized for the sacraments, the power of unity and the church's vitality is strengthened through emotional methods other than the liturgy. This forms the emotional place referred to by Finlayson—they do not emphasize the subjectivity of space itself, but promote the participation of the body's subjectivity in activities, stimulate emotion, and produce influence through the spatial mechanism (Finlayson, 2017). In the above interview collation of insiders in different sites, clues of place mechanism can be unearthed. I summarize the relevant factors into the following four aspects:

- **Re-arrangement of spatial sequence:** Unlike the passive gatherings arranged by architects in custom-made church spaces, the rearranged pulpits and seats in these non-customized worship places are forms of gatherings settled spontaneously by users. The members' awareness of positioning in the unconscious intention reshapes the center and direction of the place.
- **Re-configuration of spatial power:** The new form of gatherings in these places is a metaphor for reconfiguring religious, social, and personal power in space. The rearranged sequence re-divides the space into different areas, forming new

boundaries, and the positional relationship of different areas expresses the power of the religion contained therein.

- **Re-establishment of space identity:** The leaders of these house churches strive to provide a place of worship consistent with the teachings and the development of the world. They look forward to overcoming the division brought about by distance and separation by establishing identity and providing momentum to promote and maintain unity for the inner relationship between man and God and the interpersonal relationship of religious communities. In addition to the form of gathering, images[4], symbols[5], texture[6] and color of the material[7], etc., also play a role in this process.

- **Re-shaping of space atmosphere:** The Christian places of these house churches are no longer a complete occupation and isolation of territory but a kind of appropriation and coexistence of secular places. These places are somewhat seen by their users as the mundane incarnation of God's realm. In these spaces where the world is connected with God, the feeling of the atmosphere is usually complicated, and the secular emotion represented by the home is intertwined with the transcendent sacred emotion.

---

[4] Calvinists reject images; on the one hand, they believe that images cannot represent the omnipotence of God and that trying to do so would demean him. Furthermore, Calvinists believe that images cannot be educational because God can only reveal Himself through His Word (Pettegree, 2000). Although Chinese house churches with Calvinist theological characteristics have abandoned traditional images, they have combined Chinese calligraphy, an art form, with the words of the Bible to develop another image that directly conveys information.

[5] Although the cross is not the earliest Christian symbol, it is the most critical symbol in the Christian world today. The empty cross without Jesus hanging on it, as a symbol of God's power and hope, is generally accepted by Chinese Calvinists because of its minimalist form and become the main symbolic decoration of these churches.

[6] The color and texture of materials can affect sacred responses. For example, velvet is often used in church services due to its luxurious texture and ability to absorb sound, making it perfect for softening the acoustics of a church. In some cases, velvet was also used for altar covers and the bodies of lecterns and pulpits. Because the rich and regal velvet color creates a feeling of reverence, its use in church furnishings gives them a sense of grandeur and importance and thus has symbolism in church settings (Scott, 2019).

[7] Silver can evoke a sense of sacredness due to its association with purity, divinity, and mystery, symbolizing a deity's divine or spiritual power. A sense of wealth and grandeur, further contributing to its association with sacredness. Furthermore, silver is a highly reflective metal, which can create a feeling of awe and reverence, further reinforcing its ties with spirituality (Deist, 2000).

In the following analysis, I will follow the spatial clues I obtained in the interview, combining my observations and records to discuss the link between the formation of this mechanism and the intervention.

3.2.3 Case Analysis: From Social Strategy to Spatial Strategy

Case 1

A small office had been rented out on the ground floor of an unassuming hotel by a church group and had been furnished as their place of worship. I entered the hotel lobby, walked through a passage, and entered the office area where the hotel rented out. There was no access control there, and people could enter freely. The office area had been planned in an inner corridor, with at least five offices on each side. Because the outer doors of each office were in the same style, it was difficult to know which one was the church when you came here for the first time. The church leader had led me into a room with the door ajar, which was the place of the church. Compared to the other seven cases I had investigated, it was the only place of worship converted from a non-residential space. This particular case was chosen for the study due to its spatial scale and proportion, which closely resemble those of typical commercial housing in China. More importantly, in this rectangular windowless room, a straightforward form of the model of a house church's place of worship had been displayed - a podium used as a pulpit, a large television set for communicating information, an electric keyboard to accompany songs for worship, and folding chairs for congregation seating. There were no other frills there, not even any religious symbols.

Rearrangement of spatial sequence

According to the church leader, it was once a small travel agency's office space. The church community had rented and then vacated the office furnishings left by the previous tenants: the original tables and chairs had all been removed, along with the decorations on the walls. From Monday to Saturday, the space was generally unused, the area was kept clean and vacant. The seats were tucked away and placed against the wall. On Sunday morning, it was rearranged as a place of worship.
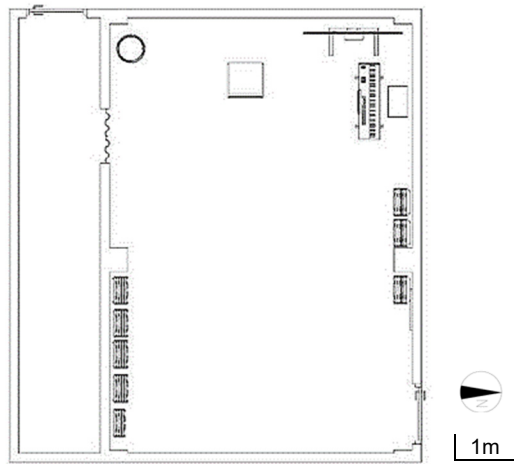
Fig. 3.11
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author
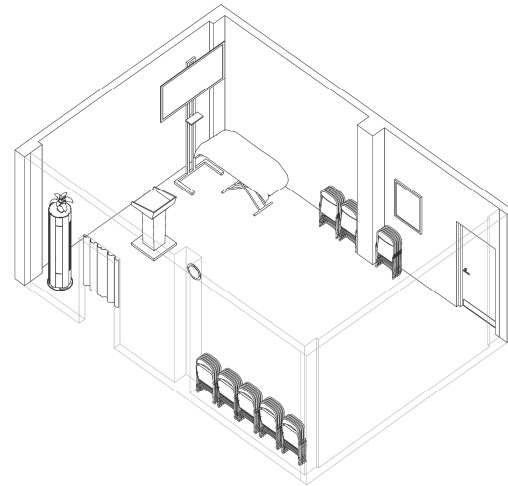
Fig. 3.12
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

As I walked into the room, I noticed that the only piece of furniture was a podium used as a pulpit. It was placed at the end of the room's long axis, away from the entrance. The church leader explained that he chose this location to be easily noticeable upon entering and avoid interference from doorways and pillars on the north and south walls. This arrangement also made it easier to place seats. The podium anchored the center of the space and remained there even when the room wasn't in use during the weekdays. Although it wasn't the physical midpoint of the room, it held significant meaning as the center of the space when it was used for gatherings.

The podium pulpit at the west end of the room had become the reference for the church members when placing their seats, and it was the direction they faced during the worship service. It could be seen in the observation of the process of seating arrangement that this pulpit had been the center of the place that guided the direction of the spatial sequence. Along the path marked by the podium, the folding chairs had been placed on both sides of the long axis by those members who had come to the church to arrange the venue in advance and arranged symmetrically, forming a spatial form with a firm order. The two areas had been separated by the long axis passing through the pulpit, creating a longitudinal momentum of the extended axis. Finally, they

gathered and intersected by the raised podium at the west end of the long axis to form a complete structure.
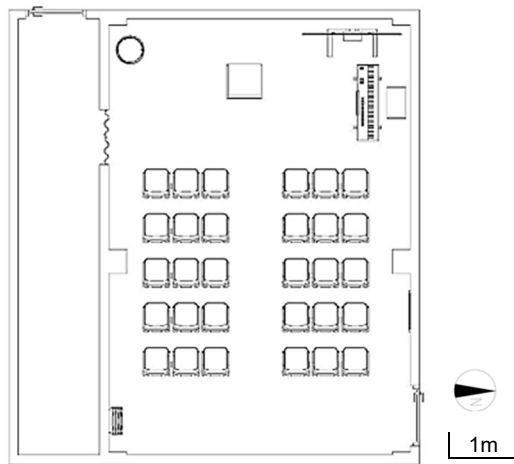
Fig. 3.13
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author
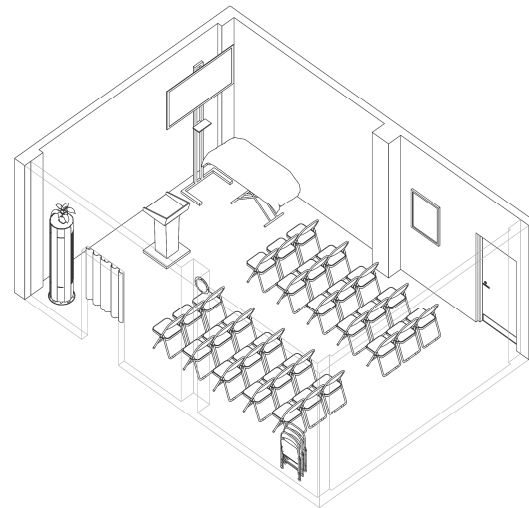
Fig. 3.14
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Reconfiguration of spatial power

According to interviews with church leaders, after renting the room and consulting with church council members, they decided to keep the room's original flooring, wall painting, roof finish, and lighting to save as much money as possible. Upon entering the room, the place was comprehensive, not divided into zones. Gray square tiles had covered the room floor, and all the walls had been painted white without any distinction. The plaster decorative hanging panels left by previous tenants had surrounded the room's division, and the light strips had been evenly arranged inside to form homogeneous lighting. Church members had kept the worship space intact by covering the wall opening leading to the extra room with a cotton curtain printed with a cartoon image.

Without the elevated pulpit, there seemed to be no place in the room to focus. The raised pulpit occupying the west end of the room caught my eye as I entered the room for the first time and realized that this position seemed to be the focal point of the whole

room. The position of the furniture has been highlighted in the space. This location defined the site's purpose and reflected its core values - a place of worship with a sermon service at its core. On one side of the back of the table, they had been an electronic organ and a TV screen to aid in worship. Although these two devices faced the audience, their corner position did not affect my attention to the pulpit. The pulpit was central and dominated the area. The raised pulpit seemed to proclaim the authority of the preacher standing there—connecting the top-down relationship and delivering God's message to the seated believers. Though associated with worship rituals, instruments, screens, and other devices provided services that did not involve the divine word itself and were placed in off-center secondary positions.
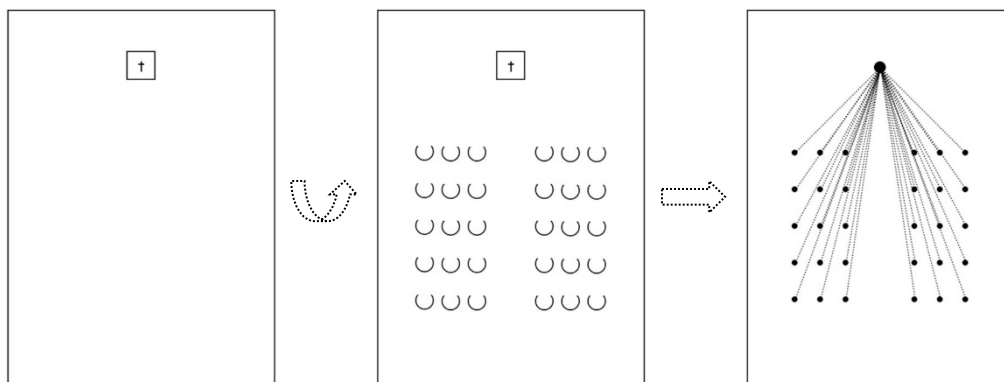
Fig. 3.15

Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service

Source: illustration by author

Folding chairs were placed on either side of the podium along an axis extending from the pulpit. This axis was consciously avoided to form a corridor. The seating area did not infringe on the status of the pulpit. On the contrary, the pulpit was made more potent for attracting attention through the corridor channel. I also observed that people avoided the center aisle when seated and entered their seats from the side aisle at worship services. As the place's focal point, the pulpit formed an invisible power in the place and spatial dominance with the help of visual focus. This power came from the new spatial sequence created by the rearranged furniture, which subtly influenced the

behavior of those who came there.

Re-establishment of space identity

When one enters the place, all one sees is an empty room with a podium. Even after all the arrangements and preparations for worship have been made, no explicit religious images or symbols would be found there. However, in my interactions with members who came to worship here, I found that even the non-symbolic furnishings and some even insignificant things seemed to be associated with the "house of God" in the feelings of these church members.

"… Of course, this is not an ordinary place; this is the house of God … such as the pulpit (Fig. 3.17) *and the red velvet cover* (Fig. 3.16)*, I don't know why; they always remind me of some past scenes in the cathedral when I attended Sunday worship there before … or I feel like I've seen these things in some Three-Self church …" (JW Interview, 2021).*
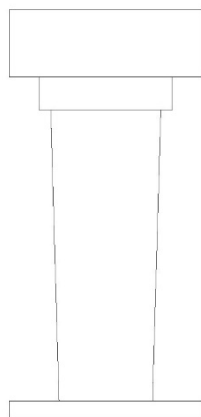
Fig. 3.16
A podium used as a pulpit,
reminiscent of a cathedral scene
Source: illustration by author
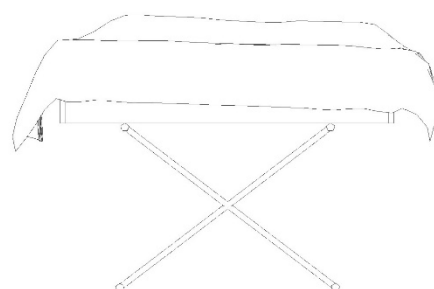
Fig. 3.17
Velvet cover on keyboard,
reminiscent of a cathedral scene
Source: illustration by author

In this place of worship, the personal experience of the place played a role in the identification of religious identity. The same religious services undertaken by different

144

places created connections between the concrete and the abstract, between the real and the memory, and overlapped the clues in other Spaces. This helped the church members in the "blank" space imagine a rich scene that aroused emotion. It was challenging to say whether the activities happening there endowed these ordinary things with different meanings or whether these things endowed people with different feelings. The two might be whole in themselves, and the worship service there worked with these specific substances to shape meaning.

In this venue, the place of worship was rearranged weekly, and this work was not a task assigned to specific church members but a spontaneous process in which all church members could participate at will. I arrived about an hour before the service began, and some church members began arriving about ten minutes later to set up and prepare the place. In arranging the venue, they always used the pulpit, a symbol of theocracy, as a reference point, placing the folding seats in the proper position. The whole place was ready in about twenty minutes. In interviews, these members of the joint preparation service described the work this way,

> "… I am thrilled to be a part of this ministry. To me, it is like building a church and doing work for God …" (YZ Interview, 2021) "… I don't feel exhausted. This kind of service, talking and laughing with everyone, is pleasing …" (JW Interview, 2021)

Some members believed that by "building the church" together, they could connect with God on a deeper level. Each seat was strategically placed to align with the sacred center, contributing to a larger picture of blue chairs that stood out from the gray floor. This emphasized the unity of the individuals who sat in them. In addition, communication in the service process was also an opportunity for members to interact. Unlike coming to a church place with fixed seats where members usually sat right after entering, this interaction expanded the scope of communication. It was no longer

limited to members within a specific location but formed a flow of locations, making it possible for all members participating in the service to interact. It could be seen that the communal "construction" service itself played a positive role in maintaining and promoting community relations.
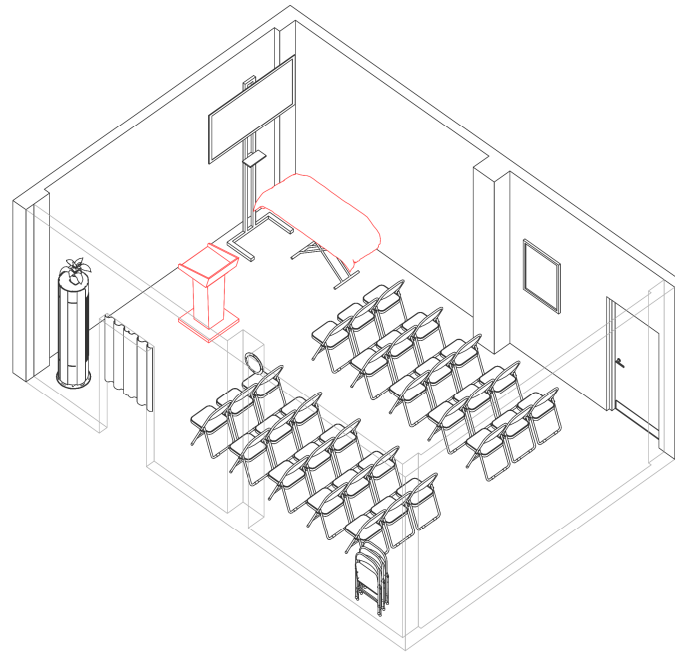
Fig. 3.18
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

This church had no choir service for music worship, and the congregation led by the host sang in chorus to complete the three hymns before the sermon service. Because of the high density of people throughout the venue, intimate seating brought members closer to each other physically. I could hear the voices of those around me singing and even praying softly, which made the whole worship experience possible more holistically. In addition, because the chairs were not fixed, the body was not bound in a fixed spatial relationship, which enabled it to have greater autonomy and made the perception and communication between individuals easier. When the worship service was over, it could be seen that the seats, which had been neatly arranged, had been more or less moved. In this process, the body seemed to be fighting for space. This

autonomy did not create division but strengthened the possibility of an individual connection. Individuals' sight, hearing, and communication enhanced the church's unity. The place had a simple design with minimal decor and lacked noticeable symbols or strong vibe tension. However, its purpose was clear, and the small number of people inside created a high density, making it easily recognizable as a cohesive structure.

Re-shaping the space atmosphere
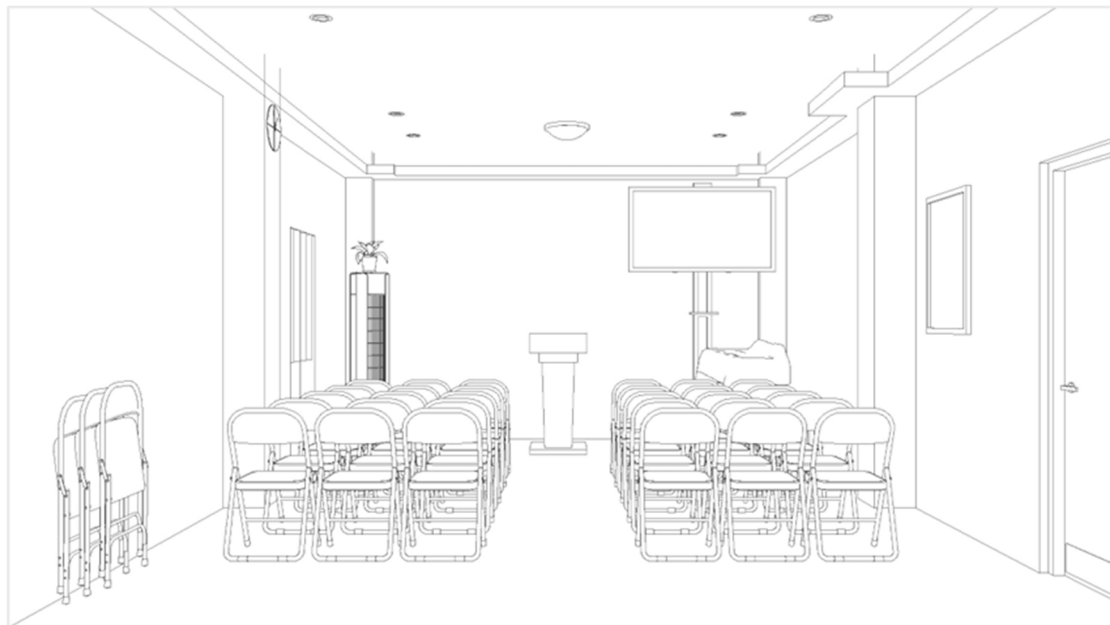
Fig. 3.19
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

The church community did not put much effort into decorating this temporary rented space. One could see no deliberate attempt to create a symbolic religious connection there. On the contrary, the furnishings were easy to buy and familiar items in daily family life: simple ceiling lights, curtains printed with lovely patterns to separate the space, chalkboards at the entrance, the home cylindrical air conditioner with the standard home ornamental plants on it…According to the interviewed church leaders, they did not deliberately create a specific atmosphere or image; the selection of furnishings and decorations was based on economic and practical principles and the

purpose of creating a relaxed feeling.

"… we want to give brothers and sisters a relaxed environment where they can feel rested here. We want everyone to worship and communicate in a relaxed atmosphere … [we] didn't buy special religious decorations, which might make people think it's too serious … [we] didn't initially plan on giving this space a homelike feel. Instead, we scoured the internet for furnishings that fit our needs and budget …"（YTL Interview, 2021）

And these furnishings for church members gave them a sense of a "home" atmosphere. In interviews with church members, the experience of the place was often described as "homey."

"… Being here feels incredibly calming … It's like being in my own living room … The gentle lighting adds to the warm, secure atmosphere, and it's a peaceful place to be …" (JW Interview, 2021) "… I enjoy being in this place because it gives me a comfortable and homely feeling. It feels cozy and liberating to be here … My daughter is fond of the small blackboard placed near the entrance and loves to draw on it … She even has a similar one in her room …" (YZ Interview, 2021)

When asked how they could feel "at home" in a place that is not home, the members interviewed said,

"… Upon entering, I noticed that the proportions of the ceiling, lighting, and space were similar to those of my home. As a result, I didn't feel like I was in a vastly different environment …" (TL₁ Interview, 2021)

These church members had a sense of "home" beyond the legal address, which was more dynamic than it seemed. The simple decorations and furnishings made an emotional connection between the sacred space and their personal lives. While some details in the place connected people to the actual church scene, the environment did not feel exclusive or unwelcoming. On the contrary, with the feeling of "home," the familiar atmosphere made the religious sentiment more relatable and compassionate.
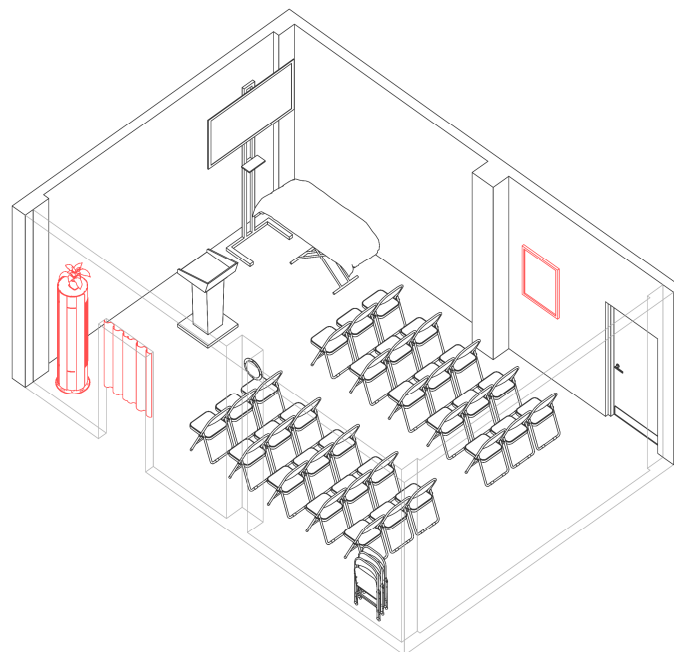
Fig. 3.20
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a domestic scene
Source: illustration by author

Case 2

A pastor lived in a residential district built around 2000, with about 90 high-rise buildings and 3,000 residents. He opened his home on Sundays as a worship space for the church community. I found this place based on the address given by the pastor. This district was free to come and go without registration. Although this residential area was large, the internal road system was not complicated. The building number and other signs were apparent, making it easy to find the corresponding building. He opened the door for me after I contacted the pastor through the intercom downstairs. The pastor's apartment was on the second floor above ground, so there was no need to take the elevator; it could be reached through the stairwell behind the entrance. There were two houses on the floor where the pastor lived, one of which had a cross sign on the door, so it was easy to know that this was the pastor's house. After entering the door, the apartment's entrance was a small hallway separated by a shoe cabinet. On the right side was the south-facing living room, where typical household furnishings such as sofas, coffee tables, and TV cabinets were placed. On the left side was the dining room, with a wooden dining table and several dining chairs. The dining room and the living room were connected to form a transparent living space in the shape of two rectangles, one large and one small, whose short sides were adjacent. The innermost part of the house was three bedrooms and a bathroom—this was a prevalent commercial housing type in China.

Rearrangement of spatial sequence

I attended a Sunday worship that was scheduled for 2:30 pm. Before that, a Bible study and group lunch were held at the church in the morning, which I also joined to gain more knowledge about the space. The room was kept in its original residential arrangement during the Bible study. This was a voluntary activity, and seven people participated that day. They sat comfortably on leather sofas or low stools around a coffee table in the living room to read the Bible and discuss informally. There was no particular seating arrangement, and everyone sat according to their preference. It felt

like a casual family gathering. We moved to the dining room at lunchtime, where the pastor's wife prepared and served the food. Members did not have to participate in the process. The lunch was also an informal exchange held around the table.
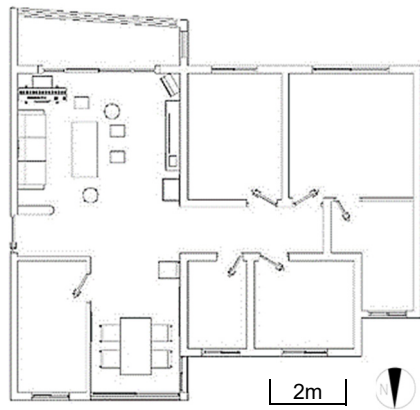
Fig. 3.21
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author
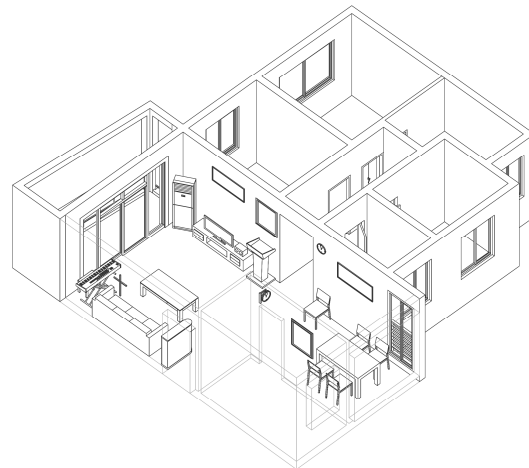
Fig. 3.22
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

After lunch, the members of the church who were primarily responsible for welcoming were waiting downstairs to accommodate the worshipers and opened the outer door for everyone. The other members began to arrange the place of worship spontaneously. The members moved the podium next to the TV cabinet on the west wall to the floor-to-ceiling glass door between the living room and the balcony on the south side and placed it toward the living room on the north side as a pulpit. The reason why the pulpit is set in this direction, the pastor explained, is mainly based on actual user needs. Compared with the dining room side, the living room side is more spacious, easy to arrange seats, and feels more stretched. Then the pastor took a low white table from one of the bedrooms, placed it next to the pulpit, spread a white tablecloth, and arranged the communion vessels. This altar table, dedicated to the placement of communion vessels, is not seen at other venues. Although the podium and Eucharist table are placed side by side, the podium used for the pulpit is significantly higher than the low table used for the altar. It is more likely to attract people's attention, playing a central role. The electronic organ used for music accompaniment was slightly removed

from the southeast corner of the living room and placed in an inconspicuous position beside the sofa.
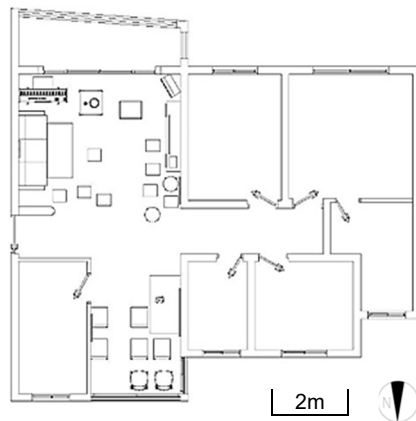
Fig. 3.23
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author
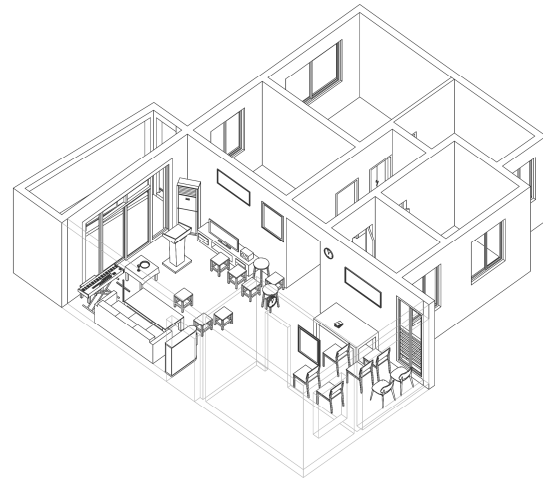
Fig. 3.24
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

The furniture in the living and dining rooms was rearranged to create a congregation area after the pulpit and chancel were furnished. The coffee table was moved closer to the sofa, and the dining table was pushed against the restaurant's west wall. Different styles and heights of stools were added to the area. Low chairs were placed in the more extensive living room closer to the pulpit, while taller round stools and dining chairs were added to the smaller restaurant area farther away. The seats were arranged unordered in the horizontal direction, but their height constituted a discernible order. In this arrangement, the height of the seats followed an observable height law with the pulpit, creating a direction pointing towards it. Although the sequence of seats did not reflect this direction, the height relationship between the pulpit and the chairs did.

Reconfiguration of spatial power

In the interview, the church pastor told me that when he and his wife bought the house, they had decided to open it on Sundays as a worship place for church members. Therefore, they had considered the need to convert it into a place of worship when

renovating the house. Thus, unlike the over-decorative decoration style prevalent in many Chinese homes, they had strived to keep the space simple when decorating. The ground of the house's main space had been covered with a reddish-brown shiny and reflective wooden floor of the exact specification. There had been no extra decoration on the ceiling, only essential lighting. All walls had been painted pure white. Only crucial furniture and a few decorations had been placed in the living and dining rooms.

When I attended a Bible study there, the living room had undoubtedly been the most critical area in the entire living space, and the coffee table had undoubtedly been the focal point of this area. It had occupied the living room's center and formed a ring around it. It had been like a consensus-building platform, attracting people around it to share and communicate. Before Sunday worship, as the podium used as a pulpit had been moved to the southernmost side of the living room, the power center of the venue had gradually shifted. When the low table used as an altar had been placed on the side of the pulpit, the translucent screen in front of the floor-to-ceiling glass sliding door between the living room and the balcony had been pulled up. The projection screen above the sliding door had been lowered, and the core area of a worship place had been finished. This location had become the most eye-catching presence in the whole place. The spatial power of this place had been redistributed in a short period. By then, the coffee table had no longer been so attractive that I hadn't even noticed when it was pushed close to the sofa.

Although the floor covering and wall painting had been uniform, the living room and dining room were still two distinct areas before the worship venue was set up. The living room with the coffee table as the core and the dining room with the dining table as the core had been independent areas that had not disturbed each other. In arranging the worship space, the independence of these two areas had gradually been broken. First of all, the completion of the arrangement of the pulpit area had given its

location a strong image, weakening the influence of the tea table and dining table. Finally, when they had been moved to one side, their previous impact on the field had been gone. The boundary between the two independent areas gradually blurred and merged and finally became a cohesive whole.

In the power center area at the southernmost end, the podium used as a pulpit remained the most eye-catching. In contrast, although the low table used as an altar was also in an important position, its image was less prominent than the podium. Firstly, its low height made it less noticeable. Secondly, it was covered in a way that prevented it from standing out. It was specially coated with a white cotton tablecloth, and the utensils were also covered with the same white cloth, blending it with the original furniture in the room. As a result, its image was submerged within the space. Therefore, in the power center of this space, the pulpit still maintained an unshakable position. This relationship between the pulpit and the altar furniture aligned with the theological concepts of Chinese house churches influenced by Calvinism, where preaching was considered the core of all services, and communion was seen as a commemorative ceremony. The pulpit was thus placed in the field more impactfully, conveying to the people the supreme power of the service it represented.

In the congregation area, the moved furniture randomly inserted seats of different heights and shapes into the vacant space. There was no distance between them and the pulpit area; on the contrary, they were placed as close as possible to it. Here, the choice of seat forms was not uniform, nor was there any particular order in how they were placed. The original sofa in the living room, simple round stools of varying heights, and the original dining chairs constituted the seating area. Various seats used for sitting were taken out and irregularly placed here. However, when the audience was seated, and the pastor preached from behind the pulpit, the power in the space was revealed through the vertical height difference. The audience sitting on the low seats in front looked up at the pastor behind the pulpit and the suspended projection screen. The

gaze of those sitting on the higher chairs at the back had to traverse the relationship between low and high in the front and ultimately converge with the pulpit. The act of looking upward under this high-low relationship directly or indirectly conveyed to the people the authority of the pulpit, which carried the function of preaching.
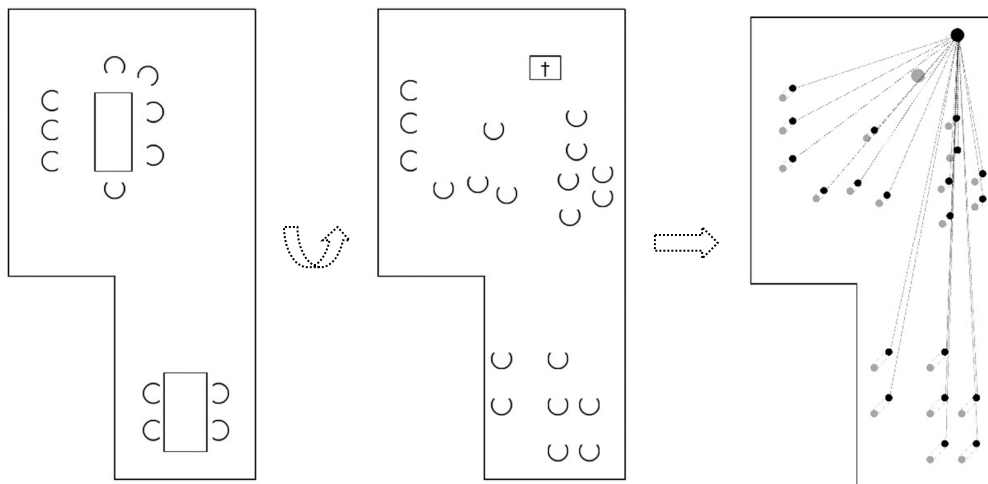
Fig. 3.25
Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Compared with the pulpit, although the altar did not represent the highest power, the power difference between it and the congregation was still reflected in another high-low relationship. During the communion service, the audience stood up and looked at the low altar while the pastor knelt at the table and blessed the communion with the chalice aloft. These low furnishings became the focus of everyone's attention. At this moment, the pastor was no longer a tall "great man" preaching the holy words but a humble "servant" before the altar. The pastor was no longer the focal point of the congregation, and the utensils carrying the sacrament had become the center and protagonist of power. Instead of conveying a message to the congregation in a high-profile teaching manner, it captured the congregation's attention in a humble and emotional form.
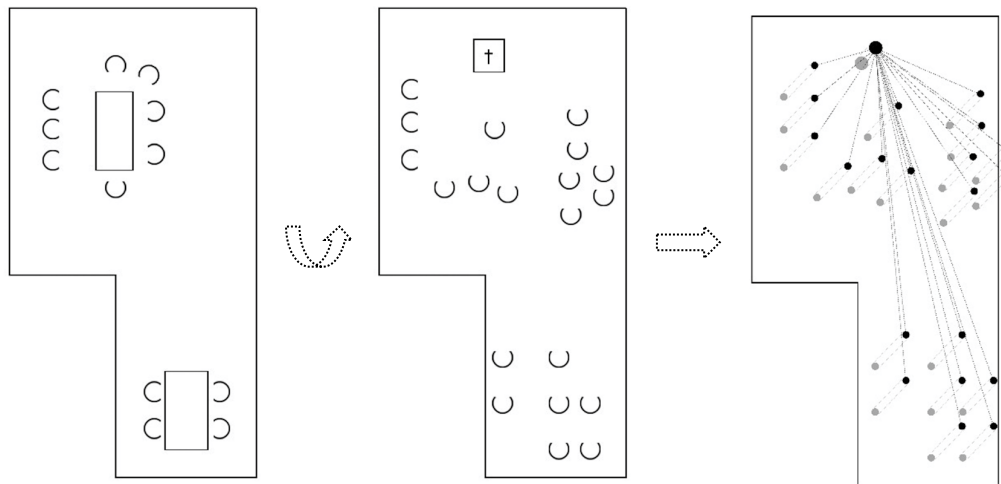
Fig. 3.26

Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during eucharist service

Source: illustration by author

Re-establishment of space identity

A typical Chinese family's living space was my first impression of the place when I arrived on a Sunday morning. However, upon closer observation of the decorations, it became evident that this house was filled with items related to Christianity, leaving no doubt that it was at least the residence of a Christian family. The framed Chinese calligraphy work "Immanuel (God is with me)" (Fig. 3.28) hanging on the background wall of the TV immediately caught people's attention upon entering the house. A small wooden cross (Fig. 3.27) hanging on the background wall of the sofa was also noticeable. In the dining room, one could easily spot calligraphy works reflecting Christian values on the walls, such as "Glory to God and Benefit to People." (Fig. 3.29) These three decorations, strategically placed in the main areas of the living space, made it clear that this was a family space for Christian believers.

The content of the two calligraphy works revolved around the concept of "God," signifying the connection between this place and the divine. The pastor mentioned that these works were gifts from church members, and he liked them so much that he decided to hang them on the wall. Although he did not explicitly explain the deeper reasons for choosing these specific works, in my interview with the pastor, "God is with

us" emerged as a critical theme in building and shepherding the church. He emphasized multiple times that the most crucial aspect of a church is not the physical building itself but the presence of God in that place.
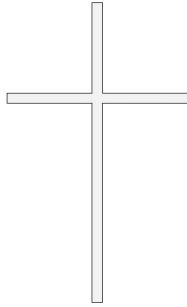
Fig. 3.27
A cross deco on the wall
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.28
A framed Chinese calligraphy work "Immanuel"
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.29
A framed Chinese calligraphy work "Glory to God and Benefit to People"
Source: illustration by author

"... The most essential thing for a church is not a building. Do you understand? The most important thing is that God is in this place … When I first became a believer, I attended the worship service of a large church. They have gorgeous churches, but after a long time, I found that the pastor's message is not in line with the truth of the Bible. It was a place filled with deceit. You will not find God there. That's why I left there and decided to start my church … As a pastor, I should allow brothers and sisters to grow in the word of God and enjoy the presence of God in the church, which is also the most critical value of a place of worship … Only by letting brothers and sisters feel the love of God and letting them know that God is here can their faith be indeed strengthened …" (BDM Interview, 2021)

For this pastor, "God is here" is the basis of the value of a church site, whereas no matter how gorgeous a church building is, it is just a pile of materials. And letting everyone know that God is here, in his description, is firstly through preaching services

that convey the message of faith and secondly through positive internal relationships among members of the church community. And these two calligraphy works reflect the belief and values advocated for him. And this value is also reflected in interviews with members.

"… I'm not entirely certain if this location can be considered a church building, but I experienced a profound sense of closeness to God during my visit. Particularly while engaging in prayer and fellowship with fellow believers, it felt as though God was present with us at that moment …" (AR₁ Interview 2021) "… I regularly participate in Bible studies, and through this process, I have gained valuable experiences that have brought me closer to God … Additionally, I am involved in providing care services and enjoy sharing the love I receive with others to bring glory to God …" (LPW Interview 2021) "… I believe in the presence of God among us, and that's what strengthens my relationship with Him. It's quite challenging to come across individuals as compassionate as those within the church community …" (YFM Interview 2021)

During interviews with members, the place of worship was not described as a church building or a public space but rather as a "place where God is present." It serves as a medium to help individuals cultivate a positive and intimate relationship with their God by emphasizing God's active involvement in that place. The significance of the location is also evident in the design of the worship area, which offers a more inclusive and empowering atmosphere for individuals. The venue is only set up as a place of worship on Sunday afternoons, and the communal service of arranging the venue is not assigned as a duty but as voluntary work. Typically, those participating in the morning Bible study spontaneously engage in this task. The number and arrangement of seats are flexible and random, without a predetermined or orderly layout. Members involved in the service mentioned that they generally estimate the number of participants and set up a corresponding number of seats. If the number exceeds the estimate, additional

seats are provided on the spot. Some individuals may even sit on the floor in case of overcrowding.

The worship space was set up in less than ten minutes on the day I visited. The positions of the seats were not fixed; they were placed randomly in the space. Church members who attended the worship activities arranged the chairs according to their preferences and needs, creating a temporary formation before the worship service. This formation continued to evolve during the service as people occasionally adjusted their positions as required. Individual autonomy is respected in this space, allowing individuals to establish spatial relationships. Shifting positions enables individuals to explore and understand their relationship with God. From this perspective, it goes beyond a mere declaration of belief identity and serves as an exploratory and dynamic process for recognizing one's identity.
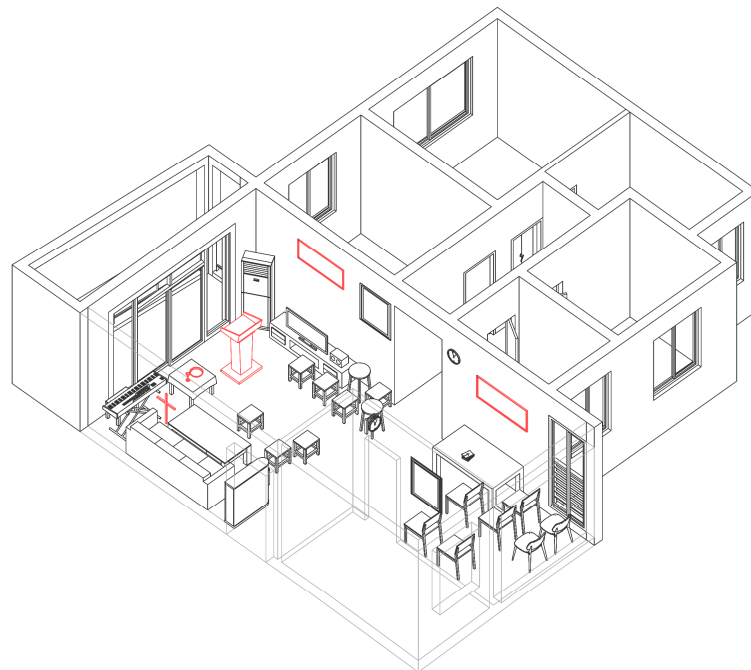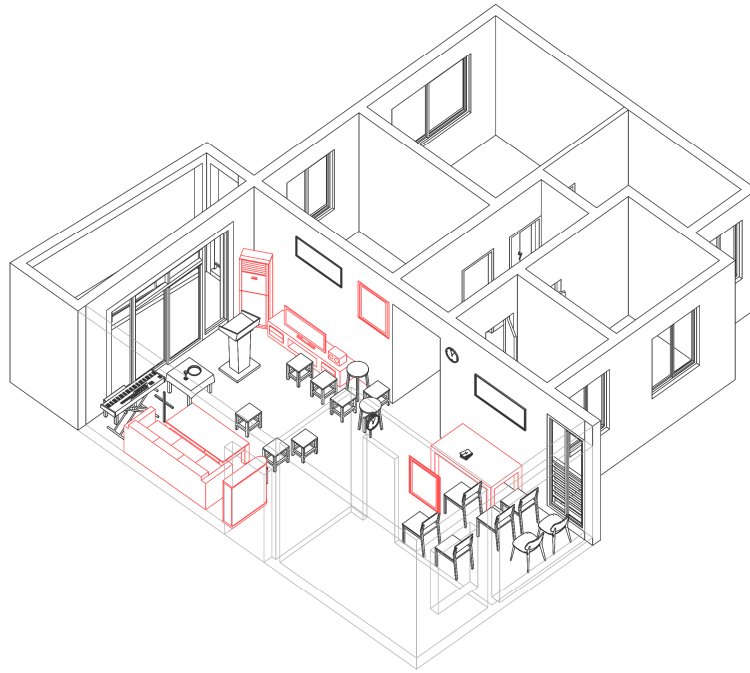

Fig. 3.30
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

As I participated in their collective worship, I also experienced the vitality this autonomous spatial structure brought to the worship process. Greater individual autonomy freed the body from being confined to a specific and fixed position. During the music worship, people were at ease, subconsciously moving out of their original positions and coming closer together. Some members gathered, holding hands and singing together. In these moments, the place fosters unity not through deliberate position arrangements but through the spontaneous gathering facilitated by the spatial autonomy granted to the members. After the music worship, everyone adjusted their seats to a relatively relaxed and comfortable distance, facing the pulpit to listen to the sermon. During the sacrament service, members once again stepped out of their original positions and consciously moved closer to the center of the sacrament. The dynamic spatial form, alternately gathering and loosening physical distances, played a role in the place. The convergence and relaxation of physical proximity always brought individuals together, forming a visible representation of shared identity through the observable changes in seating positions.

Re-shaping the space atmosphere

As a space still used as a family home outside of worship hours, there were distinct Christian elements present, but they were integrated into the everyday decor of the house. Even the unique podium used as a pulpit was usually positioned alongside the TV cabinet, with a decorative painting featuring a vase hung above it. This arrangement gave the podium the appearance of a common side table in many Chinese homes. These Christian-related decorations and furnishings did not overpower the sense of the space being home but instead blended harmoniously with it. Furthermore, other furnishings typically associated with a residential setting were also present. In this context, the image of a typical home undeniably dominated the overall atmosphere of the place. When members were asked about their worship experience in a private setting with an unmistakable residential ambiance, their responses shed light on their perception.

Fig. 3.31

The interior perspective before worship

Source: illustration by author

"… I feel incredibly at ease while worshiping God here as if I'm right at home. I don't sense any restrictions whatsoever … I don't think it's a very different place. There are many similar decorations and furniture in my house … " (LPW Interview, 2021) "… At this place, there aren't any assigned seats. We have the freedom to sit wherever we please. I prefer to sit on a small stool, bringing back fond memories of my childhood. It was a common spot for me to sit at home as a kid. Didn't Jesus say that He likes children? (laughter) … " (YFM Interview, 2021) "... I don't feel this is a solemn place; this is our common home. Although everyone feels very relaxed here, we are also very involved when we worship. But that's because of love for God. This is our spontaneous concentration, not forced concentration …" (AR₁ Interview, 2021) "… The pastor took out all the seats in the house as if he were entertaining relatives. These seats can be anything. It feels homie and cozy …" (PL₁ Interview, 2021)

Fig. 3.32

The interior perspective during worship – from the back row

Source: illustration by author

It could be observed that the overwhelming atmosphere experience stemmed from the notion of "home." This experience was influenced by the family-style furnishings and decorations present in the space. Additionally, the relaxed spatial organization and the resulting autonomy of the individuals contributed to this sense of home. No rigid spatial sequence or strict discipline was observed, allowing the body to understand subjectivity better. The furniture was not precisely positioned, and individuals could choose their preferred locations based on their own will. This place experience emphasized community within the church group rather than targeting the general public. As the pastor had stated,

"… We dedicate our home to the use of God, to give our brothers and sisters a place to gather and worship God together. This is not only the home of our family but also the home of our brothers and sisters and God … for Christians, churches are much more important than church buildings. A church is a group of us who share a common faith; a church is just a place. The church is living

162

life, and the church building is dead. So what matters is our group's state, not

the place's state …" (BDM Interview, 2021)
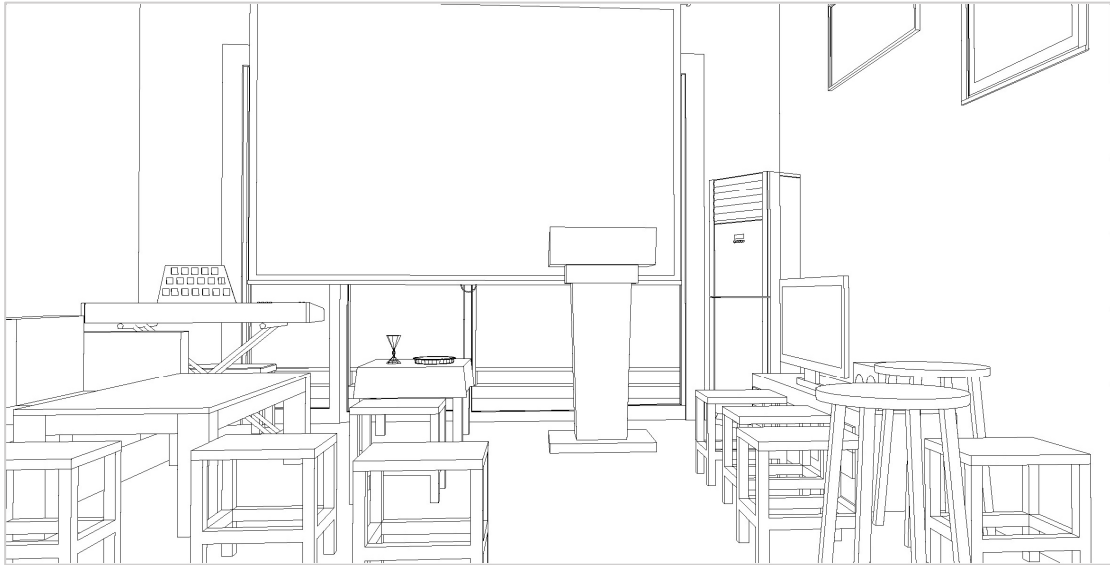
Fig. 3.33
The interior perspective during worship – from the front row
Source: illustration by author

This location greatly emphasized the importance of the home and the emotions it holds. The space was not intentionally designed as a public religious area but maintained its original residential image without significant changes. The concept of home was integrated into the church's theological understanding and dissolved the traditional separation between the sacred and every day. The atmosphere of the original dwelling was utilized to enhance the belief and allow individuals to feel a sense of intimacy and love. The pastor of this church believed that by creating a welcoming and comfortable environment, individuals could feel the presence of God in their hearts. The sacred emotion was amplified by the home atmosphere, ultimately enhancing the mood of worship.

Fig. 3.34

Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a domestic scene

Source: illustration by author

Case 3

In a residential complex of about 440 houses built in the late nineties, the church group rented a dwelling unit on the ground floor of a multi-story apartment building in the southeast corner away from its main entrance. They transformed it into one of the church community's places of worship. This residential district did not require registration and was free to enter and exit. After entering the main entrance, one could see a few buildings there. Under the guidance of the church's pastor, I soon came to the building where the church was located. The building could not be entered directly, and the gate needed to be opened with a key. The pastor mentioned they would arrange a particular person to receive and guide the members to enter during the Sunday worship service to avoid disturbing the neighbors. After entering the building door and passing through the foyer, I saw three residences on the ground floor, and the church group rented the one on the left. However, there was no indication on its door. If the pastor hadn't led me, I would have had no way of knowing that it was a place rented by the church. Upon entering the gate, one could see a large rectangular foyer. It was connected to the kitchen on the left and the worship hall on the right by a long corridor. After entering the door, people went through the extended passage with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on one side and entered the worship hall. Its form was two large and small rectangles, with the short sides adjoining each other. When I entered, a big conference table was in the large rectangular hall's center, with stacked chairs lining one side of the wall. Electronic pianos, microphones, and other equipment were stacked in the corners of the small rectangular space.

Rearrangement of spatial sequence

After entering the house, apart from the kitchen connected to the foyer to indicate its previous use as a residence, there was little indication of it being a residential space. According to the church leaders, it was previously occupied by the owner himself. Upon renting it, they removed most of the decorations and furniture left by the previous owner and rearranged the place. The entire kitchen was kept intact and repurposed as a

pantry. The bedroom area of the house was transformed into offices and reception rooms for church staff. The living space, composed of the dining room and living room, was designated as the main public activity area, serving as a meeting room for church seminars or Bible studies from Monday to Saturday. On Sunday mornings, it was transformed into a place of worship.
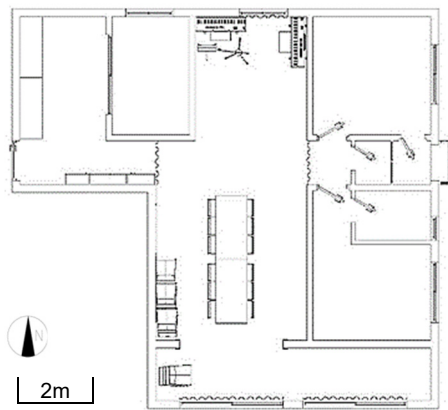
Fig. 3.35
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author
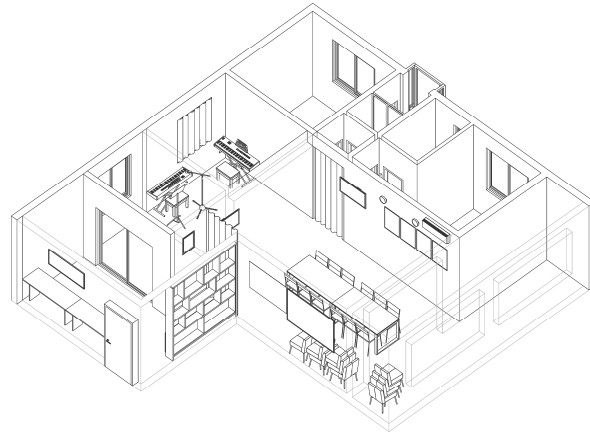
Fig. 3.36
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Before being arranged as a place of worship, the main order of the space was formed around the conference table, giving it the appearance of a meeting room. The furnishings for Sunday worship, such as electronic pianos, microphones, and music stands, were stacked behind the original dining room area but did not attract much attention compared to the prominent conference table. It was difficult to envision this discussion space completely transforming and quickly replacing it with a new spatial arrangement. However, when converted into a place of worship, the microphone and music stand used as a pulpit were relocated from the back to the front center of the small rectangular space. The electronic organ used for musical accompaniment was also placed behind them. As a result, this previously unremarkable area became more conspicuous. Special lighting, curtains, and other installations were added to unify these simple devices into a recognizable spatial module. This simple arrangement created a distinct alcove presence, independent from the rest of the room, emphasizing

its functions. According to the pastor, the positioning of the pulpit in this area was mainly based on practical considerations. On the one hand, the wall on one side of the space was suitable for installing TV screens and convenient for storing and arranging worship equipment. On the other hand, using this space as a pulpit allowed the original living room area to be fully utilized as the congregation area, allowing for a more orderly arrangement of seats.
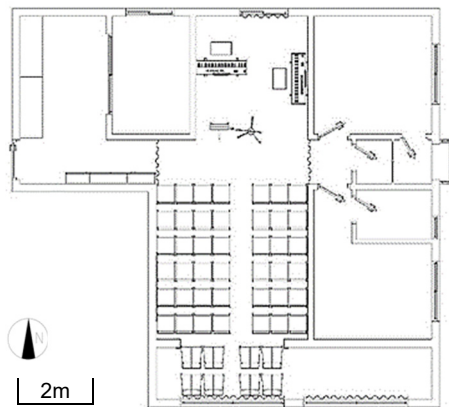
Fig. 3.37
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author
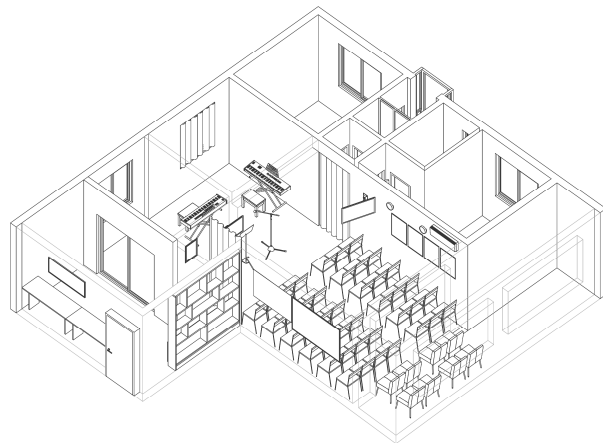
Fig. 3.38
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

While the alcove was arranged, the large conference table in the living room area was swiftly disassembled and removed. The pastor mentioned that these tables were custom-made by church members specifically for this place, allowing for quick installation and removal. With the conference table gone, the area behind it transformed into the congregation space. The seating area was divided into orderly left and right groups by an axis that passed through the alcove space. Linear light fixtures, installed by the church group on the ceiling formed glowing lines that directed attention toward the niche on the north side of the place, emphasizing the spatial orientation. The two groups of separated seats created a sense of momentum, following the direction of the light and leading them toward the alcove space. Eventually, they converged in front of the alcove space, symbolizing the internal connection between the congregation and the central pulpit areas.

Reconfiguration of spatial power

According to the interviews with church leaders, the decision to retain the existing floor, wall, and ceiling finishes was primarily driven by practical considerations and to minimize the required work. Upon entering the place, the flooring appeared uniform, with light yellow floor tiles covering the ground. The walls were painted plain white, and the ceiling lacked any distinctive decorations. Therefore, no area of the inner surface is protruded. Upon entering through the doorway, one's gaze was directed towards the bookcase on the left, leading towards the entrance of the adjacent bedroom area, creating a corridor that extended through the entire hall space. In perception, the connected living room and dining area appeared visually separated by the passage extending from the entrance to the bedroom area, forming two relatively distinct areas with a weak visual connection. However, before the worship service, the red velvet curtains covering the openings between the living space, the entrance corridor, and the bedroom area were pulled up, creating a continuous interface. This visual separation was reconnected, and the previously separated dining room and living room areas were brought closer together and fused, resulting in a closed and integrated worship space that enhanced the interaction between different zones.

If only the microphone and music stand were set up as the pulpit in the space, their presence might appear diminished, lacking the ability to convey the power of the worship service fully. However, in this particular venue, the inherent characteristics of the space itself helped translate the representation of power through strategic positioning. Firstly, in terms of the spatial layout, the smaller dining area, compared to the spacious living room, visually compressed the spatial volume. It was arranged as an alcove-like "pulpit stage" for worship ceremonies. The small space was filled with microphones, music stands, and two keyboards. Secondly, through the use of lighting, this alcove space was illuminated and differentiated from the rest of the room. When the purple velvet curtain covering the rear window of this space was raised, and the

overhead lights were switched on, the entire small space instantly became the focal point of the venue. The external light softly seeped in through the gaps in the curtains, blending with the indoor lighting reflected by the curtains, creating a distinct ambiance for this space. The yellow floor reflected the overhead light, making it the most illuminated area in the room. This specially illuminated area highlighted its unique position of power within the overall space. Despite being emphasized as the area for preaching, this alcove space was not isolated from the congregation area in front. On the contrary, it was brought closer and seamlessly connected to the seating area by hanging red velvet drapes. This intimate proximity influenced the congregation area more directly. The various equipment within this space, along with their specific positions, subdivided the power dynamics within the area, making their core value evident. The music stand and the microphone were positioned at the front, with the overhead light casting a direct spotlight on them. The two electronic pianos were placed in a relatively inconspicuous position towards the back, supporting the music stand and the microphone. They held their power within the overall worship ceremony.

Here, due to the shape of the original residential space, the alcove space for the worship service was located outside the center of the front end of the congregation area. Therefore, the music stand and microphone marking the position of the preacher were placed where the central axis of the seating area to the left of the center of this small space passed through. The linear incandescent tubes on the ceiling at the top of the seating area marked this axis emanating from the music stand. The influence of this axis was visible in space - the folding chairs echoed it, consciously divided into two areas by it, forming a passage in the middle. It seemed to be a path split by the luminous niche so that the influence of the services carried here ran through to the end of the hall. The seats humbly faced the sacred center in a dense and orderly posture, waiting for the "performance" to begin.
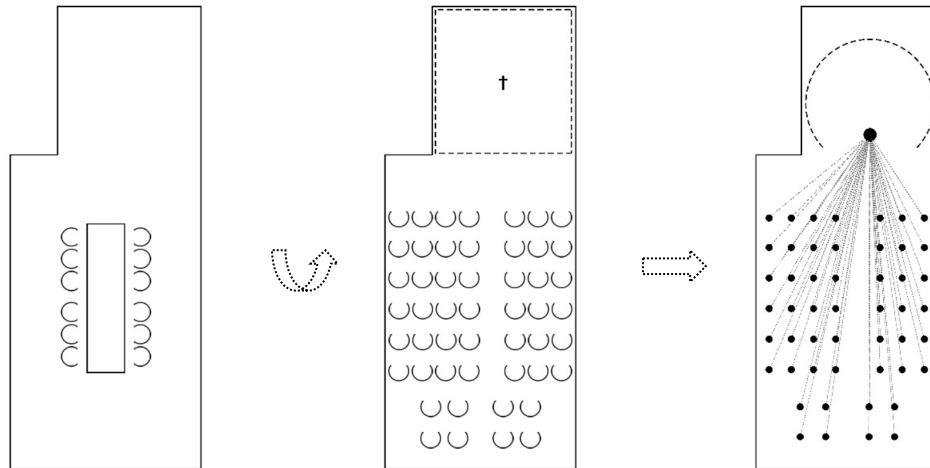
Fig. 3.39
Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Re-establishment of space identity

When I first walked into the place, I realized it was no longer being used as a residence, but it was hard to know that it was a space requisitioned by a Christian church as a place of worship. Because there were no prominent Christian symbols or related decorative elements and furnishings in this venue. Upon entering the room, one would need to glance backward to notice the calligraphic embellishment adorning the northern wall of the entrance. This piece consists of scriptures from 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. " (Fig. 3.40) In addition, no decoration related to Christianity was found in the venue. During interviews with church members, it was not discovered that calligraphic embellishments played a role in defining the location's identity.

However, during the conversation, when discussing the limited material conditions of this place of worship, several members more or less mentioned the concepts of "God's grace to us is sufficient" and "God is gracious to His children. "

"… The material conditions [of this place] are not comparable to your churches in Germany; it may seem a bit shabby … [but] we are very content; God has not

given us prosperous conditions, but here is enough for us …" (YW Interview,

2021) "… Each brick in this space is a testament to God's grace. Although we

can no longer gather in our former location, a converted factory space, we have

not been abandoned. God has provided us with a new way forward …" (HYQ

Interview, 2021)

Fig. 3.40
A decorative painting with Bible
verses – 2 Corinthians 12:3
Source: illustration by author

Although this could not directly prove the influence of the painting on faith recognition and place identification, its relevance to the belief value cognition of members who had participated in church activities there for a long time could not be denied. In that place, the decorative scriptures "taught" the people who came there in the most direct form.

Despite the limited presence of Christian elements in the venue, the church pastor mentioned in the interview that, as one of the many places of worship in their church, it still reflected specific characteristics of "the unity of the church." The pastor intentionally created a unified layout pattern for all venues to ensure that church members had a comfortable and high-quality worship experience despite scattered worship locations. This included using consistent materials, colored curtains, casual furniture such as chairs, and providing necessary equipment like televisions and audio gear. Furthermore, a new air ventilation system was installed to address air quality concerns due to high population density. Church members who were interviewed affirmed that they appreciated these efforts.

"… We are not limited to attending Sunday worship at this particular location.

*After some time, we will be arranged to visit other worship places to meet and connect with more fellow worshippers. Despite the variety of places, the atmosphere feels familiar as many of the layouts are similar, and there is a sense of comfort in being surrounded by like-minded individuals ..." (YFW Interview, 2021) "... When you visit our church, you may find that our other venues are quite familiar. That's because this place of worship is just one of many within our community ..." (*HYQ *Interview, 2021)*

This reproduction method played a positive role in recognizing the group's identity. When asked about the construction of the religious image of the place, the pastor particularly emphasized the red velvet curtains used to separate the space on two sides, as well as the purple velvet curtains used to block the windows (Fig. 3.41). He described them as carefully selected. According to the pastor, they chose velvet, a material not commonly seen in daily life but often used to decorate venues for special ceremonies or grand occasions. He also mentioned that red and purple are widely used in traditional religious places. While he acknowledged that the materials and colors of the curtains themselves do not have a direct religious significance, he believed they could create a formal and solemn environment. Other church members also affirmed this purpose during the interviews. One interviewee mentioned that the red velvet drapery reminded him of the Tabernacle in the biblical temple.
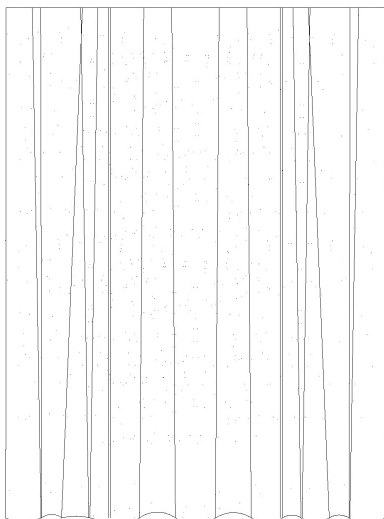
Fig. 3.41
Velvet curtain, reminiscent of a cathedral scene
Source: illustration by author

"… Every time I see the curtain, it reminds me of the temple curtain. I am reminded of the significance of Jesus' sacrifice, which has allowed us to approach God directly without any barriers … This experience is repeated every week, reinforcing our belief that Jesus has brought us closer to God …" (YW Interview, 2021)

From that perspective, those furnishings, which rarely appeared in residential spaces, were unexpectedly connected to certain religious scenes, arousing particular spiritual emotions and mediating the everyday space and the sacred realm.

This venue was usually used as a church training or meeting room. Every Sunday morning before worship, it was refurbished as a place of worship. This work was done spontaneously by church members. Several members had just started their setup when I arrived at the venue. The large conference table used for discussion must be dismantled and removed first. This work was completed quickly with the tacit cooperation of several people, showing their proficiency. After the space was vacated, they quickly placed the seats stacked on the wall in the appropriate position according to the fixed marks on the ground in advance, and the pulpit area was also arranged by other members simultaneously. These two processes did not interact but proceeded independently and simultaneously. The process was standardized and efficient, and the worship venue was set up in less than ten minutes. The whole process only required a little communication among members because all the positions had been arranged in advance. In this place of worship, the center of worship was no longer a reference point, but the marks on the ground became the focus of attention. When the position of each seat itself was marked and anchored, the interaction between different areas was correspondingly reduced, and the concentration of the members participating in the service on the work of others was also reduced to a certain extent. It could be seen that in arranging the seats according to the markings, a separation was somewhat produced.

The space immediately assumed a different state when all the seats were arranged. The black chairs were strategically positioned to maximize the use of space, hugging the room's walls as if merging with the surroundings. As the space filled up, it seemed to transcend its role as a mere container and instead became an integral part of the gathering, tightly binding everyone together. Within this space, people became less aware of their physical surroundings, causing them to focus shifted toward the individuals present. This heightened perception manifested during the worship service. With the seats nearly occupied, even though the venue housed only a few dozen members, a sense of abundance permeated the air. The proximity of individuals intensified their awareness of one another and fostered a shared experience. During the musical worship, a member expressed herself by raising her right hand, which led to many others in the room following suit. Emotions appeared to spread and connect more swiftly within this densely packed venue. Through bodily interactions, separated individuals converged and united as a collective entity, proclaiming unity through synchronized gestures.
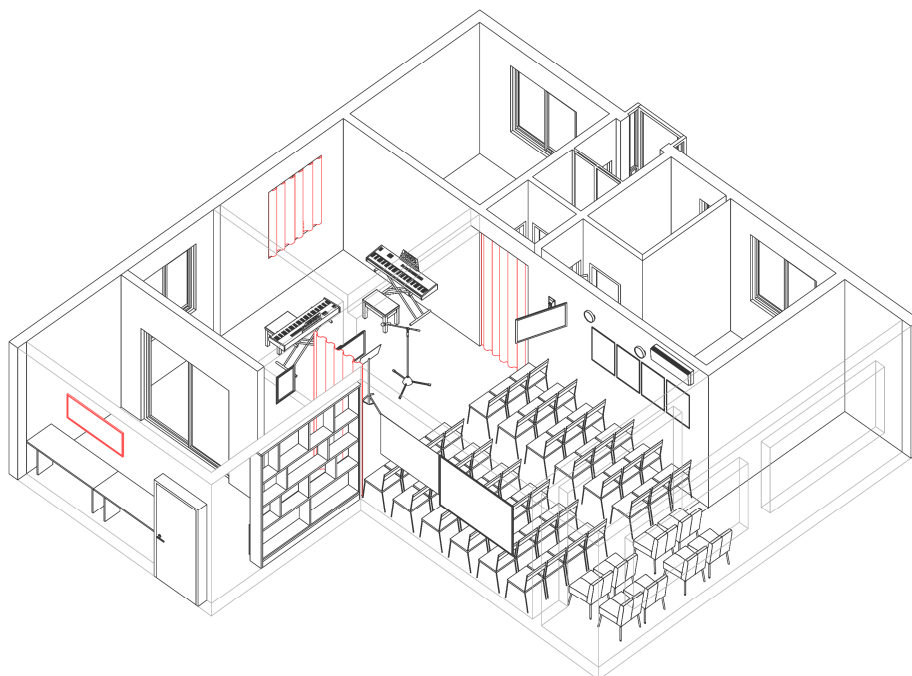
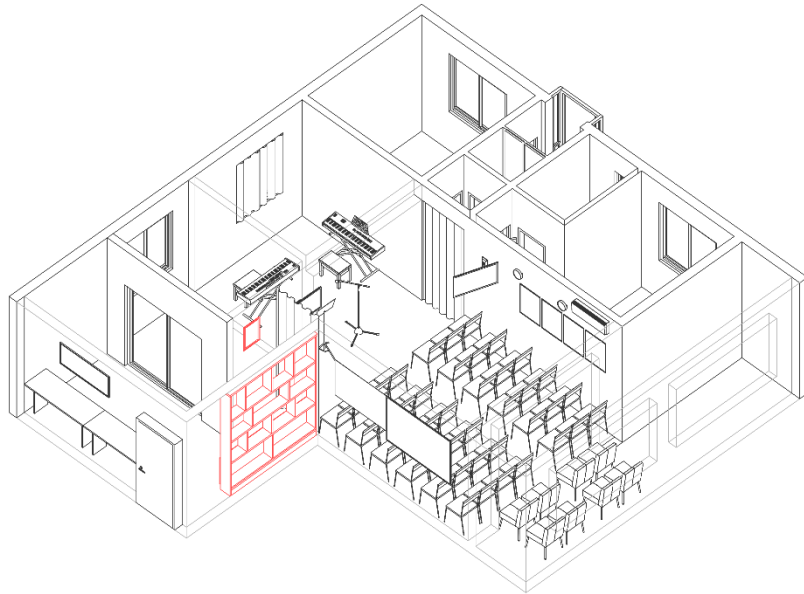

Fig. 3.42
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

**Re-shaping the space atmosphere**

According to the church pastor, he had implemented a unified layout and planning for the church's worship spaces. However, he acknowledged that each venue would have different forms and functions outside of worship hours. In the case of the worship place I visited, it was utilized as a church training room or meeting room on weekdays. As a result, besides the prominent large conference table, a tall wooden bookshelf was installed in the corridor leading to the main hall. Glass writing boards was also mounted on the east and west walls of the hall. These personalized additions mingled with the standardized arrangements, creating a complex and multifaceted environment. This space became a collection of furnishings commonly found in various functional spaces. The red and purple velvet curtains, typically used in ceremonial settings, coexisted with everyday family-style furnishings like the entrance bookshelves and hanging clocks. The photo boards, glass writing boards, and wall-mounted TVs illuminated by spotlights resembled features commonly seen in public training institutions' discussion rooms. Additionally, exposed air outlets and ducts from the fresh air system, installed to improve indoor air quality, evoked scenes reminiscent of industrial facilities. When asked about their overall impressions of the venue, the interviewed members expressed a certain degree of uncertainty.
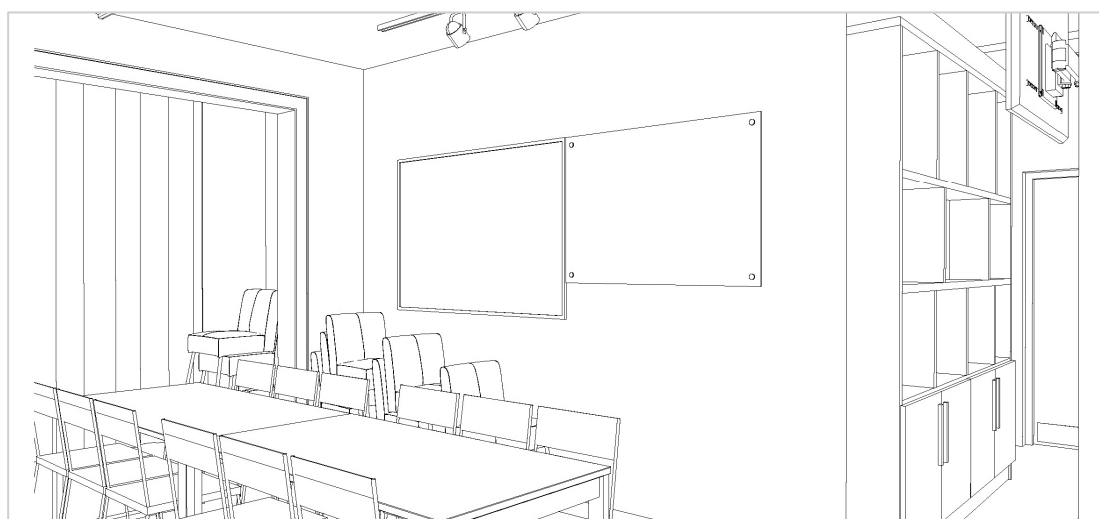
Fig. 3.43

The interior perspective before worship - dual image of the place created by
the bookshelf (home-like) and the conference table (classroom-like)
Source: illustration by author

"… I find it difficult to describe this place specifically; it gives me a lot of feelings … Whenever I'm here, it feels like returning to my room. The bookshelf and the books give me a sense of familiarity, yet it's not quite like being back home. The living room at home is not arranged similarly, and I wouldn't find these writing boards hanging on the walls …" (YFW Interview, 2021) "… The first impression here may be more like a classroom, especially when you see the big table in the middle; it looks like a place where everyone listens to the class together … But I don't seem to use velvet curtains in the lecture place; they are too gorgeous …" (TL$_2$ Interview, 2021)

In those narratives, the complexity and uncertainty of emotions stemmed from the interplay between different settings and scenes that resonated with the personal lives of the interviewees. Each type of furnishing in that venue represented a fragment of the overall sense of the place without any single furnishing dominating the entire area. Interestingly, when questioned about their worship experience in that place, the subtle transformation of spatial uncertainty became apparent.
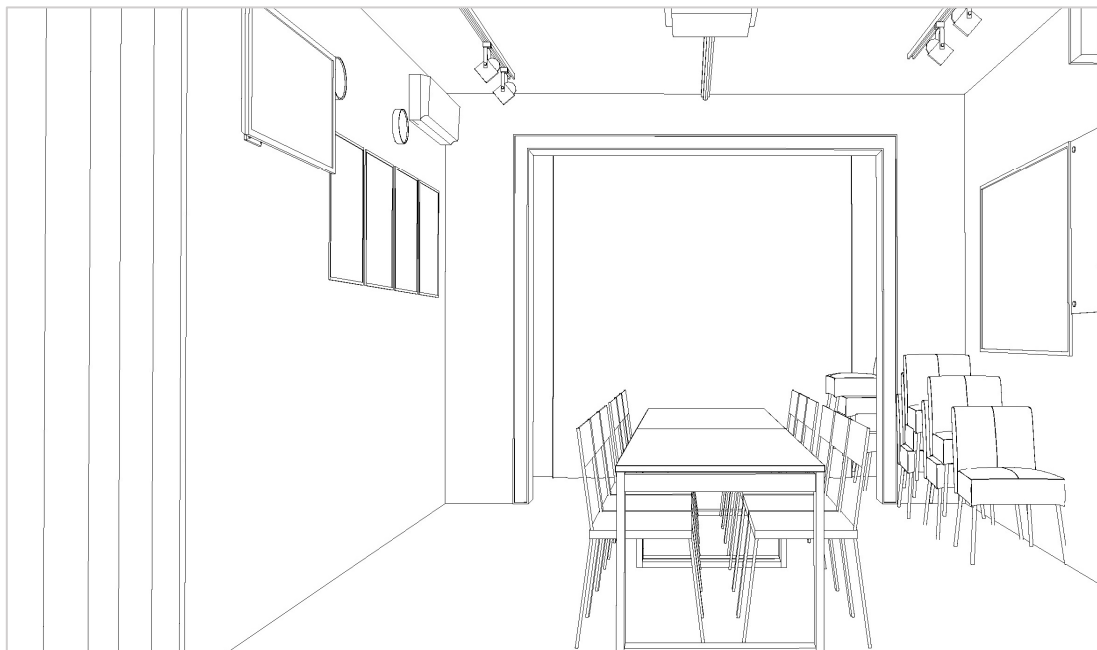
Fig. 3.44

The interior perspective before worship – the classroom-like space

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.45

The interior perspective during worship

Source: illustration by author

"… When I listened to the preaching, um, I didn't feel this was a church, and certainly not a classroom. This is God's house, where we live with God and worship Him …" (YFW Interview, 2021) "… I can sense the excitement of everyone during the worship; it feels as lively as celebrating New Year's at home …" (YW Interview, 2021) "… I really like the atmosphere of worshiping together, like a family together, very relaxed and unrestrained …" (TL$_2$ Interview, 2021) "… I find the atmosphere here more relaxed than cathedrals. It's enjoyable to see everyone come together to sing and worship God. The lively environment feels like a festive celebration back home …" (TQ$_1$ Interview, 2021)

At that moment, the sense of home as an emotion derived from everyday life intertwined with religious practices. The original residential image of the place was readily embraced and served as an emotional foundation. In other words, despite the significant replacement and covering of the interior furnishings and decorations from the previous family, the few remaining home furnishings and embellishments, combined with the inherent scale of the space, continued to imbue the place with a

sense of "home." This fusion of secular and religious emotions established a unique emotional realm, fostering worship services. When compared to other public service spaces, such as educational institutions, it can be argued that the emotional connection between the home environment and the religious sentiment of this Christian house church was solid.

Fig. 3.46
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a domestic scene
Source: illustration by author
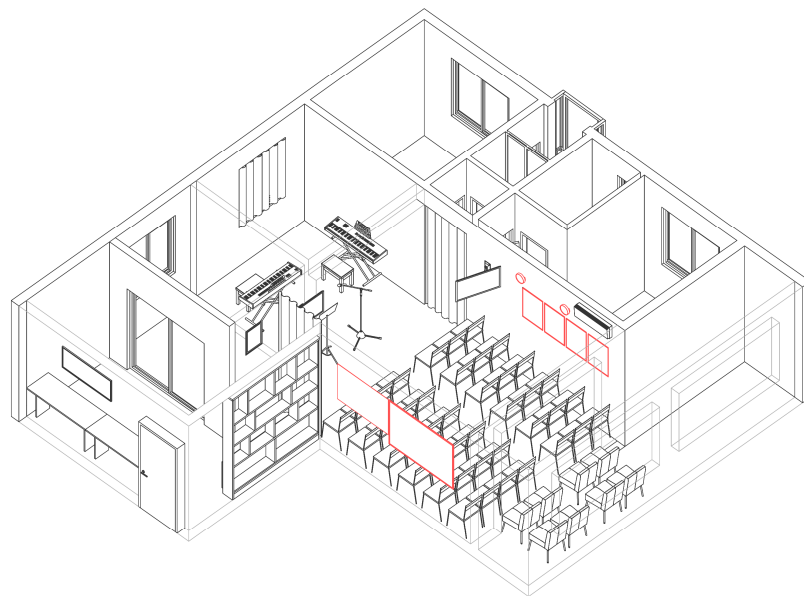
Fig. 3.47
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of an office scene
Source: illustration by author

Case 4

In a high-rise building constructed in 2003, located in the busy downtown area of a first-tier city in China, there were around 460 units. Two house churches rented separate floors within the same spatial structure as their places of worship. Their Sunday worship services are held at different times, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. I attended these two church services individually. On a Sunday morning, I arrived at the building gate approximately 40 minutes before the scheduled service. Due to security measures, access to the building requires assistance from internal personnel to open the entrance. At that time, a church member was already waiting there and kindly opened the door, guiding me through the foyer and into the elevator. The rented residential units for the church are located on the middle floors, with eight units situated around the central traffic core of the building. Without the provided house numbers, it was challenging to discern which unit served as the church, as all the exterior doors shared a similar style and lacked identifiable markings. After knocking on the door and entering, I passed through a small L-shaped hallway, moved aside a silver curtain, and entered the worship hall. Upon entering, I was initially drawn to the congregation area, where rows of seats had been arranged. The pulpit, however, was not immediately visible. As I turned to observe the direction the chairs were facing, I noticed a podium serving as the pulpit in front of an open alcove space.

Rearrangement of spatial sequence

While talking to the church pastor, I learned that the site the church group rented had previously been the owner's home before being leased for religious activities. The apartment layout was relatively compact, featuring an L-shaped foyer that led to the living space connecting the open kitchen, dining room, and living room. The innermost area consisted of the bedroom and washroom. After acquiring the space, the church's deacon board discussed and established a renovation plan. They decided to retain the existing porch area while demolishing the original open kitchen, allowing for the integration of the dining room and living room as a worship hall. The foyer was retiled,

and new light fixtures were installed. However, the white-painted walls and plaster decoration on the ceiling, remnants of the previous owner, were left untouched. The original bedroom area was not redecorated; some office furniture was added to these rooms for the church's administrative purposes. According to the pastor, these were their initial updates to the venue. Subsequently, they made further adjustments based on the issues encountered during its use. For example, they replaced the single door between the L-shaped foyer and the living space with a floor-to-ceiling silver reflective curtain. This change aimed to minimize disruptions caused by latecomers having to open the door during worship. The hall was a multipurpose room for various church activities throughout the week, and the furniture was arranged accordingly. However, every Sunday morning, it was rearranged as a worship space.
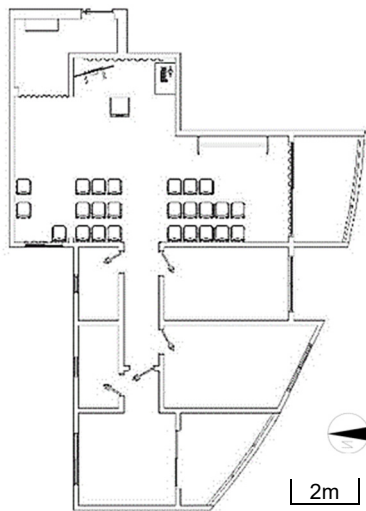
Fig. 3.48
Plan of the place before and during worship
Source: illustration by author
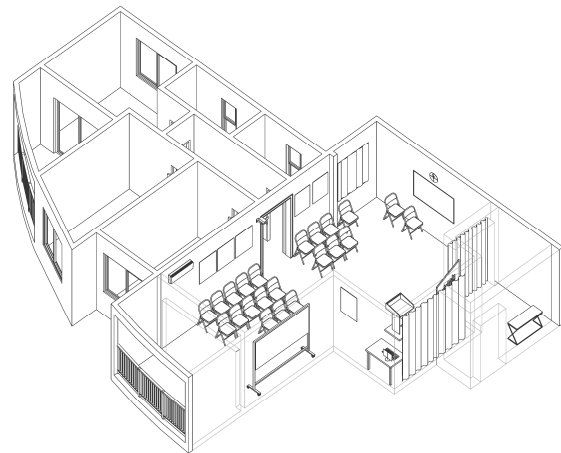
Fig. 3.49
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

The church group took full advantage of the existing spatial structure when planning the space. The small section of wall added at the entrance created an L-shaped foyer, which naturally formed a shallow alcove in the east wall of the hall. This space served as the backdrop for the pulpit. The pastor noted that ideal for locating the pulpit as it

facilitated the arrangement of screens and equipment, making it a focal point. Around 50cm in front of the backdrop, a podium adorned with a silver cross was placed as the pulpit. A silver reflective curtain was hung on the east wall, capturing and reflecting light strikingly. With this backdrop, the podium at the front became visually prominent, clearly emphasizing its role as the center of the worship space. A television screen showing the worship process and sermon details and a computer for control purposes were strategically placed beside the walls to the north and south of the backdrop curtain. This ensures that they do not interfere with the central position of the podium.
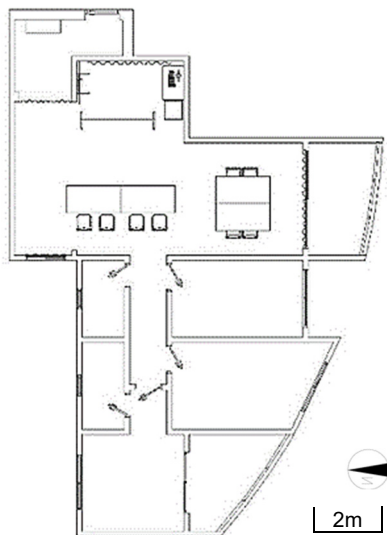
Fig. 3.50
Plan of the place after worship
Source: illustration by author
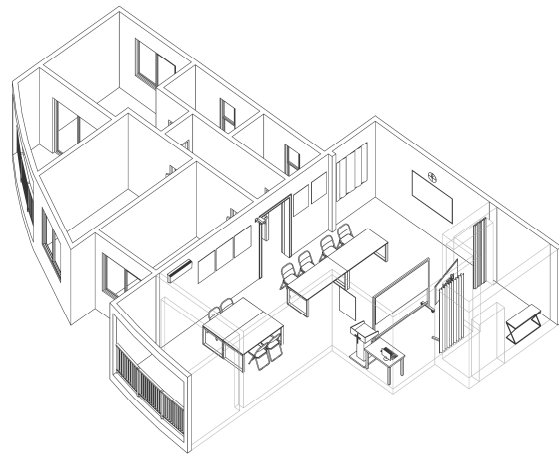
Fig. 3.51
Isometric drawing of the place after worship
Source: illustration by author

Folding chairs were arranged to face the pulpit, unfolding horizontally about the spatial layout of the hall. The corridor on the west side of the hall, leading to the bedroom area, divided the seats into two groups, one on the north and one on the south, with varying seats. These two groups of seats did not adhere to a strict directional order but instead interacted with the pulpit in front, forming a triangular spatial arrangement. The pulpit occupied one vertex of the triangle, pulling the seats towards it, creating a sense of convergence. This configuration established a sense of direction in the form. The line

of sight directed towards the center of the pulpit delineated the space, serving as an invisible boundary for the seating area. The directionality was further expressed through the spatial layout of the seating and the pulpit.

I also participated in the tidying up after the worship here. The background silver curtain was first pulled down to the north side, then the TV was moved to this corner, and then the pulpit was moved to the south side by the computer desk. A white writing board was moved to the position of the former pulpit, almost completely blocking the background space. The former center of worship has wholly disappeared from the site. At the same time, most of the chairs were also put away, and the remaining ones and four desks were divided into two groups and placed in the hall. The originally seamless hall area was now divided into two parts. The north side is the teaching area facing the writing board, and the south is the centripetal discussion area around the desks.

Reconfiguration of spatial power

Although the church group renovated the floor of the hall space, they did not use flooring to differentiate the different areas of the place. The entire floor, from the entrance to the hall, was covered with light yellow marble tiles with subtle patterns. Similarly, all the walls retained the white paint left by the previous owner without any distinctive markings. However, the hall's ceiling was divided into three sections by a circular plaster decoration with hidden light strips. These sections corresponded to the corridor connected to the foyer on the north side, the main hall in the middle, and the small connecting space leading to the balcony on the south side. This space division did not align with the requirements for worship functions and was disrupted by the arrangement of seats during worship.

According to the pastor's introduction, the plaster decoration on the ceiling corresponded to the original owner's living room and dining room, so they were distinguished in the ceiling decoration. The suspended ceiling surrounded the central

area in the same shape, and the internal light strips evenly illuminated the entire space, strictly distinguishing it from other areas. However, no part inside was emphasized; it was a field without a clear focal point. When set up as a worship space, an eye-catching backdrop stood out from the rest by adding a reflective curtain and appropriate lighting. This silver curtain was usually drawn at the north corner of the background wall and was only opened during Sunday worship. The four spotlights on the ceiling were also turned on simultaneously, casting direct light onto the silver floor-to-ceiling reflective curtain on the background wall. At that moment, the silver curtain resembled a cascading waterfall of light, making the pulpit in front of it more eye-catching, pushing it towards the congregation, and proclaiming the authority of the pulpit in front of it.

Indeed, the illuminated lights made the central area the brightest part of the entire worship space, contrasting with the darker areas on the north and south sides. However, the arrangement of seats challenged this distinction. They spread out horizontally, disregarding the boundary between light and dark. The passageway behind them, leading towards the bedroom area, acted as a driving force, pushing the seats apart and directing them towards the dark areas on both sides. Nevertheless, the pulpit ultimately triumphed over this dispersing force, bringing the horizontally scattered seats back together into a distinct triangular shape. Its influence was manifested as a unifying force in the spatial arrangement, represented by the vertices of a geometric shape.

And this relationship between space and power became completely disentangled once the pulpit was removed. With the introduction of new furniture, power was redistributed within the space, creating a new spatial dynamic. Education and discussion activities divided the area with different spatial configurations through the placement of furniture, marking distinct zones within the space.
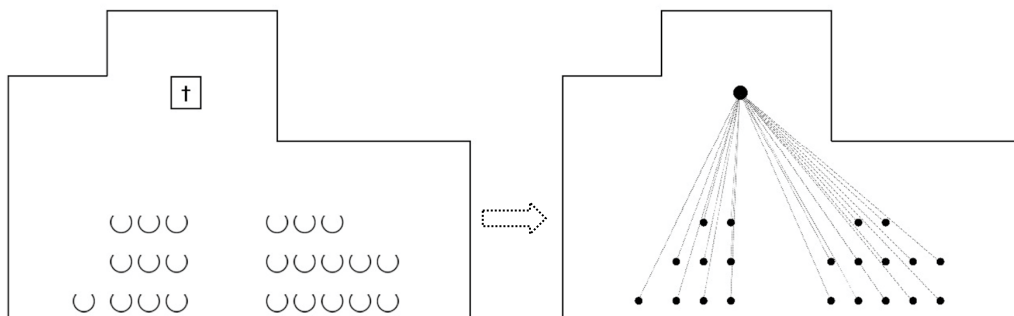
Fig. 3.52

Diagram of spatial power during preaching service

Source: illustration by author

Re-establishment of space identity

When entering the hall area of the venue through the silver curtain from the foyer, people could see numerous Christianity-related picture decorations. Most of them combined Chinese characters, symbols, and patterns. Even those unfamiliar with the text content could easily recognize the connection between this place and Christianity through symbols like the cross in the images.

Once the curtain was opened, attention was immediately drawn to two decorative paintings of the same size and form hanging side by side on the west wall of the hall facing the foyer. The central image in both paintings was a cross surrounded by wreaths. Underneath the cross within the wreath, terms related to faith values were printed, while Bible verses clarified the terms inside the circle were printed outside the wreath. In the painting on the left side, "concentric & counterparts" was printed inside the wreath, and beneath it was Philippians 1:5, "for your partnership in furtherance of the Good News from the first day until now." (Fig. 3.57) In the corresponding position on the other painting, "abundant life" was printed, accompanied by John 10:10, "The thief only comes to steal, kill, and destroy. I came that they may have life and may have it abundantly." (Fig. 3.56) Another unique decoration was the scripture sticker on the wall next to the foyer entrance, featuring the verses from Chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians，

"Love is patient and is kind; Love doesn't envy. Love doesn't brag, is not proud, doesn't behave itself inappropriately, doesn't seek its way, is not provoked, takes no account of evil; doesn't rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails." (Fig. 3.53) Once seated, the silver cross on the pulpit facing the seating area became the visual focal point (Fig. 3.54). Additionally, a miniature decorative painting on the side wall could be observed. The image featured the Chinese word for "love" surrounded by a wreath at the top, with a smaller-font scripture below. Upon closer inspection, it was identified as 1 Corinthians 13:13, "But now faith, hope, and Love remain—these three. The greatest of these is Love." (Fig. 3.55) These were all the Christian decorations visible in the venue. The pastor mentioned that these decorations were not fixed and could be replaced according to the situation.
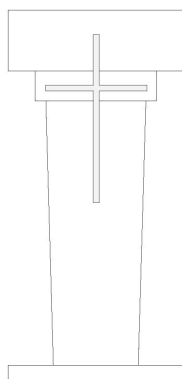
Fig. 3.53
Podium with silver cross
Source: illustration by author
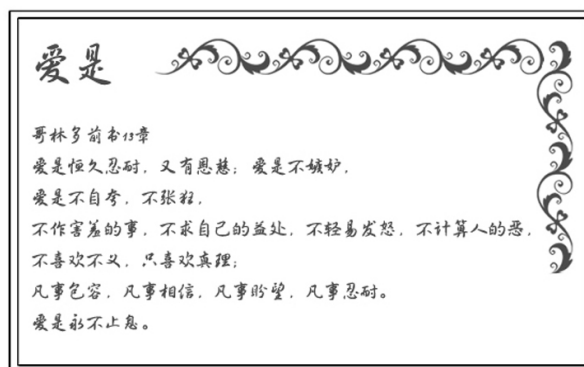
Fig. 3.54
A decorative painting with Bible verses – 1 Corinthians 13
Source: illustration by author

"… Our primary mission is to embody God's love in our daily lives. In our recent sermons, we have emphasized the importance of this aspect. The decorative arrangements you've noticed were added to our premises approximately two months back. Our current theme is Living with Love. Next quarter, we will shift our focus to the Great Commission and incorporate new visuals to enhance our message ..." (PL$_2$ Interview, 2021)

Fig. 3.55
A decorative painting with Bible verses – Philippians 1:5
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.56
A decorative painting with Bible verses – John 10:10
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.57
A decorative painting with Bible verses – 1 Corinthians 13:13
Source: illustration by author

This kind of instructive text decoration played a vital role in helping church members build a shared understanding and values in a particular aspect in conjunction with the pastor's message during a specific period. Here, the scriptures in the Bible and the values conveyed by them were presented in front of people as decoration, making this place a platform for divine discourse, and relevant information was passed on to members in the most direct way. The influence of these scriptures did permeate the narratives of church member interviews,

"… As believers, we understand that the church is not simply an organization but a living entity that embodies God's love. Recognizing the many blessings from the Almighty, we strive to share this abundance with as many individuals as possible …" (TLW Interview, 2021) "… I feel very peaceful here. It is God himself who protects us and gives us such a good place of get-together …" (WL Interview, 2021) "… To live out God's love is our greatest mission, and we pay great attention to teaching this aspect in our sermons ..." (PL₂ Interview, 2021)

From this perspective, this venue indeed provided an environment for these decorations to exert influence, and these decorations scattered on various walls became signs that helped define the new identity of the place. However, among all the

Christian-related decorative paintings in this venue, the most prominent and captivating decoration was undoubtedly the silver reflective curtains on the wall. Even though they served as the backdrop for the pulpit, church members still expressed a distinct appreciation for their presence in the interviews.

"… They [curtains] make me feel this place is holy...I feel that I have to be holy to be worthy of being a son of God …" (TLW Interview, 2021) "... I was invited to this place by a friend, and upon arriving, I immediately felt a unique atmosphere. The silver curtain added to this feeling, making it hard to describe but setting it apart from ordinary places. Perhaps it was the sense of sacredness they spoke …" (HH Interview, 2021)

This feeling was indeed the primary reason why the pastor of the church chose this type of curtain. In the interview, the pastor explained that the selection of this curtain was intended to convey the holiness of God through its color and reflected light. He also mentioned that initially, there was only one such curtain on the background wall of the pulpit, which church members generally appreciated. Consequently, they opted for a curtain made of the same material when replacing the door between the foyer and the hall. This installation, different from everyday objects, played a positive role in establishing the image of a religious place in this venue.

Regarding the venue arrangement, the pastor stated that before the COVID-19 pandemic, dedicated members would set up the space every Sunday morning. However, following the outbreak, although physical gatherings resumed, the church adopted a combination of online and offline meetings to address the concerns of some members. Using social software, Sunday worship services were broadcast live through a camera facing the pulpit. As a result, the number of members attending on-site worship services significantly decreased compared to pre-pandemic times. Consequently, for an extended period, the seats in the venue were no longer arranged

by a specific individual but were pre-arranged by the pastor himself.

During my visit to the worship service, I noticed that only half of the seats were occupied. As a result, the staff density was relatively low, giving everyone a greater sense of autonomy. During hymn worship, it was common for members to stand up and sing while unconsciously moving closer to the person leading the hymn behind the pulpit. The worship leader's actions had a significant impact, as her swaying body inspired others to sway, and her raised hands encouraged emotional responses from the congregation. Amidst the silver curtain backdrop, a few people became active and filled with emotion.
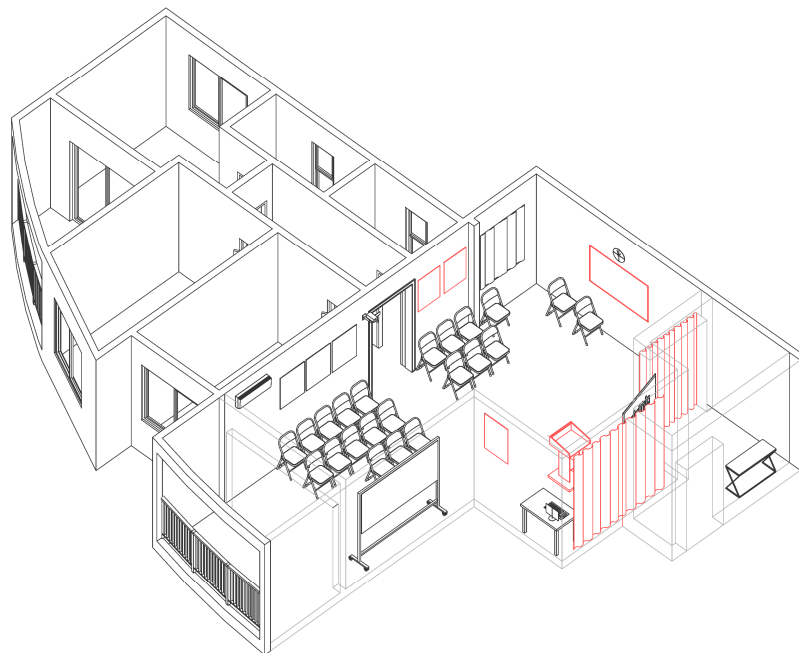
Fig. 3.58
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

On the day I attended worship, a baptism ceremony occurred in this venue. The baptized members wore white robes, while the pastor changed into black robes adorned with red ribbons. Baptism was conducted by water splashing. The baptized individuals were baptized in the brightest corner in front of the background area, and

other members instinctively moved their seats to witness the liturgical ceremony together. Although the spatial structure of this venue was loose and flexible, it did not lead to a sense of separation. Instead of establishing cohesion through a meticulously designed spatial system, the spontaneous unity created by the engaging worship services was expressed through this flexible structure.

After the baptism and the completion of the worship service, I also participated in the post-service cleanup. Two members efficiently relocated the television and the pulpit to the sides of the background area. A member silently folded and removed the seats in the congregation area. The pastor and several other members retrieved folding desks from the bedroom area and skillfully unfolded them in the empty hall. The last writing board was moved from the wall of the small space on the south side to the front of the background area. Throughout the process, there was minimal communication among the members. Each person focused on their assigned task, and the cleanup was completed in approximately ten minutes. During the interviews with the members, there was no sign of frustration or discontent regarding the dismantling and decluttering of the worship space.

"… I think it's okay. Because there will be other activities in the middle of next week, it [the venue] must be tidied up … I'm still coming for a Bible study on Wednesday night …" (AR$_2$ Interview, 2021) "… I don't think it's a negative thing; it has to be prepared like this every week ... I won't feel lost next Sunday since the worship set up will remain in place …" (JPZ Interview, 2021) "… The location will remain unchanged. Regardless of how it is arranged, it serves as a gathering place for brothers and sisters. Therefore, I do not have any negative emotions regarding the removal of other places of worship. It will transform into a space where everyone can worship God on the upcoming Sunday …" (TLW Interview, 2021)

The members' responses were quite different from what I had anticipated, as they did not express any discomfort or negativity during the dismantling of the worship space. In this cyclical process of transforming the place, the worship space became intimately connected to a specific time, creating a predictable and recurring space-time experience. Even though the physical layout of the space remains unchanged, the consistent and repetitive nature of the worship experience maintains an emotional attachment to the place.
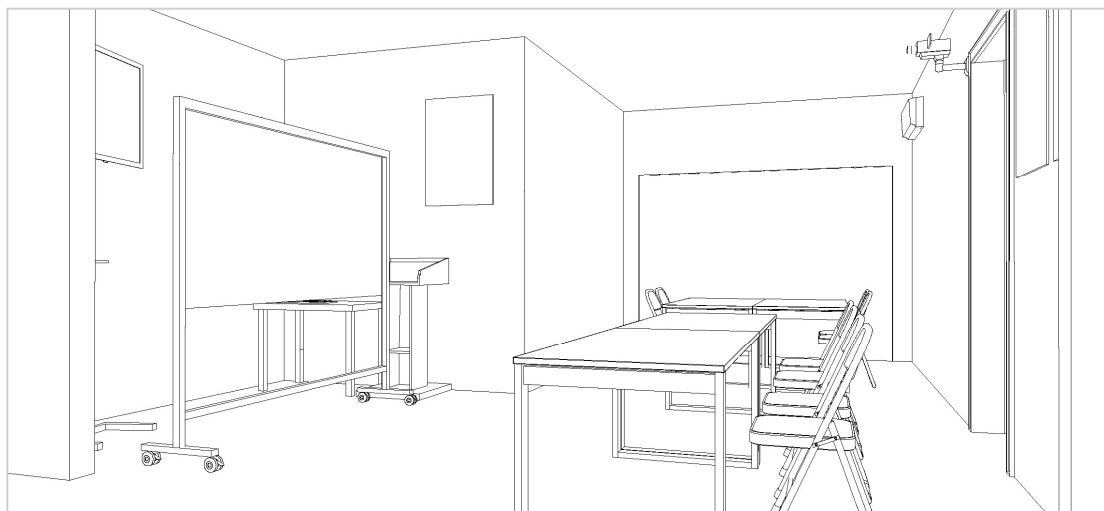
Fig. 3.59
The interior perspective after worship - place of worship converted to place of education
Source: illustration by author

Re-shaping the space atmosphere

In the worship space of this church, significant adjustments were not made to the physical layout, and the overall scale and proportion of the space remained similar to its previous use as a residence. Four picture decorations featuring textual information, such as scriptures, were arranged in the venue. Still, they were presented more relaxedly and did not create a distinct religious influence that completely transformed the image of the former residential space.

Fig. 3.60
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

However, the furniture choice gradually eliminated the place's residential ambiance. The layout of the foyer resembled a specific public area. The walls were covered with light yellow soundproofing material, and the furniture arrangement was simple, with only a table for disinfection supplies placed near the entrance door (Fig. 3.61). This entrance space served a welcoming purpose, encouraging people to enter the hall rather than linger in this area for an extended period.
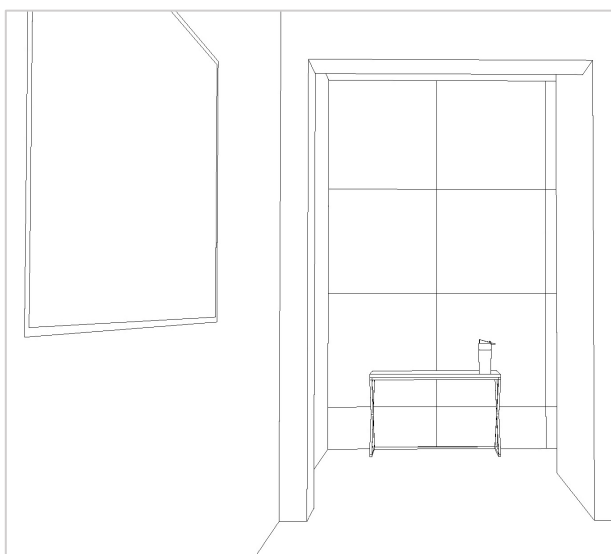
Fig. 3.61
The interior perspective of the foyer with
light yellow soundproofing material and
a single table
Source: illustration by author

The simple folding seats, the podium adorned with a hanging cross, and the spotlights installed on the ceiling entirely transformed the hall into a Christian public space. However, during the interviews about the member's experience of the atmosphere in the place, these changes were not the focus of their attention. The presence of the two silver curtains (Fig. 3.62) significantly impacted and subverted their spatial perception.
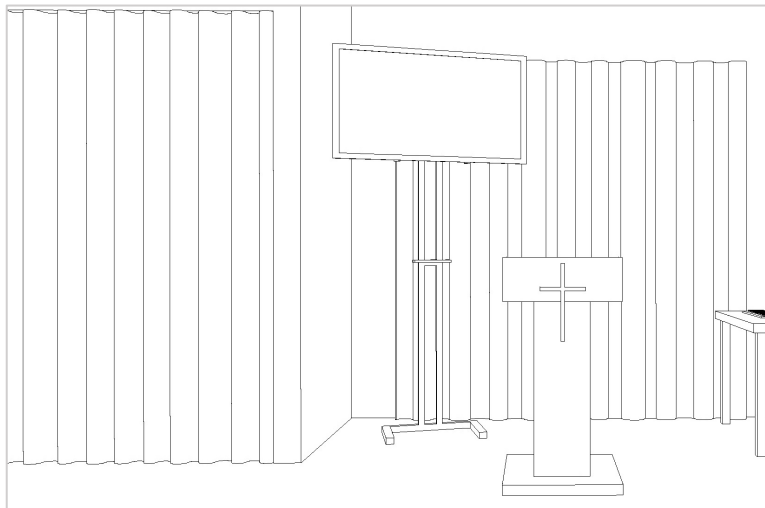
Fig. 3.62
Two silver curtains, reminiscent of a sacred scene
Source: illustration by author

"… This is no ordinary abode; it is God's dwelling and thus distinct from our own … I am impressed by this place; the silver curtain at the front fills me with a sense of wonder …" (WL Interview, 2021) "… This is a solemn place. To worship God is to be in awe … It may be the two curtains that make me feel that this place is very different from the usual place. It's more sacred here …" (TLW Interview, 2021) "… The most memorable thing is the silver curtain; you can't see such a thing at home … This place exudes a sense of sanctity and seriousness, where casual behavior may not be appropriate …" (HH Interview, 2021) "… Whenever I visit to participate in other activities, I notice the curtains are always drawn back. At that time, I didn't think there was anything unique about this place …" (AR₂ Interview, 2021)

When the two silver reflective curtains are not used, the Christian worship space coexists with the original residential scale subtly and understatedly. Once the curtains

are drawn in front, the religious ambiance becomes the focal point and overtakes the area, supplanting the previously mundane imagery. However, the transformation is still ongoing. As per the accounts from the members, this place is not just perceived as a sacred space, but rather the idea of "home" is still entwined with their experience.

"… I find that coming here to worship is quite relaxing. It's definitely more comfortable and laid-back compared to the cathedrals I used to attend … After all, it is not as grand as a cathedral ... This place feels like home, although it's a different kind of home, not as relaxed as my own … Feeling relaxed doesn't mean you can do whatever you want …" (WL Interview, 2021) "… This place still makes me feel a little bit like home, and I can't tell exactly what it feels like … Although I think the atmosphere here is quite severe, I still don't think it is such a strange environment …" (AR₂ Interview, 2021)

Installing a silver reflective curtain had a noticeable impact on the area's atmosphere, yet users found it difficult to pinpoint the exact feeling it evoked. While some felt a sense of sanctity and solemnity typically associated with religious spaces, they could not fully classify it as a holy area. Likewise, although they felt comfortable in the place, they struggled to connect it with the familiar feelings of intimacy and warmth. The confusion may have arisen from the clash between the scale and visual impact of the surroundings. Homey feelings were primarily derived from the size and proportions of the place, while the reflective curtain evoked emotions associated with religious experiences. As a result, the atmosphere was more severe and awe-inspiring rather than relaxing and cozy. The relationship between family values and spiritual power became intertwined, resulting in a unique blend of familial and divine ethics. This fusion of the sacred and secular transcended the traditional divide and significantly impacted the overall experience of the space.

Case 5

I visited another house church on a different floor of the same building as Case 4. I arrived 50 minutes early for Sunday afternoon worship and was greeted by the church's receptionist, who was already waiting at the building's entrance. They kindly opened the door for me and provided directions to the floor and house number. Similar to Case 4, there was no clear indication on the door of this place. After locating the entrance according to the house number, I rang the doorbell, and the church members inside opened the door for me. I walked through a rectangular foyer, opened a partially covered linen curtain, and entered the worship hall. The hall consisted of two square spaces, one large and one small, with a desk in the center and several members concluding their Bible study around it. A TV screen was also hanging on a mobile stand. It was together with an electronic piano placed against the western wall.

Rearrangement of spatial sequence

This church's entrance and worship hall differed slightly from the church in case 4 regarding shape. After consulting with the church leaders, I learned this building had a dual-use purpose for commercial and residential activities before the church group rented it. The frame shear wall structure allowed the internal space to be divided and adjusted based on users' needs. The pastor explained that initially, this place was the owner's residence and was later rented out to a photographer as his studio until the Church rented it. Since the owner couldn't commit to a long-term rental, the church's deacon made minimal changes, considering the uncertain factors involved. Therefore, they retained the space structure and some decorations like lamps and ceilings left by the photography studio. They only made simple partitions with curtains to separate the entrance, hall, and office areas. The hall area was typically arranged flexibly according to the church group's weekday activities and served as a worship space every Sunday afternoon.
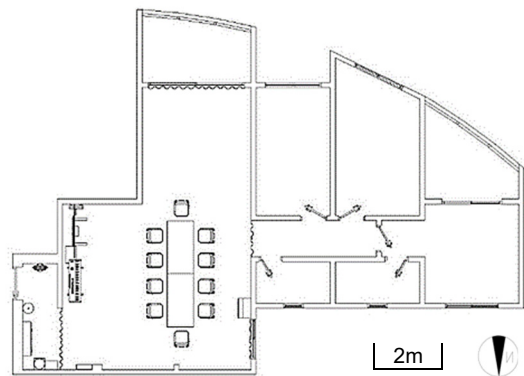
Fig. 3.63
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

2m
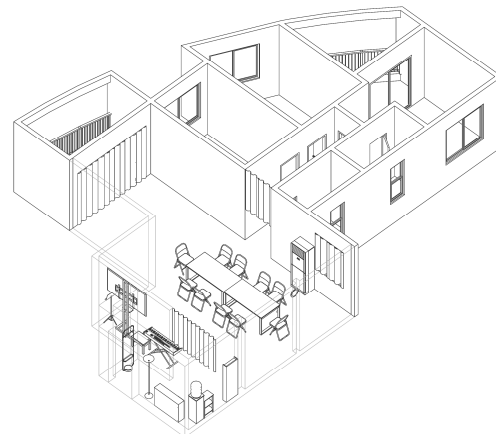
Fig. 3.64
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

A bible study had just concluded in the hall area when I arrived. At that time, a desk occupied the center of the space, with the surrounding areas not clearly defined or distinguished. However, the desk was removed shortly after, and the curtain between the small square space and the balcony was drawn. The TV was relocated to the east side of the smaller square space, facing the larger square space. This small area gradually became independent from the rest of the space, forming a condensed alcove within the site. The electronic piano was then moved to the west wall of the small square space, and a music stand was placed between the keyboard and the TV, serving as a pulpit. This arrangement completely separated the small and large square spaces, creating an independent alcove space. The church leader explained that he had considered placing the pulpit on the east side of the ample square space but decided against it to avoid disruption as latecomers enter through the foyer from that side. After discussing with several members, the current pulpit arrangement was chosen.

Subsequently, the large square area was gradually filled with white folding seats in a consistent style. The seats faced the alcove-shaped space, forming left and right rows with a clear central axis, creating an aisle in the middle. However, the two rows had a different number of seats. The row facing the niche space had significantly more seats

and extended in a series against the west wall, almost occupying the area facing the niche. In the other row, the seats were concentrated on the side close to the alcove space, while there was a clear distance between the other side and the east wall. The alcove space influenced the arrangement of the seating area, resulting in varying spatial densities in relation to its position, creating a tendency toward the alcove.
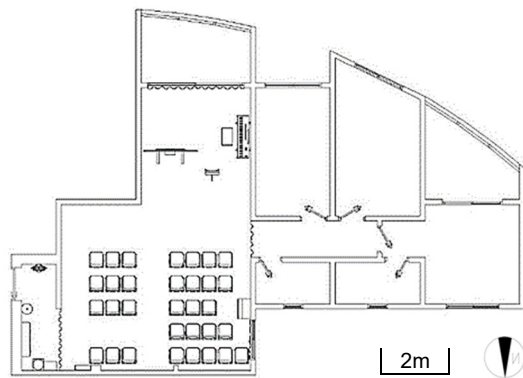
Fig. 3.65
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author
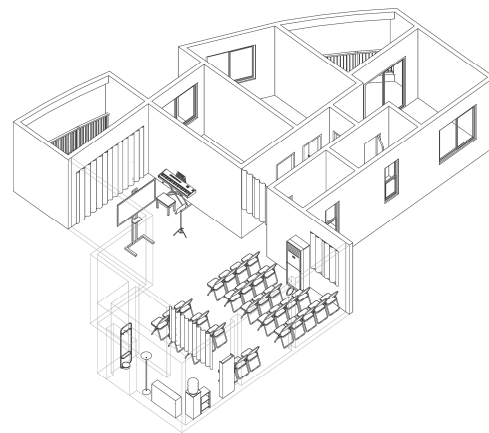
Fig. 3.66
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Reconfiguration of spatial power

After renting, the church group kept the ground pavement and white-painted walls from the previous photography studio. The entire ground was covered with light yellow floor tiles with a reflective effect without any zone separation. The walls were uniformly white, without any alterations. As a result, the hall area was still perceived as two square areas of different sizes. A structural beam at the top divided the sizeable square area into two parts: a stripping zone extending from the hall entrance on the north side and a rectangular zone in the middle.

Due to the use of the previous photography studio's decoration, the presence of the stripping zone was significantly amplified. A row of wooden decorative strips, the same width as the entrance hall opening, lined up from beginning to end, with spotlights installed between them. This made the stripping zone impossible to ignore due to its

unique form. However, this division did not fit well with the current function of the large square area used for congregation purposes. The church leader mentioned in interviews that they had not initially considered this issue; they only considered separating the small square spaces from the larger ones when arranging the place. They utilized the lighting environment left by the photography studio and created an area with chiaroscuro.

Before the worship, the spotlights at the top of the small square area were turned off, and the dark blue velvet curtains that spanned from floor to ceiling in front of the French door on the southern side were lifted. These blue curtains filtered the outside light, producing a slightly mystical backdrop and reducing the brightness in the alcove space, making it the darkest area during worship. Simultaneously, the surface lights on the rectangular portion in the middle of the expansive square area and the spotlights on the southern strip portion were switched on. The light color and brightness of the two types of lamps were closely matched, resulting in evenly distributed illumination throughout the vast square area. The white seating, walls, and reflective floor intensified the effect of light, blending the two separate parts and creating a unified spatial whole. Although unintended, this approach effectively resolved the zoning issues that resulted from the previous ceiling decor.

A contrast was created between a dimly lit alcove and the brightly illuminated hall, setting the scene for worship. The music stand, serving as a pulpit, stood at the intersection of these two areas, its importance clear. Positioned behind it was a mysterious space facing a distinct group of individuals. This arrangement linked the visible congregation to the mysterious world of faith. Therefore, the pulpit's impact was not singular, and its spatial influence was intertwined with the alcove space. The pulpit and niche were interconnected, drawing and summoning the congregation. In response to this compelling call, the congregation showed their "obedience" through changes in spatial density.
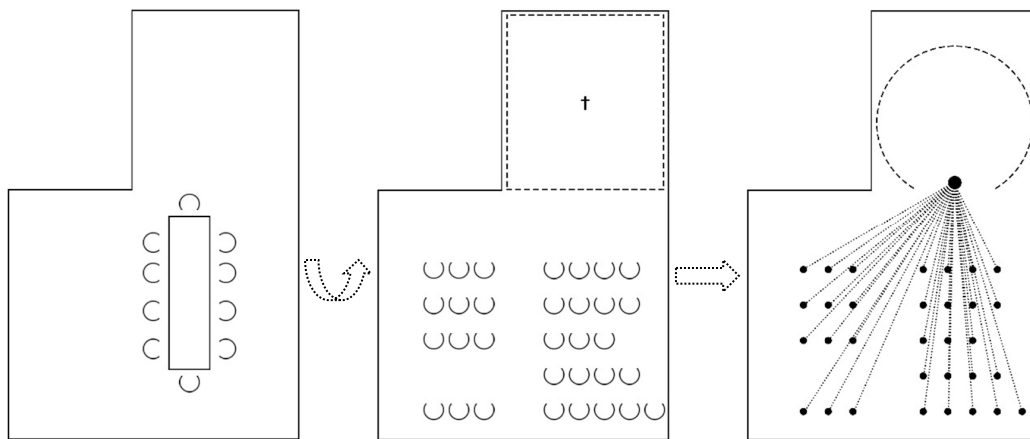
Fig. 3.67

Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service

Source: illustration by author

Re-establishment of space identity

Unlike the church group in Case 4, this place utilized fewer Christian symbols and words in its furnishings and decorations to establish its identity. Upon observation, the only indication of a Christian affiliation was a curtain at the entrance of a subtle restroom. The curtain was adorned with the phrase "peace and joy in Christ," written in English and corresponding Chinese characters (Fig. 3.68). The church leader explained that they had brought this curtain from their last meeting place, choosing it because they believed it best represented the vitality and energy of their youth-focused church. Its placement at the bathroom door was purely functional and had no more profound significance. Although the content of the curtain was not explicitly doctrinal, and it hung in a discreet location, the words on it were frequently mentioned in interviews with the members. In particular, members often used the term "joyful" to describe their feelings about participating in church activities.

"… It brings me happiness to gather with my fellow brothers and sisters. Our group consists mostly of young individuals, and we enjoy a laid-back atmosphere during our meetups. Laughter fills the air during these gatherings, bringing me great joy …" (JR Interview, 2021)."… I enjoy visiting this place. I

recall my college classmates bringing me here for the first time. At first, I was hesitant as I thought it would be a dull and serious place. However, I was pleasantly surprised by the relaxed atmosphere … The conversation revolves around faith, but it feels genuine and relatable. I am delighted to interact and converse with everyone, which brings me immense joy. As a result, I started attending these meetings regularly and even got baptized here …" (YPL Interview, 2021).
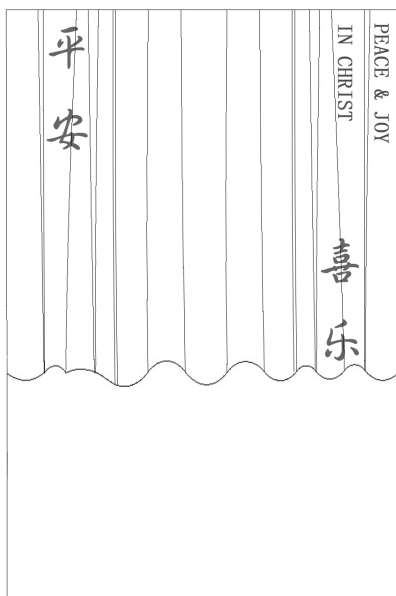
Fig. 3.68
A curtain with the words "peace and joy in Christ", hanging at the entrance of the bathroom, brought from the previous venue
Source: illustration by author

The place's identity was closely linked with the church community's identity in this scenario. The community's faith was reflected in the decorations, which featured biblical phrases. These decorations served as a visual representation of the connection between the community, religion, and place. Although it was difficult to provide concrete evidence or measure the precise impact of these text decorations on the Christian community's identity, their importance was evident through the interviews conducted.

The church leaders intentionally chose a plain linen curtain (Fig. 3.69) in primary colors to separate the entrance and the hall. This contrasted the curtain with explicit text

information that directly expressed identity. They had selected linen curtains to evoke the memory of the fine linen material used to separate the outer courtyard when constructing tabernacles in the Old Testament—this choice aimed to achieve a similar effect differently. However, the church members did not appear to have a special attachment or particular sentiment toward this material.

"… I am not sure. I must take some time to become more acquainted with this passage from the Old Testament. I feel embarrassed about my lack of knowledge on this topic (laughter). I've never realized before that the outer courtyard is divided this way. (laughter) …" (YPL Interview, 2021) "… I noticed that this curtain looks very much like the one I have at home. I was unaware of its significance until now …" (PL3 Interview, 2021) "… This curtain, um, I don't feel strongly about it, but the appearance is pleasant …" (JR Interview, 2021)
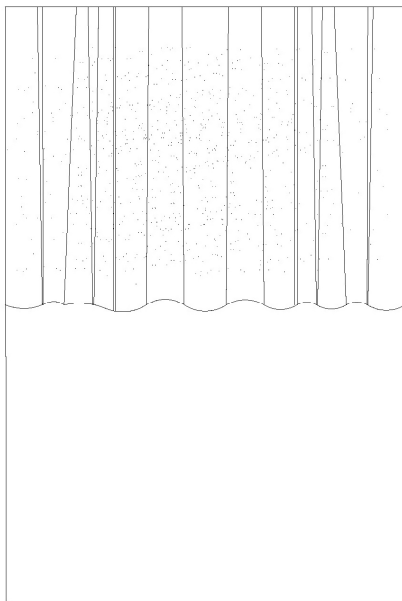
Fig. 3.69
A linen curtain, hanging between the entrance
and the hall, to evoke the memory of
tabernacles in the Old Testament
Source: illustration by author

Compared with the velvet curtains often used in ceremonial occasions and other church places, the linen curtains used here were also commonly seen in daily life. While the use of linen material could establish a connection with the long history of Christianity, even more so than velvet, for ordinary members, the symbolism associated with this material seemed too subtle to trigger related religious imaginations

quickly.

The venue setup occurred approximately half an hour before the start of Sunday worship. Before that, small Bible study activities would happen in the same space. The central desk greeted visitors upon entering and was the main furniture for the Bible study meetings. After the conclusion of the Bible study, the church members who participated in the activities would spontaneously put away the long table and begin arranging the space for worship. Other members who arrived early but did not participate in the Bible study would also assist in setting up the venue, and the entire process typically took around fifteen minutes.

The initial steps of the arrangement involved drawing up the curtains leading to the balcony and turning on the two rows of spotlights at the top of the hall, creating two contrasting spaces. Equipment such as televisions, electronic pianos, and music stands were positioned where light and darkness converged. Afterward, the white seats, initially leaning against the wall, were unfolded and placed concerning the designated space for worship services. Initially, the chairs were evenly divided into two groups. However, members made adjustments through simple discussions. They removed the row of seats furthest from the alcove space from one array and placed them in the seat array closer to the alcove space. The seating arrangement was not fixed but determined through consensus among the participating members during the communal service. This flexible layout mode provided the members participating in the service with significant autonomy and voice, resulting in the final spatial form embodying the collective will of the members. This autonomy was not a random choice but was influenced by the alcove space, which served as the focal point for preaching. It enabled the collision of individual wills to be harmonized within the framework associated with the sacred space, orderly forming a unified collective identity and decision-making.

At this place, the congregation was surrounded by a cohesive lighting setup that created a noticeable contrast as they worshiped the enigmatic space before them. The seats were all occupied about ten minutes before the start of the worship service. Though there weren't too many people in the area, the lighting setup created a sense of unity. It countered the physical distance between individuals, fostering a feeling of belonging within the church community. This was also mentioned by members in their interviews.

"… The entire congregation is brightly lit, allowing me to see those around me. Being among everyone in worship, I can feel the presence of God …" (LLW Interview, 2021) "… I feel like the dark space in front [referring to the alcove space] doesn't belong to me. The bright area, on the other hand, belongs to our brothers and sisters …"   (JR Interview, 2021) "… It doesn't seem like I'm alone in worship as the bright light illuminates everyone. This is where we come together to worship God …" (YPL Interview, 2021)
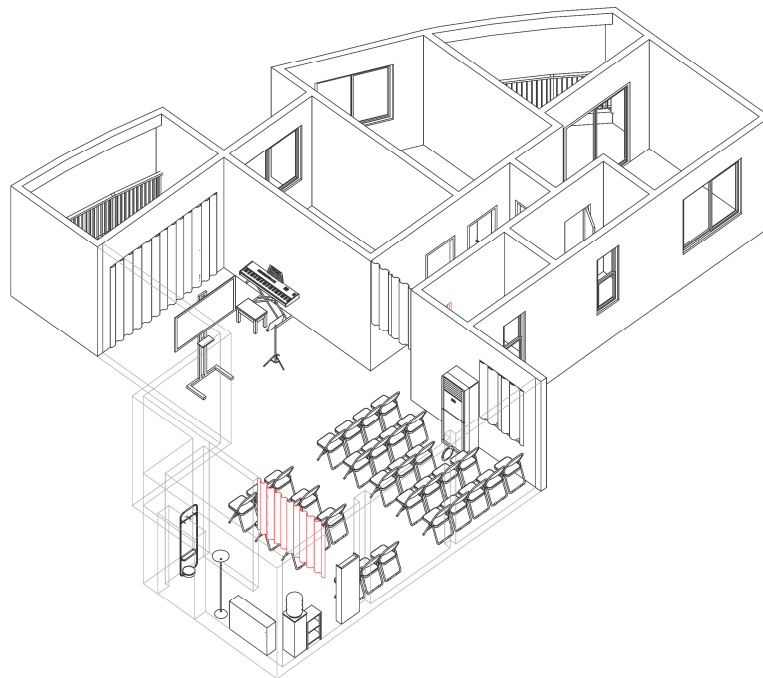
Fig. 3.70
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

It was evident that the lighting in the worship space played a vital role in setting the tone and promoting interactions between the attendees. The lighting was thoughtfully crafted to create a warm and welcoming environment, significantly enhancing the worship experience. With the space illuminated, the attendees became more aware of each other's presence, encouraging them to engage and connect. During the service, I noticed a subtle shift in the seating positions of individuals. Whether it was a deliberate choice or an automatic response to the environment, people started to move closer to one another. The chairs, initially arranged in a straight line, gradually curved to align with the natural movement of their bodies, promoting a sense of unity within the space. The change in seating arrangement demonstrated the attendees' desire for closer proximity and their willingness to interact with each other. Overall, the environment was charged with a strong sense of togetherness.

Re-shaping the space atmosphere

The function of this place has been converted many times in different periods. It had been initially used as a residence, and before the church rented it, it had served as a photography studio for a long time. The previous tenant had altered or replaced the original home decoration and furnishings. No exceptional renovations were done after the church was rented due to the lease period. Many traces of the previous photography studio were left behind, such as the six planar track spotlights installed on the ceiling in the hall's center, which was rarely found in residential spaces. Additionally, the church group that rented the space took measures to address sound issues during their Sunday hymn worship by installing basic sound insulation panels on the entrance door and partition wall of the adjacent apartment. These acoustic panels indicated that the place had been detached from its residential function and could now accommodate audio-related services. The space had been stripped of its residential attributes and instead decorated with essential features of a public place. However, without any relevant Christian elements present in the main worship space of the venue, it wasn't easy to perceive it as a Christian venue without being told.
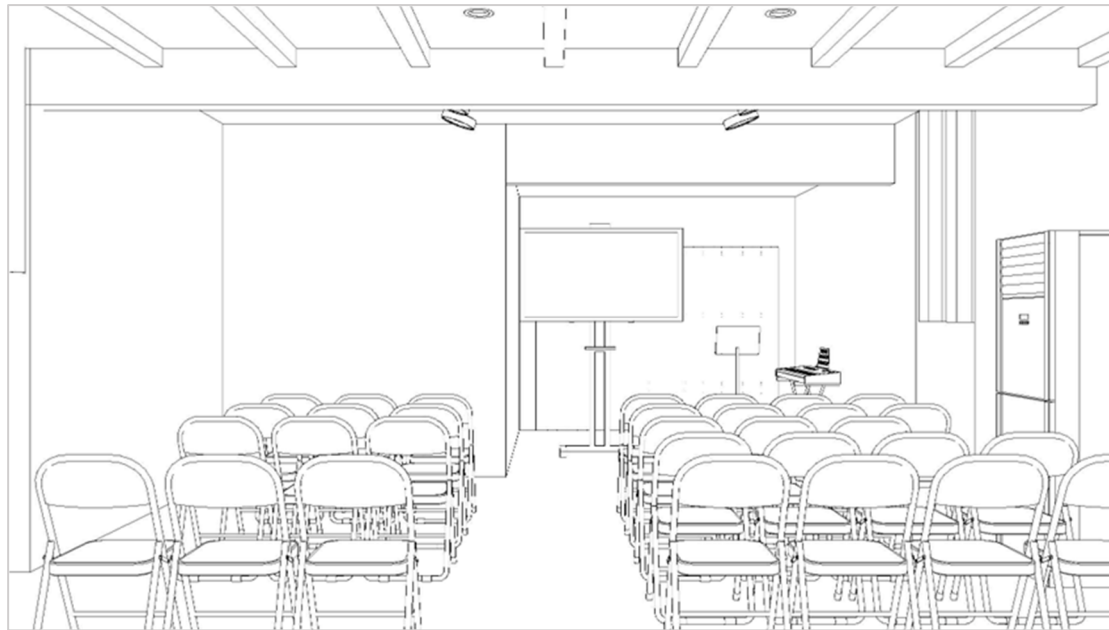
Fig. 3.71
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

But in terms of furnishings, some domestic furniture had been chosen for specific layouts in the site, such as household clothes hangers and floor lamps next to the foyer's door, as well as coffee machines, water dispensers, and sideboards for sundries in the foyer's corner. The church leader briefly explained these furniture and electrical appliances during the interviews. Some of the furnishings had been purchased by the members of the deacon committee, such as water dispensers, sideboards, and other large pieces of furniture. Others had been brought from home by other members of the church, such as floor lamps and coffee machines. The church leader stated that the choice of these furnishings had not been intended to deliberately create an illusion or evoke a "feeling of home." On the one hand, they had acquired this cost-effective furniture based on actual needs. On the other hand, out of love, the church members spontaneously contributed some objects brought from their homes. In the interviews with church members regarding the foyer, they had also mentioned that their first impression upon entering had been that of a family space rather than a public place.

"… The furniture at the entrance is charming and adorable, creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Upon entering, I can't help but feel at home ..." (YPL Interview, 2021) "… This place is like a second home to me. Numerous activities take place here, not limited to just Sunday worship. I also enjoy gatherings with my fellow brothers and sisters … The furniture appears quite standard and doesn't evoke any particular emotions in me. It's similar to the furniture commonly found in households …" (PL$_3$ Interview, 2021) "… As soon as I walked through the door, the soft yellow glow of the floor lamp welcomed me and enveloped me in the sense of warmth. The nearby clothes hanger resembled the one in my home, giving me a feeling of familiarity and comfort as if I had truly returned home …" (JR Interview, 2021)

The atmosphere in this place wasn't intentionally designed to feel "homely," but the church members also didn't want it to feel disconnected from everyday life. They avoided creating a scene that would feel detached from their daily experiences. Instead, the foyer was furnished with domestic furniture, which allowed members to associate it with a familiar setting upon entering. Despite the overall public feel of the decor, the members still saw it as a place that felt like home.
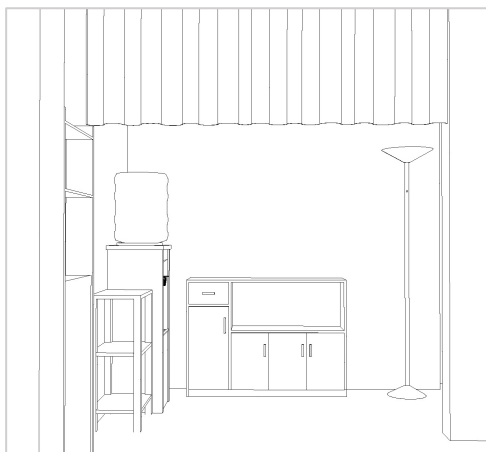
Fig. 3.72

Perspective view of tee corner,

with home domestic furniture

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.73

Perspective view of the entrance,

with domestic furniture

Source: illustration by author

This warm and inviting environment lent itself well to informal gatherings and religious activities like worship and Bible study. Members had access to the space during regular hours and often organized events like dinners, tea parties, and game nights[8]. Some even used the space for self-study or temporary work. It had become more than just a place of worship; it was a central part of the church members' daily lives, connecting them emotionally and serving as a bond. As a result, worship in this space was not seen as a separate religious act but rather as an expression of the unity and consensus already established among the members. Religious symbols and sacred separation are no longer necessary to achieve consensus and unity. Instead, the agreement is found before worship, and the act of worship serves as a platform for the self-expression of that agreement.
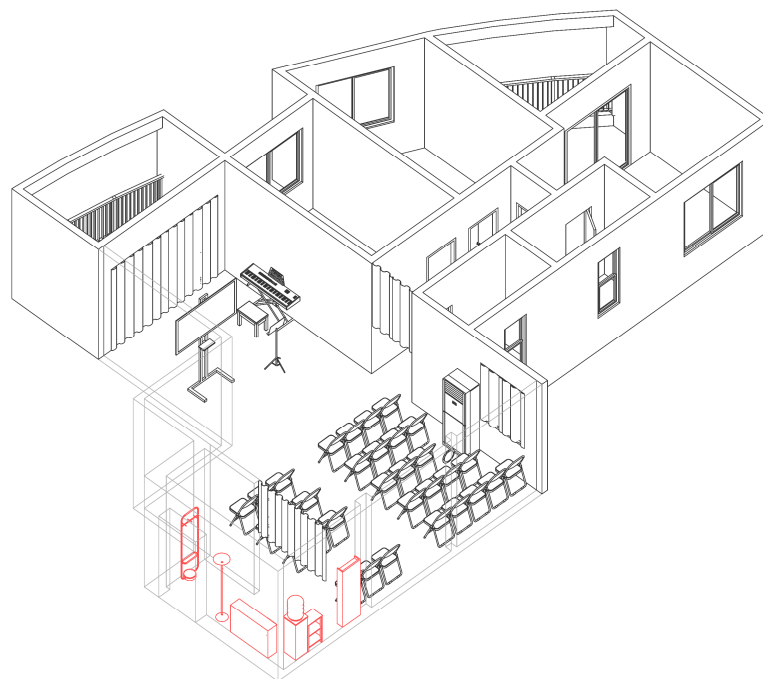
Fig. 3.74
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a domestic scene
Source: illustration by author

---

[8] After the worship service, I participated in a game event that the church group hosted at the same venue on a different day of the week. The setup for this event consisted of a circle of chairs arranged to accommodate the game's needs. As this event was unrelated to the worship service regarding time and space, I did not keep a record of it.

Case 6

I visited a church renting a residential unit in a mixed-use high-rise building. The building was built in 2004 and had 240 units, with approximately half of the units serving as offices and the other half as residences. The church occupied the middle floors of the building. The building lacked access control, allowing free movement in and out. When I entered the building, I was in a spacious foyer with four elevators. I took one of the elevators to the floor where the church was located, following the instructions given by the church leaders. The floor had an exterior corridor, with seven units sharing each corridor. The church's residential unit was in the third unit after entering the corridor from the elevator hall. The windows of the apartment facing the passage had opaque stickers, making the interior layout invisible from the outside. However, the door had a Christian message sticker, making it recognizable as a Christian-related space. The door was ajar, and upon entering, I saw no partition walls except for the bathroom and kitchen on the right side of the entrance. The space was opened up, forming a large rectangular area that seamlessly integrated a smaller rectangular space, all illuminated by bright south-facing light. On the east side of the room was a stage covered with a red carpet with a podium served as a pulpit on it.

Rearrangement of spatial sequence

Upon arrival, I was immediately drawn to the elevated stage centered along the eastern wall. A podium was positioned as a pulpit for the venue. The location underwent significant renovations by the church community. During conversations with church leaders, I discovered the dwelling was originally a three-bedroom house, later rented by the church group. The open rectangular living area, comprised of the living and dining room, is directly connected to the outer corridor through the entrance door. The side of the living area near the entrance door housed the washroom and kitchen. Two windows facing the outer passage illuminated the living area, while the side facing the entrance door boasted three bright bedrooms arranged in a row, basking in direct sunlight from the south.
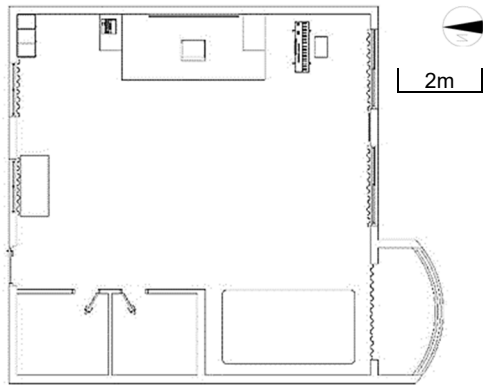
Fig. 3.75
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author
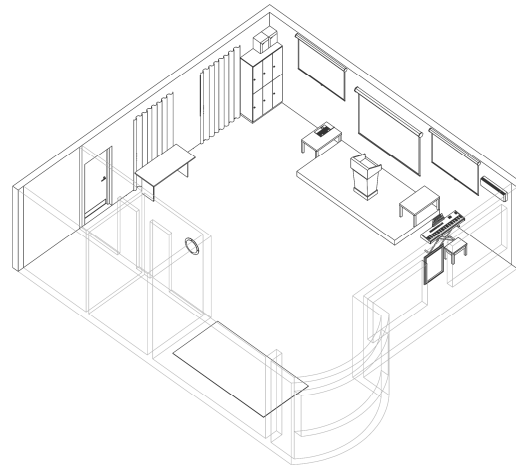
Fig. 3.76
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

The church leaders chose this location because the building had a frame shear wall structure, and the internal partition walls were not load-bearing and could be modified with the owner's approval. The windows near the outer corridor were sealed and covered with wallpaper for privacy. The non-load-bearing partition walls in the living and bedroom areas were removed, creating a large open area with ample lighting. The space was used for various weekday church activities, such as Bible study and communal meals, and transformed into a worship space every Sunday.
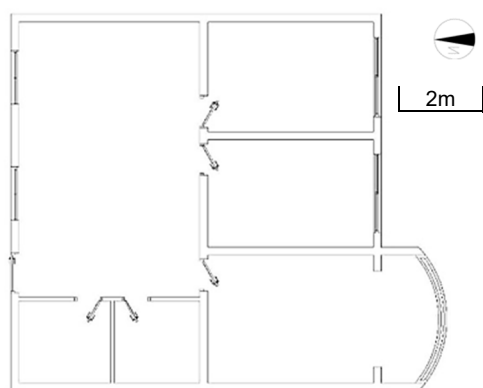
Fig. 3.77
Plan of the original apartment
Source: illustration by author

The large rectangular room was arranged as a worship space during the event. A stage, covered in a red carpet and measuring 10cm in height, was placed at the center of the long east side of the rectangle. A podium was positioned at the center of the stage.

The pastor explained that this location was chosen to allow the projection screens to be set up after the partition walls were removed from the east wall. Additionally, the centrally placed and decorated stage was visually impressive and provided convenience for setting up seats. The stage remained a permanent feature in the venue, even during other events, representing the space's core meaning with a solid and noticeable presence.
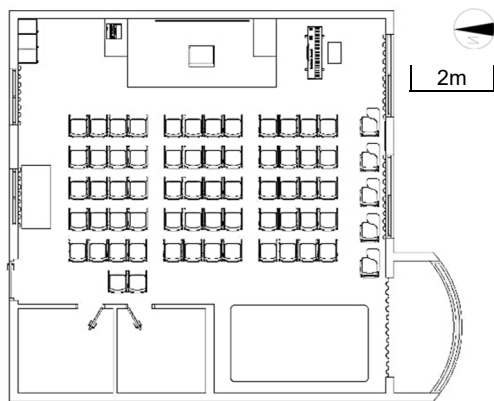
Fig. 3.78
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author
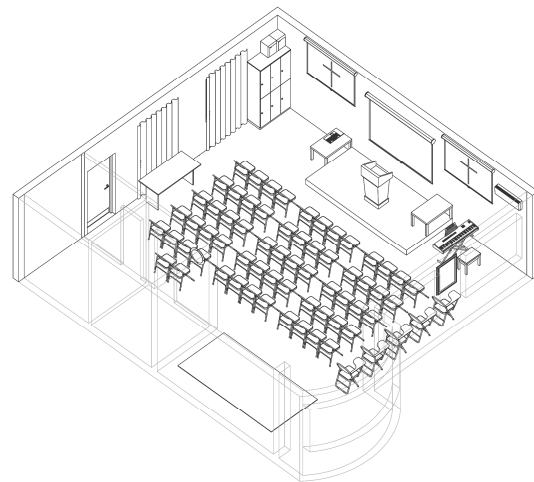
Fig. 3.79
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

In front of the stage, seating areas were arranged in three well-ordered groups along the long axis of the large rectangle. The middle group of seats occupied the axis extending from the pulpit, creating a seamless flow without visible spatial passages. However, the raised stage beneath the podium expanded the central area of the pulpit and effectively brought together the three regions that extended horizontally from the axis.

The small rectangular area connected to the southwest corner of the large rectangle was also fully utilized. This area, situated away from the entrance, was enclosed by the kitchen and bathroom walls, providing a specific sheltered space. It was furnished with upholstery and served as a space where individuals could freely sit or kneel to

pray. This secluded area, distinct from the formal worship space, was left unfurnished and maintained an informal spatial arrangement. While adding richness to the overall place, it did not disrupt the spatial sequence of the worship area.

Reconfiguration of spatial power

To maintain cost-effectiveness, the church leaders chose to preserve certain aspects of the space while making necessary adjustments. The original wooden floor was kept with minor repairs where walls had been removed, resulting in the seamless and uniform ground throughout the venue. The white-painted walls were also maintained for visual consistency. However, the exposed structural beams on the ceiling visually divided the space into two parts. The worship area was arranged with a raised red carpet stage as a connecting element, bridging the two areas together. Positioned under the main beam, a podium used as a pulpit served as the central focal point, symbolizing the supreme authority of the service. The stage, elevated by approximately 10cm, expanded the influence of this power center, encompassing the entire hall area and the three groups of seats beneath it.

Three sets of folding seats faced the stage in the hall and were arranged horizontally to fit the hall's shape. Despite structural beams on the ceiling, the seating arrangement remained unaffected. The middle group of seats visually bridged the divide created by the beams, following the stage and countering the sense of separation. While the seating area belonged to the congregation, it was not dominated by the symbolic axis of power from the raised pulpit. However, it was influenced by the area formed by the pulpit and stage. The podium, elevated by the stage's height, strengthened its authority with a raised viewing angle. The stage's width expanded the pulpit's power into an area, exerting its influence horizontally. Together, these elements resisted the initial sense of spatial separation.
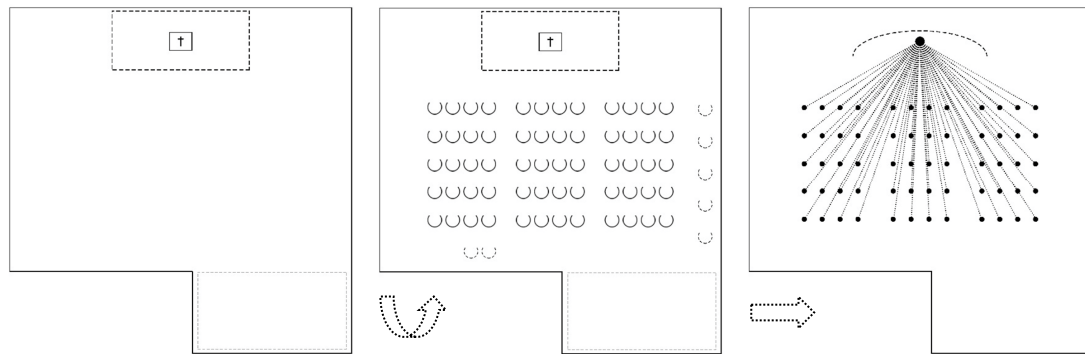
Fig. 3.80

Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service

Source: illustration by author

The space was designed to use natural light in defining and characterizing different areas, complementing the various forms of power present. For privacy reasons, stickers were used to seal off the two windows in the outer corridor near the entrance. The space's primary light source came from three south-facing bedroom windows. Different curtains were selected to cover the windows depending on the area's function, resulting in two areas with varying brightness levels. The windows near the stage had light blue curtains that allowed sunlight to stream in, illuminating the area where the seats were placed. The closed balcony at the far end of the stage featured opaque purple blackout curtains, creating a darker and quieter atmosphere in a relatively private area shielded by the kitchen and bathroom. By contrasting light and darkness, two distinct domains were defined: a public domain for God and the church community and a private domain for God and individual believers. Faith empowered the church community and individual believers spiritually in their respective domains, without interference but with mutual promotion.

Re-establishment of space identity

Although seven residential units were connected in a series along the outer corridor, I quickly located the space rented by the church. The windows facing the outer passage were covered with opaque stickers, preventing the interior furnishings from being

visible from the outside. However, a small decorative sign positioned at the top center of the entrance door displayed a different identity. It bore the slogan "Jesus is Lord of My Home." (Fig. 3.81) This outward-facing sign acted as a coded message, indicating to those who understood that this seemingly ordinary house carried a distinct mission.
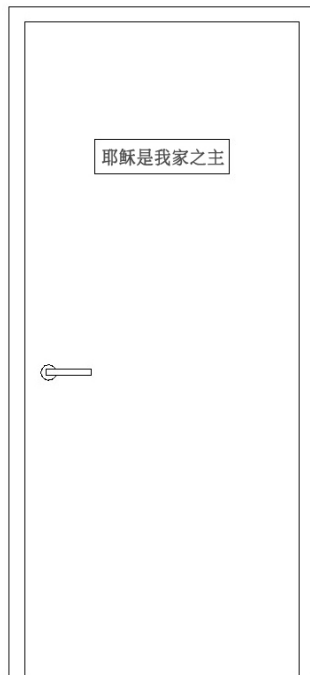
耶穌是我家之主

Fig. 3.81
Exterior door with slogan pad on it - "Jesus is Lord of My Home"
Source: illustration by author

As soon as you enter the gate, you'll notice a beautiful decorative painting with Christian messages hanging between two windows. The centerpiece of the painting is a striking red cross, with the Chinese character for "love" in a brilliant yellow hue placed within it. Above the cross was "Immanuel" written in red Chinese characters (Fig. 3.82). Upon entering the space, one's gaze was immediately drawn to the projection screens on both sides behind the pulpit, showing a red cross floating in the blue sky and white clouds. (Fig. 3.83). Once entering the house, the most prominent area was adorned with three cross images. These symbolic representations of faith captured one's attention in a space where Jesus was proclaimed Lord. While there were no other decorations with explicit Christian elements, the presence of the sign outside the entrance door and the three cross images inside effectively conveyed the purpose of the space. Visitors could quickly identify the nature of the place without much contemplation. In the interview, the members clarified the identity and value of the place.
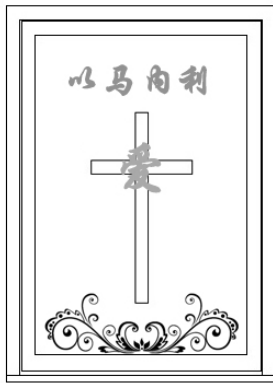
Fig. 3.82
A decorative painting with cross, love, and Immanuel
Source: illustration by author
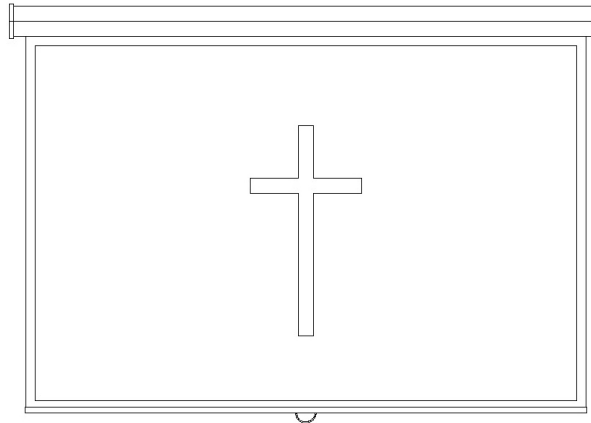
Fig. 3.83
Projection screen with corss on it
Source: illustration by author

"… This is the place where we gather to worship God. It holds great significance to me to worship here … Meeting and worshipping God with my fellow brothers and sisters every week is a vital aspect of my life …" (AR₃ Interview, 2021) "… I believe this to be a place of worship, albeit not in a conventional manner ... I feel a strong connection to God whenever I visit this place, particularly during prayer. I believe that God is attentive to my prayers …" (PJ Interview, 2021)

Of course, the precise identity of this place also emerged through the transformation of the original space. The removal of partition walls disrupted the scale of the residential unit, presenting an environment resembling a public space's scale and layout. Insights into this transformation could be gleaned from the interviews conducted with members.

"… I never realized this was a residential space. It's surprising to see such a spacious hall in a residential area (laughter) …" (ZLZ Interview, 2021) "… It doesn't look like a house at all，and I know very well that this is the temple of God …" (JPQ Interview, 2021) "… If the crosses' decoration is removed, this place could resemble a conference room or auditorium due to its ample space and existing stage …" (AR₃ Interview, 2021)

The integration of Christian elements in the decoration of the previously residential space and the alteration of its scale greatly influenced the transformation of this location into a place of worship for Christians. Its identity was established quickly in the minds of visitors without the need for any additional explanation or creativity.

I arrived at the venue approximately an hour before the worship service started. The door was already open, and I noticed several individuals kneeling and praying in the designated prayer area. Meanwhile, a few members in the hall had just begun arranging the seats. The space was empty at that time, with the podium above the stage drawing immediate attention. I learned from one of the members that if the church held activities in the hall on Saturday, it would be set up for the following day's worship. Otherwise, church members responsible for organizing the venue would arrive in advance on Sunday to prepare the seating and tidy up the area. These members appeared familiar with these tasks, requiring minimal communication as they instinctively unfolded the folding chairs in the corner and arranged them into three groups aligned with the stage. The process was completed in less than 15 minutes. The rows of seats resembled an audience eagerly anticipating the performance on stage. Given the area's spaciousness, the seating arrangement wasn't crowded, and there wasn't a close spatial relationship. Instead, an appropriate distance was maintained between individuals and the walls on either side. However, the seating area was most immediate to the stage in front, neither intentionally distant nor overly close. The proximity allowed them to be near yet lower than the pulpit, positioned to receive the divine message at the center. In this ambiguous yet modest space, the distance symbolized, to some extent, the house church group's recognition of God influenced by Calvinistic theology with Chinese characteristics—an attitude of reverence combined with intimacy.

The separate prayer area, which was not observed in other cases, drew my attention. Four members were praying, choosing their positions randomly, and kneeling on the

ground in silent devotion (Fig. 3.84). As a result, no visible spatial order allowed each individual's prayer to unfold in a deeply personal space of connection with God. Yet, their collective behavior became visible when they gathered in this small, tranquil, dimly lit prayer area. The exposed prayer area within the hall acted as another stage of the venue, presenting itself, influencing others, and becoming another identity marker. Upon returning my focus to the hall, I noticed that the prayer session had concluded. Many latecomers had not joined the prayer but instead found their seats in the hall and engaged in silent prayer.
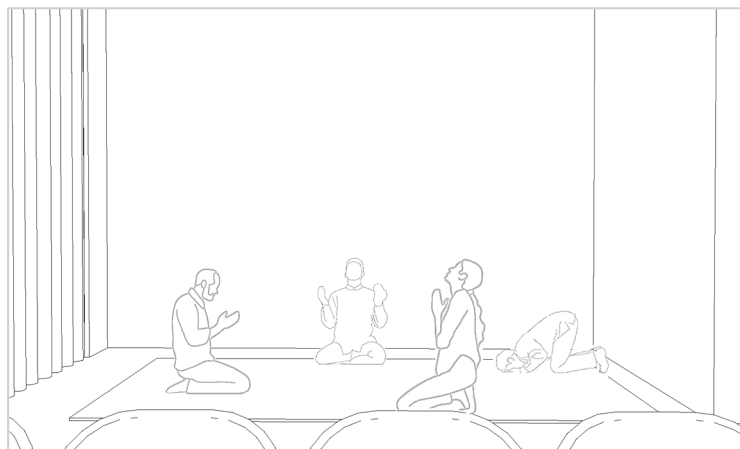
Fig. 3.84
Prayer corner
Source: illustration by author

The worship service was well-attended, yet the venue did not feel cramped. However, the congregation's attention was sometimes divided by two projection screens displaying PowerPoint presentations on either side of the podium, which caused a separation among the worshipers. This division weakened the congregation's perception as a unified entity, particularly during the music worship when congregants unintentionally focused their attention on the screens, leading to an independent experience. Although the place's identity was clear, the spatial separation remained a challenge that needed further resolution. On the contrary, the prayer corner fostered a sense of unity and coherence within the group, consolidating their collective consciousness in the space and shaping their behavior and understanding.
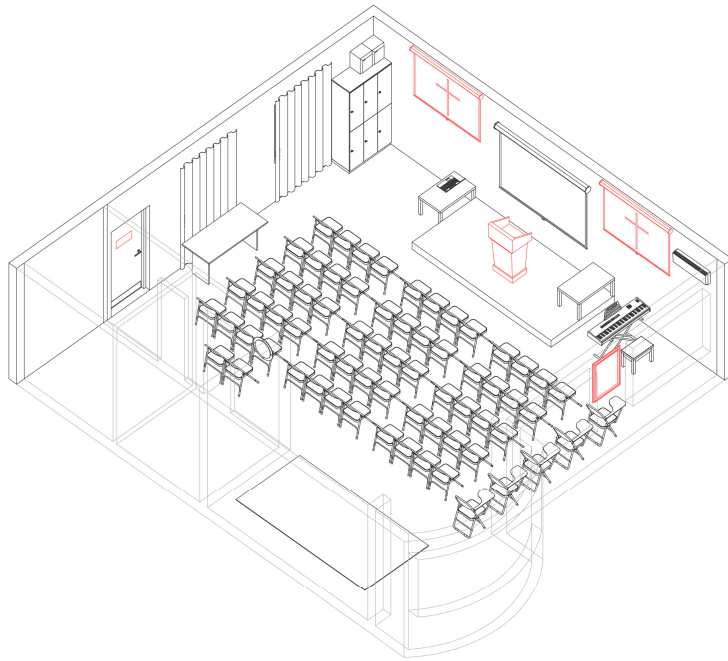
Fig. 3.85

Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a religious scene

Source: illustration by author

Re-shaping the space atmosphere

Compared to the other cases I researched, this place had undergone significant intervention and remodeling of the original residential space. Removing non-load-bearing partition walls and introducing the red stage drastically transformed the perception of scale and imbued the space with more general characteristics. The presence of the cross, a symbol of Christianity, repeatedly in prominent positions was a constant reminder of the site's identity. Additionally, the prayer area in the corner, totally opened to the hall, enhanced the religious atmosphere of the venue. According to the church leaders, these deliberate design choices aimed to diminish the residential image and create a space that separates itself from everyday life.
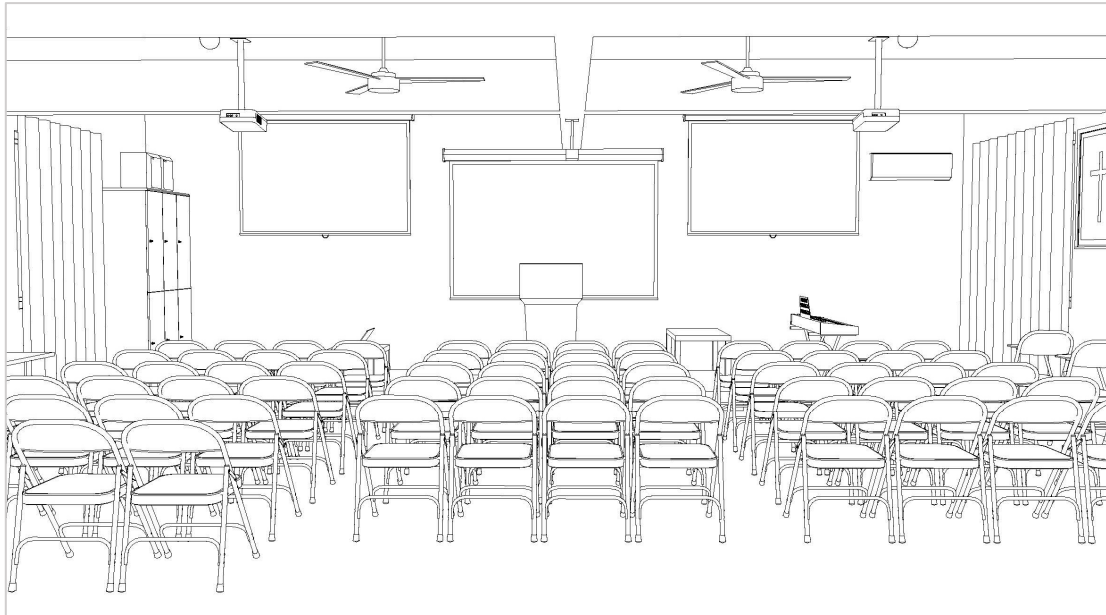
Fig. 3.86
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

Interestingly, when discussing their overall impression of the venue and worship experience, the members had an unexpected response. Despite the intentional removal of residential features, "home" was repeatedly emphasized. The entrance door, resembling a standard residential entrance, adorned with a sticker proclaiming "Jesus is the Lord of My House," evoked a sense of home (Fig. 3.87). Some church members even replicated this door decoration in their homes, further reinforcing the association with the idea of "home."
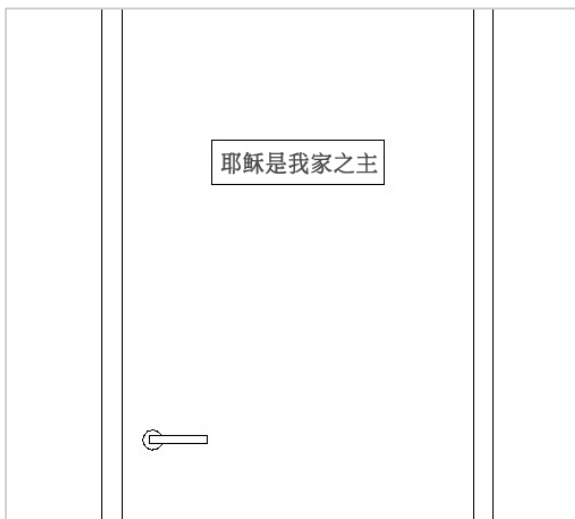
耶穌是我家之主

Fig. 3.87
Slogan pad on the exterior door,
"Jesus is the Lord of My House "
Source: illustration by author

"… In my opinion, this building is more than just a church. It feels like a second home, where Jesus is like our Father. The gate's inscription, Christ is the Lord of my home, perfectly captures this feeling …" (ZLZ Interview, 2021) "… I placed a sticker that reads Christ is the Lord of My Home on the door of my residence. Additionally, I purchased several of these stickers and distributed them to fellow churchgoers as a reminder of our shared faith community …" (AR₃ Interview, 2021)

The church's tagline is a powerful connection between the intimacy of home and the communal worship space. By displaying the message on its door, the church effectively identifies itself and provides a portable symbol of faith for its members to carry home. It is a constant reminder, creating a continuous connection between home and the church's sacred space. This connection unifies the personal realm of home and the collective realm of the church, forging a sense of unity and belonging among the members. Additionally, the materials used in the worship space design are carefully selected to enhance the welcoming and home-like atmosphere. The focus is on creating a warm and inviting space that resonates with the idea of home, inviting members to relax, connect, and engage with their faith in a welcoming environment.

"… I mentioned that this building cannot be a church because churches typically do not have wooden flooring of this kind. Such flooring is usually found in houses …" (ZLZ Interview, 2021) "… The wooden floor creates a warm, and homely feel for me. Occasionally, I kneel on the floor to pray …" (JPQ Interview, 2021)

In this unique setting where the traditional elements of residential space are absent, members have clearly distinguished between the concepts of housing and home. Despite the absence of explicit residential features, they have managed to capture and enhance the feeling of home through subtle representations and symbolic cues. It is

intriguing to note that these cues, which evoke the sense of home, may not necessarily be specific decorations or physical attributes of the space. Instead, the members' deep-rooted belief in the concept of home, as established through theological teachings, allows them to perceive and recognize these cues. This underlying belief system enables them to identify and connect with elements that evoke the feeling of home within the worship space. They become potent triggers that bridge the gap between everyday emotions and atmosphere and the sacred nature of the place. Blending daily emotions, personal experiences, and the sacred realm of the worship space shapes and influences religious behavior. These subtle representations and cues associated with the feeling of home serve as reminders and anchors, nurturing a sense of familiarity, comfort, and belonging within the worship environment. They help members establish a connection between their personal lives and the sacred space, allowing their daily experiences and emotions to merge harmoniously with religious practices and rituals. Through this blending of the sacred and the personal, the worship space becomes imbued with a sense of home, fostering a deeper engagement and resonance with the members' faith and spiritual journey.

Case7

In an urban village situated approximately 10km from the city center of a first-tier city in China, a church group decided to rent a first-floor apartment in a four-story house. Initially constructed by the villagers, this house has three households, with each floor occupied by a different family. The church group rented one of the apartments and transformed it into a worship space to serve the surrounding residents and the urban village. I accompanied the pastor as we entered the building and made our way to the second floor by walking down a long corridor. The church space was located at the end of the passage. Upon entering the gate, I was in an empty and open hall. From the visible marks on the floor and the short load-bearing wall on the west side, it was clear that the space had undergone alterations. Additionally, this self-built house's spatial organization and size were considerably different from standard commercial housing. Upon visual inspection, the ceiling appeared to be around 4.5 meters high, approximately 1.5 meters higher than typical apartments in China.

Rearrangement of spatial sequence

When I arrived at the location, the hall was empty, and the seats were neatly arranged along the walls. There were no specific displays or indications related to Sunday worship. My initial doubts about the apartment undergoing remodeling were validated during my discussion with the pastor. The pastor revealed that a church member initially occupied the apartment. After the member vacated the premises, the church acquired the space cheaply and received consent for renovation. The original apartment featured a rectangular living area, accessible directly through the entrance door, a small study on the west end, two bedrooms on the north side, and the kitchen and bathroom at the far end, away from the entrance.

After renting the apartment and consulting with the church deacons, they expanded the living area to create a worship hall. Due to the increasing number of members, the small study in the southwest and the bedroom in the northeast corner was demolished

during the renovation. The load-bearing walls were kept intact, but all partition walls were removed to create a larger rectangular hall, a smaller square area, and a small alcove-like space at the west end. From Monday to Saturday, the multi-purpose room was used for various church activities, while on Sundays, it was transformed into a place of worship.

Fig. 3.88
Plan of original apartment
Source: illustration by author

2m
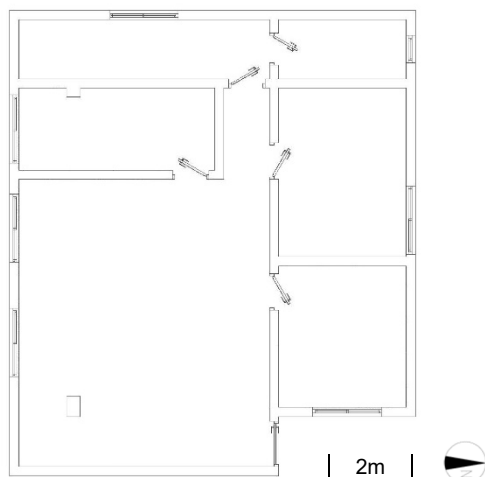
The space was quickly transformed into a worship area with the addition of furniture and equipment. The alcove-like area at the west end was the first to be completed and became the backdrop for sermons and musical worship equipment. During worship services, these items were relocated within the alcove. A music stand and microphone stand were placed in the center connection between the alcove and the main hall. The electronic organ was positioned in a corner, and the projector on the wall was activated, using the white background wall facing the main hall as a projection screen. This small space stood out within the venue, becoming a focal point. The pastor explained that arranging the pulpit in this area was primarily for practical reasons. It was far from the entrance, minimizing disturbances, and conveniently positioned at the end of the long hall, making it easier to arrange seating.
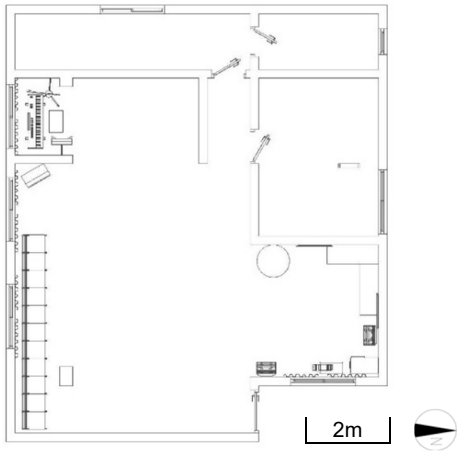
Fig. 3.89

Plan of the place before worship

Source: illustration by author
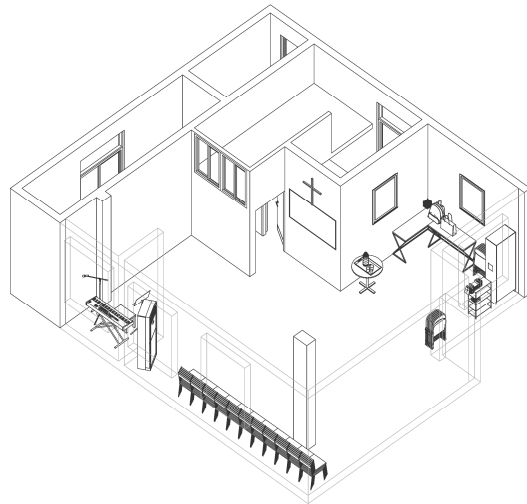
Fig. 3.90

Isometric drawing of the place before worship

Source: illustration by author

Subsequently, the seats stacked along the walls were repositioned. The chairs were arranged neatly along the length of the rectangular hall, facing the alcove area on the west side. This created a longitudinal uniform structure that looked towards the music stand and microphone. An axis dividing the seating area into uneven sections passed through the music stand and microphone, with the space between them pointing towards the alcove.
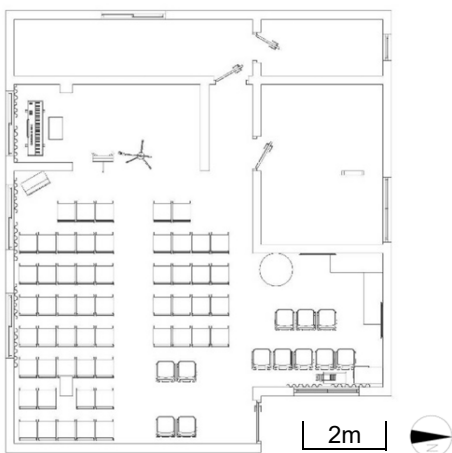
Fig. 3.91

Plan of the place during worship

Source: illustration by author
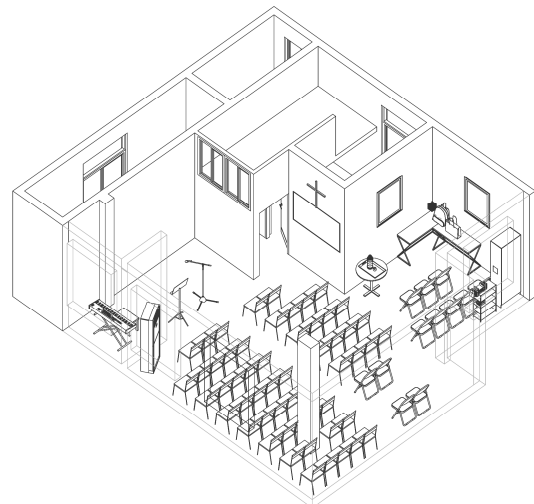
Fig. 3.92

Isometric drawing of the place during worship

Source: illustration by author

The main seating area of the venue was composed of the alcove space and the main hall. Additionally, a square wing space connected to the main hall had folding seats, creating a seating zone resembling an ear room. As this area formed a primary and secondary relationship with the main hall's spatial form, its seats differed from those in the hall. Still, they blended harmoniously with the overall spatial sequence, resulting in a clean and organized hall space.

Reconfiguration of spatial power

In renovating the location, the church group prioritized economic considerations. The pastor shared that they only demolished what was necessary to create a larger space. They retained the non-essential elements of the original house, such as the floor tiles and wall paint, with minimal repairs. The walls and ceiling were painted white, and no additional decorations were added to differentiate the areas. The previous owners had installed various floor tiles for each room, with the original living space having pink tiles, the southwest study area with light pink tiles, and the northeast bedroom area with white and gray tiles. The gaps left by removing partition walls were filled with dark pink tiles, effectively dividing the ground into three distinct areas.

The church group organized the three areas based on their size and spatial relationship. As soon as someone enters the space, they will see an alcove-like area on the west side that serves as the primary worship stage. The pulpit, a music stand, is positioned at the center of attention. Behind it, a bright projection screen has been installed, with an incandescent tube directly above it. The tube remains lit even during daytime worship, highlighting the significance of this location. The choice of location and the enhanced lighting immediately convey to those entering during worship the primary purpose of this area and its influential role. Though the electronic piano and other equipment for music worship are present within this sacred alcove space, they have been arranged inconspicuously, with their significance being secondary to the preaching point.

The main gathering area of the church was adorned with flesh-pink floor tiles and equipped with rows of folding seats. These seats were meticulously arranged in two groups, facing the front alcove space. A closer look reveals that they do not cross the dark pink floor tile band that separates the different areas. The central passage, extending from the position of the music stand that serves as a pulpit, directly faces the front alcove, emphasizing its authoritative status and visibility to those entering the space. Despite the simplicity of the pulpit furniture, its power within the church is evident in the spatial organization.

In the northeast corner of the space, there is a designated area for tea breaks. It features a small round table with teapots and kettles and a bookshelf filled with books. Bright orange seats are situated here, distinct from those in the central area, and easily recognized during worship, especially by members who bring children or arrive late. This recessed area served a secondary auxiliary function and was not immediately noticeable upon entering, distinguishing itself from the primary service within the space.
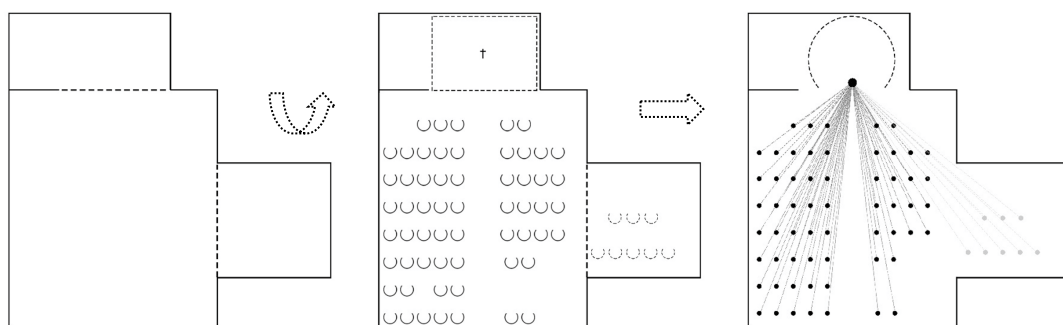
Fig. 3.93
Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Within this place, the relationship between the powers held by various services is reflected in their spatial position and prominence within the entrant's view. While not intentionally designed with this logic in mind, the church group reasonably allocated

functions based on the existing characteristics of the space, effectively representing power dynamics through positioning and furnishings.

Re-establishment of space identity

When I entered the space, my attention was immediately drawn to a large cross hanging on the north wall of the hall, indicating its association with the Christian community (Fig. 3.95). Upon closer observation, I noticed two decorative paintings on the wall of the tea room. They featured the Chinese words for "kindness" (Fig. 3.94) and "faithfulness" (Fig. 3.96), two of the nine fruits of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23[9]. The background of the paintings showcased a large floral pattern, with a small white cross next to the text. However, the prominent floral design overshadowed the Chinese characters and crosses, making it difficult to scrutinize the content.
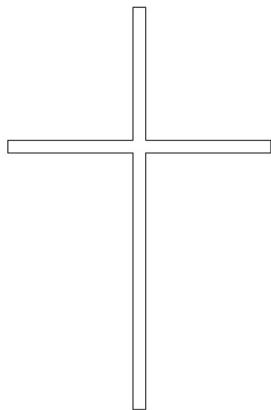
Fig. 3.94
A large cross deco
hanging on the wall
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.95
Decorative painting with bible
verses – kindness
Source: illustration by author
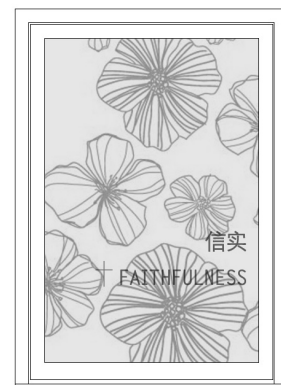
Fig. 3.96
Decorative painting with bible
verses – faithfulness
Source: illustration by author

Apart from these decorations, the space had no other prominent symbolic elements. While the significance of these decorations as markers of Christian identity was evident, relevant clues of their direct impact on the members' belief perception were not caught in my interviews with them. While it's hard to directly prove why, I'm guessing it has

---

[9] 【Gal5:22-23】But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith,or, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

something to do with the information ambiguity of the paintings.

I arrived at the venue about an hour earlier and was accompanied by the church pastor. At that time, several members had just begun setting up the space. Through our conversation, I learned that designated members would be responsible for cleaning the venue, but the space arrangement before Sunday worship was a collective effort. Different members arranged the pulpit and congregation areas, while the member in charge of the hymns retrieved the music stand and microphone from the alcove's corner. They then began practicing the sacred music for the day. Meanwhile, other members commenced organizing the hall area amidst the musical backdrop. Folding chairs leaning against the walls were unfolded and positioned relative to the pulpit in the front alcove. An axis originating from this reference point served as a guideline for everyone to align the placement of the seats. Throughout the process, it was evident that each individual confirmed the relative positions of the seats about one another, establishing an implicit sense of interaction. The entire worship space was set up in less than 20 minutes. When asked about the process, church members described it as a smooth and collaborative effort,

"… Every week, we prepare the venue for music and enjoy listening to hymns simultaneously. It's a beautiful process … At times, I find myself singing along without even realizing it …" (JWP Interview, 2021) "… If I have the time, I would happily assist with decorating the venue. It would also be a great chance to catch up with everyone and share any updates about my life. It's not stressful for me; it's a way to unwind and relax …" (JJC Interview, 2021) "… I don't consider it an additional task, as it's a soothing and pleasant experience. I get to listen to music and engage in conversations with others. Moreover, I believe serving God through this process is a divine blessing …" (LL Interview, 2021)

Members of the church no longer viewed setting up the communal venue as a simple logistical task. Instead, it became a sacred act of connection with God. The incorporation of hymns related to faith acted as a catalyst, transforming the communal service into an experience of divine grace. Personal sacred experiences were shared and communalized through communication during the service, strengthening the bond that united the church community.
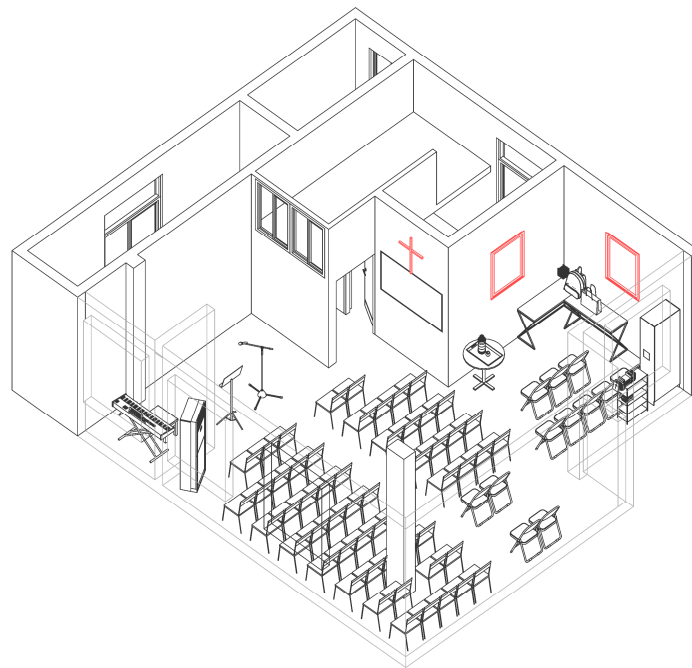
Fig. 3.97
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

The well-arranged venue exuded a strong sense of order, although the seats displayed the same style in different colors. When questioned about the choice of different colors, the pastor explained during the interview that it was due to insufficient seats initially purchased. As the number of believers increased, additional seats had to be acquired. Since it was challenging to find identical chairs, matching chairs in different colors were purchased to maintain a sense of uniformity in the worship space. These seats were positioned against the walls, occupying the hall space, but due to the height of the venue, it did not feel overcrowded. However, despite this, the dense arrangement of

the seats tightly brought people together, forming a cohesive whole. During worship, the seats were almost filled. Although closely arranged, it could be observed that individuals slightly adjusted the angle of their seats according to their physical needs, showcasing a certain degree of spatial autonomy. During hymn worship, when the congregation stood up collectively, their bodies swayed slightly in sync with the melody, creating an overall rhythm that became particularly noticeable in this high-density space. It seemed these positions had their own life, forming an organic unity. Once again, the density of the arrangement brought individuals together, and the impact of bodies being nearby allowed separate individuals to merge into a cohesive whole, an experience felt by those within the space.

Re-shaping the space atmosphere

Compared with the other seven surveyed sites, the most significant difference between this place was its space height of 4.5 meters, approximately 1.5 times that of standard commercial housing, and closer to the size of some public buildings. In the interview, the pastor mentioned that this apartment was just one of the options when choosing the worship place. One of the fundamental reasons why they finally decided to rent it is that its unusual height can make the space appear relatively spacious. This height, combined with the open space resulting from the removal of partition walls, the higher windows compared to typical houses, and the prominent sizeable wooden cross hanging high on the wall, contributed to shaping this site into a Christian space with a public ambiance. However, what added an interesting touch was the slogan posted beneath the cross, which read, "Joyful Homeland, Our Shared Abode." "Joyful Homeland" was the name of this church. According to the pastor's description, they aimed to foster a sense of belonging, intimacy, and security among the members, and the concept of "home" encapsulated these emotions perfectly.
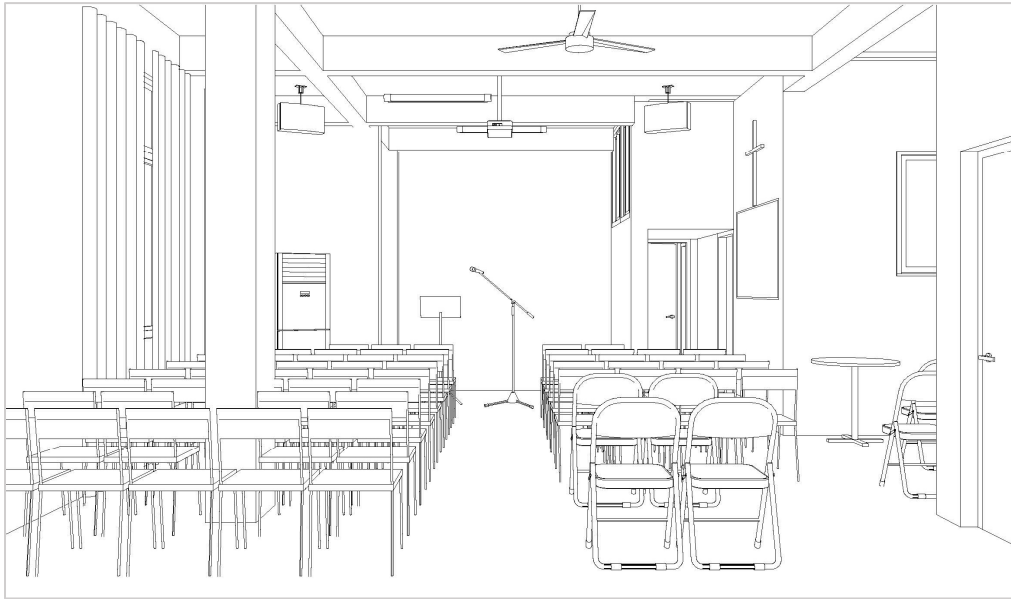
Fig. 3.98
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

"… I hope that all siblings visiting this place will feel right at home and experience a sense of tranquility and happiness during their stay … Our church community values the peaceful bond between siblings. I often pray that all attending church can experience the deep connection with the Lord we share here … Although this is a residence, it is not your typical family unit based on blood relations. Rather, it is a community built on emotional connections. It is a shared dwelling for all brothers and sisters, as indicated by the inscription on the wall, Joyful homeland, our shared abode …" (PW Interview, 2021)

The tagline associated with the notion of "home" seemed to diminish this public space's spatial extent somewhat. However, upon asking the members about their experience and the place's ambiance, their responses suggested that the shared characteristics of the space surpassed a mere public atmosphere. Instead, it blended well with the idea of "home" and created a cohesive community vibe.

"… The atmosphere here is more relaxed compared to other church venues. It feels like being at home, with a very casual ambiance …" (JL Interview, 2021)

"… I really appreciate this church because it has a welcoming and familial atmosphere. The people here are very friendly and caring towards each other, which I value. Additionally, the gathering place itself feels cozy and inviting …" (TQ$_2$ Interview, 2021)

Despite the site's unusual size and layout, certain pieces of furniture within it triggered memories of home for visitors. The tea room, in particular, was frequently cited as the area that evoked the strongest associations with their residences (Fig. 3.99).

"… I enjoy spending time in the tea room with my children, where we can sit and unwind. It's a comfortable and peaceful environment that makes my children feel at ease as if they are in the comfort of their own home …" (TQ$_2$ Interview, 2021) "… The location of the tea table gives me the impression that this is not a formal setting. On a side note, I brought the circular tea table from my house to the church. It adds a cozy touch …" (LL Interview, 2021) "… the thermos, glass tea kettle, and tea table, all These things together are like a home corner …" (JL Interview, 2021)

Fig. 3.99
Tee room opens to the worship hall, reminiscent of a home scene
Source: illustration by author

This small and unassuming area disrupted the perception of a traditional religious space. Despite the absence of a residential scale, the home atmosphere permeated through this compact and functional space, creating an emotional connection between the every day and the sacred and fostering a sense of intimate sacredness. As expressed by the members, this vibrant atmosphere made them more inclined to bring their children to this place, as it provided them with a sense of familiarity and security, eliminating any feelings of distance between them and the sacred.
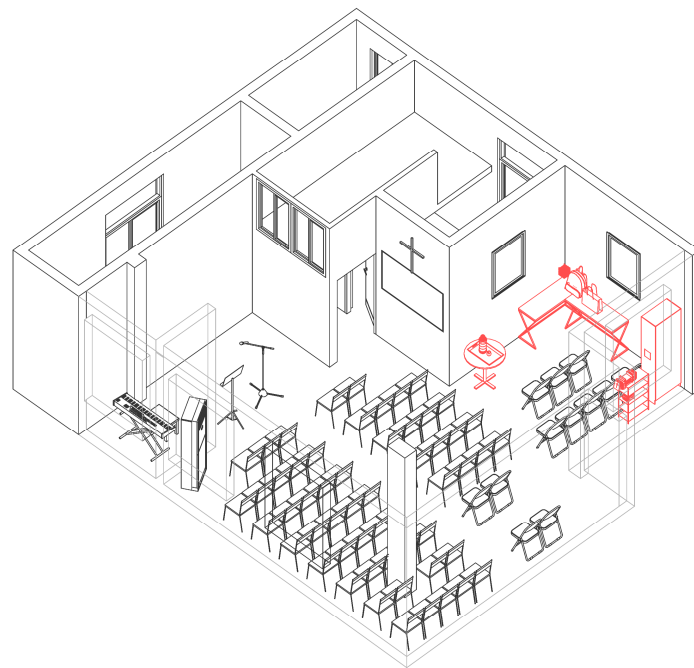
Fig. 3.100
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a domestic scene
Source: illustration by author

Case 8

In a residential district comprising over 1,450 households, constructed around 2003 in a first-tier city in China, a house church member rented one of the high-rise residential units as office space for his own company. On Sundays, he would open it as a small worship place for some members of his house church. This was the only venue I visited accessible to church members only on Sunday mornings. I got to the event location about 40 minutes before the service started. The directions given by a regular attendee of the church helped me find my way, but the district's security was tight. The gate guard asked me questions about my visit and who I would see before letting me in. Once inside, I quickly found the building where the church was held, thanks to clear signage. I used the intercom system to reach out to the church members, and one of them let me in. After passing through the lobby, I took the elevator to the middle floor, where the church venue was. The door was already open, and I saw some church members preparing tea in the kitchen on the left. Walking down the corridor, I arrived at a rectangular hall. It was then an office space with two equal-sized sections filled with desks, computers, and office supplies. In the hall's center was an almost oval-shaped conference table facing the entrance corridor.

Rearrangement of spatial sequence

As per the account of the church member who provided the venue, the place was previously a residence where the owner's family lived. The entrance boasted a promenade-shaped foyer, with the kitchen on the left side. Moving beyond the foyer led to a conventional rectangular living area that served as a living and dining room. Opposite the entrance were three bedrooms and a washroom. When the member rented the space, they chose to maintain the original layout of the house, converting the former living area into a communal office for employees. The three bedrooms were repurposed as the member's private office, a conference reception room, and a storage room. As the church operated in small groups, the member opened the space on Sunday mornings and made minor modifications to convert it into a worship venue for

the congregation. The place was swiftly restored to an office setting after Sunday worship, as his employees frequently worked overtime on Sunday afternoons.
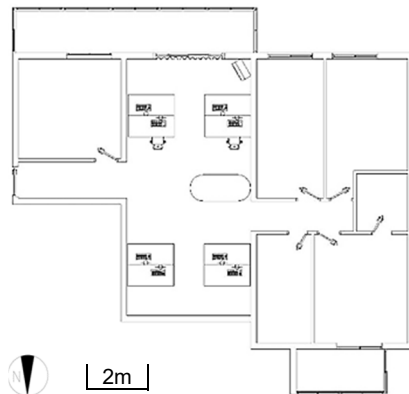
Fig. 3.101
Plan of the place before worship
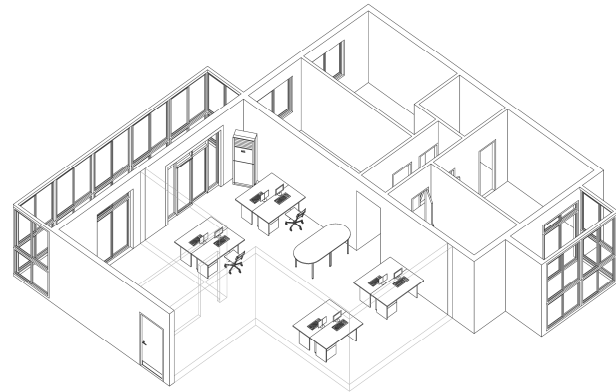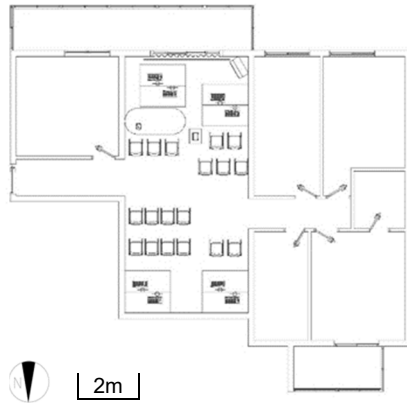Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.102
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Only the south side was illuminated naturally through a balcony in the hall space, while the other walls were solid. During Sunday worship, the congregation faced the balcony as it was preferred by members who found it more comfortable, avoiding any sense of oppressiveness. The curtains in front of the sliding glass door leading to the balcony were pulled up during the setup, and a movable projection screen was placed in front of it, completing the worship area. Since there was no physical pulpit in this space, live webcasting using online conferencing software was used to conduct sermons and worship sessions. The projection screen was positioned on the only illuminated surface. Still, it served as a passage connecting the physical congregation area with the virtual pulpit rather than being the focal point. This allowed members to transition from the current physical space into a deeper space dedicated to worship. Therefore, no particular position within the physical space formed a naturally appealing center, and the worshipper was anchored to the virtual center. Interaction within the physical venue remained relatively weak.

Fig. 3.103
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author
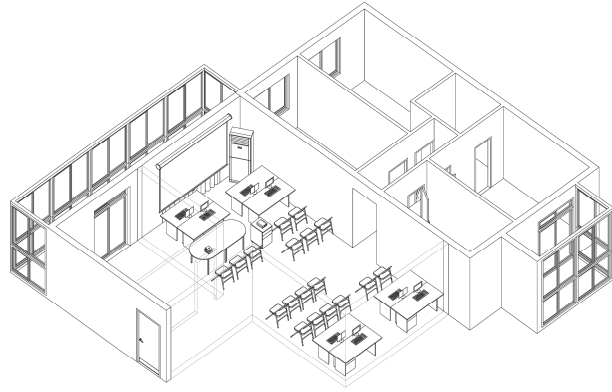
Fig. 3.104
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

This limited connection between the body and physical space was also evident in the arrangement of the congregation area and seating. The desks previously occupied the space were relocated to both ends of the room, primarily to create an area where seats could be concentrated. Members placed the original office chairs facing the projection screen in this space. The seating arrangement was random, and the presence of the projection screen did not prompt them to form a specific array with a sense of direction or momentum. The positional relationship between these seats and the front projection screen was not the primary consideration during the arrangement since their focus was on facing the pastor's desk in the virtual space. The physical space merely served as a gathering place for people, accommodating the congregation but not directly hosting the worship service.

Reconfiguration of spatial power

The church member who provided the venue mentioned that as a rented office space, minimal decoration was done after renting it. Only the previous household crystal chandeliers were replaced with two ordinary ceiling-mounted fluorescent lamps, and office furniture was added according to practical needs. The hall floor was covered in light yellow tiles, likely left behind by the previous owner. The walls were painted a uniform white, lacking any unique features. The floor and wall areas were not physically

separated, with a strip of earlier ceiling plaster decoration stretching from the entrance corridor to the bedroom area, creating two designated sections corresponding to the original living and dining rooms. Each section had a strip of gypsum decorative panels outlining the ceilings.

No specific furniture or equipment was prepared for church worship when it was arranged as a place of worship. Even the projection screen had to be borrowed from a company. However, by utilizing the existing furnishings and equipment from the office spaces, the church created an essential venue that met the requirements for worship functions. During worship activities, hymns and the pastor's sermons were broadcast live through conference software, with the images being projected onto the front screen and the sound played through speakers connected to computer equipment. This allowed visual and auditory experiences to occur at different points within the venue. The projection screen acted as a bridge between the physical worship center and a virtual realm, extending the reach of the sacred service beyond the physical space. While it was a focal point for vision, it could not fully engage all the senses of the congregation.

The seating area in the congregation hall was not directly connected to the front screen. The original desks and conference tables were moved to the north and south sides to create a small open space in the center. Thus, this place was not solely for the congregation, as office desks and conference tables remained between the screen and the seats. Due to the lack of a defined central location and close relationship with it, the seating area did not form a precise sequence or direction. The seats were randomly placed behind the movable desks, creating a loose arrangement.

The arrangement of the seats reflected an abstract topological relationship between them and the virtual center, presenting an incomplete representation within the physical space. The virtual network connected different times and spaces, facilitating

remote worship and making the organization of worship itself more flexible. However, the resulting virtual spatial power rendered the positional perception between different areas more abstract. Establishing a concrete positional relationship within the physical site became challenging. The spatial power dynamic in this area appears weak and poorly defined, making it difficult to maintain.
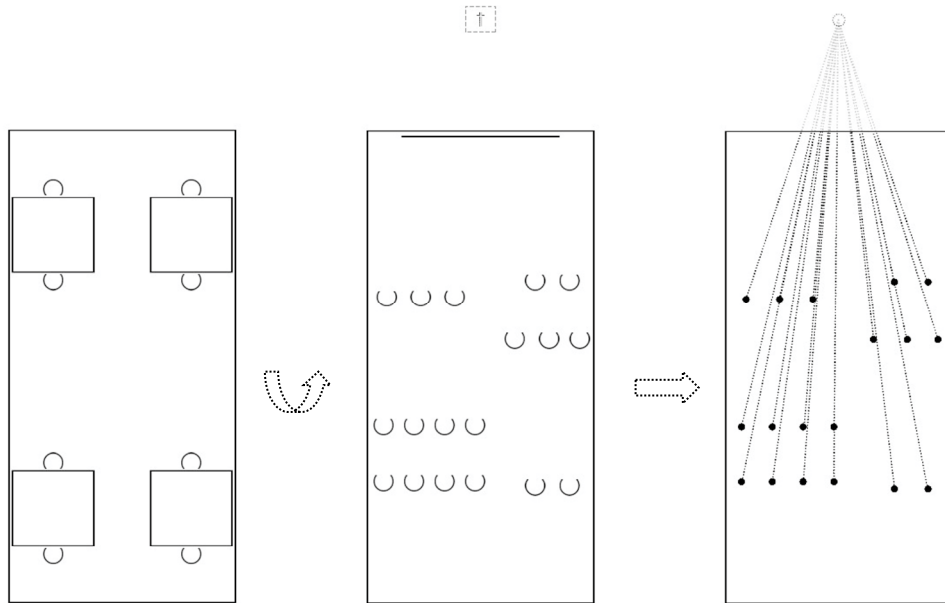
Fig. 3.105

Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service

Source: illustration by author

Re-establishment of space identity

There were no Christian decorations in this office, which was only used as a place of worship for about four hours a week. This place had a relatively strong sense of temporariness among all the eight venues I surveyed. When I first walked into this place, the most direct and robust feeling was that it was an office. The office-like atmosphere remained strong even after it was converted into a place of worship. Only when the projection screen was lit up did the background of the cross above make one realize it was a requisitioned Christian place (Fig. 3.106).
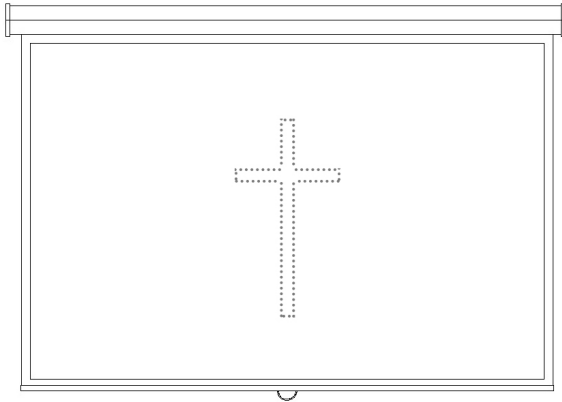
Fig. 3.106
The cross flashed across the projection
screen, the only religious symbol of the place
Source: illustration by author

Throughout the interviews, the individuals did not explicitly express their religious beliefs and experiences regarding this location as a place of worship. However, the reason for their frequent visits was mentioned multiple times.

"… We are not simply attending a church building, but rather, we are coming to worship God. The focus should be solely on the worship itself …" (JP Interview, 2021) "… We just gather here temporarily to worship together on weekends … As long as we can smoothly worship online, the venue conditions don't bother me much …" (YM Interview, 2021) "… I find the environment here to be suitable for worship, considering we will only be here temporarily. Because this is Brother X's office, there may be times when someone needs to work overtime. We will restore the venue to its original state right after the worship …" (TT Interview, 2021)

Based on the descriptions provided, it was clear that the absence of a defined religious affiliation did not impede the community members' understanding of the place's significance. On the contrary, it somewhat strengthened the sense of purpose. The worship service conducted there, even virtually, became apparent and captivating. On that day, a participant who was not yet a faith follower as an outsider to the worship described it as a welcoming environment with no pressure. According to the outsider's account, despite its lack of clear identity, this religious place did not have any negative

impact. Instead, in a way, it became a reason she didn't oppose being there.

"… I still don't believe God... I am a friend of X; she invited me to the party, and I have probably attended their activities four or five times … This place relaxes me and reduces my stress. I would have been overwhelmed in a true church, but the casual atmosphere here makes me feel comfortable … I believe that following them to listen to their sermons is beneficial. The content they provide can assist me in resolving certain uncertainties in my life … Currently, I don't intend to join the church. However, if I manage to make time, I might consider participating in their activities …" (YTL Interview, 2021)

The setup for this temporary place of worship was quick and efficient. A few members arrived early and efficiently arranged the furniture, installed the projection screen, and connected the computer equipment in less than ten minutes. Since there was no specific layout, the seats were placed randomly behind the mobile desk facing the screen. The worship session featured a group singing led by other members in a different location through the Internet. The lyrics were displayed on the projection screen using PPT, while the accompaniment was played through the computer's connected speakers. While the chorus was ongoing, there was no visual of the leading member, and the lyrics appeared on the screen. Even here, the seat could still be moved flexibly, but this autonomy of the individual body didn't shape unity here. During the hymn worship, everyone remained still, facing the screen and singing together. There was no significant interaction between the members, and they did not gather in any particular location. The virtual form of worship failed to generate a collective consciousness, and the individuals did not seem united in an ideal way. I believe it wasn't the physical distance that caused separation but rather the abstract sense of reach when real space connected with the virtual area, affecting the individual's spatial experience.

Re-shaping the space atmosphere

Fig. 3.107

The interior perspective during worship

Source: illustration by author

As per the church member who provided the place, the residence was rented as office space for almost three years. In the process, the image of the residence was replaced by a prominent image of office space. It was mentioned that the place began to be used as a place of worship on Sunday mornings about six months ago. However, it is unsure if it will be used for a long time as the church leaders are looking for a more suitable venue.

The venue primarily served as office space for non-religious companies. Thus no furniture or installations were purchased explicitly for worship purposes. There were no podiums, accompanying musical instruments, or any Christian-related decorations. The only Christian-related symbol was the occasional appearance of a cross on the projection screen during worship. The layout was slightly adjusted when the residential space was converted into a place of worship. The office desks were moved to both ends, and the chairs were placed in the middle to create space for the congregation.

However, it's important to note that this was only a temporary worship space, not a fully arranged place of worship. The presence of office furniture between the projection screen and the worshiping members indicated that it was still an office space. During interviews, the fact that it was an office space was often mentioned when discussing this worship place.

Fig. 3.108
The interior perspective before worship – residential space converted work space
Source: illustration by author

"… The location we're currently in for our Sunday gathering was generously donated by Brother X, who owns the company housed in this office. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to him for providing us with this space …" (TT Interview, 2021) "… This is a rented space owned by a member of our church who uses it as their company's office. As such, we do not have much control over the layout or design. Nonetheless, I am thankful that we have ample space available for worship … As soon as the worship is over, we will promptly restore the venue. Afterward, we may explore other options for gathering and enjoying coffee or dinner while continuing our conversations …" (YM Interview, 2021)

Unlike in domestic spaces, connecting with religious feelings in the workplace can be emotionally challenging. In this particular venue, there was a lack of distinct identity and emotional cohesion within the physical spaces. The atmosphere of "home" was noticeably absent. While the concept of "home" was still mentioned in interviews, it was used to describe an abstract sense of religious belonging rather than the physical site of the church.

"… The church is like a second home to us. More specifically, a home is not defined by a physical location but rather by the people who are a part of it. Brothers and sisters unite to form a tight-knit family within the church community …" (YM Interview, 2021) "… This location serves as a temporary meeting point for family members. Our primary purpose for gathering here is to engage in communal worship and fellowship with God. I feel incredibly fortunate to have access to such a wonderful space for worshipping together …" (JP Interview, 2021) "… While some may refer to this place as home, it's important to note that it may not fit the traditional architectural definition of a home. However, as a family created by God, we can transform this space into a true home …" (TZ Interview, 2021)

Their descriptions made it apparent that this temporary gathering place was a transitory spot where church members engaged in worship activities for a relatively brief period. Emotions, it seemed, were not profoundly cultivated, and there appeared to be a disconnect between the space and the members' beliefs and daily lives. The practical aspects of the place were emphasized in this emotionally detached environment, prioritizing its functionality over any emotional attachment. The absence of a distinct identity and a sense of place did not undermine the functional role of the space. It served its purpose by accommodating the necessary activities of the worship service, providing seating, and facilitating the logistics of the gathering. The

functionality of the place allowed for the smooth flow of rituals and communal practices, ensuring the practical needs of the members were met. However, it was evident that the functional aspects of the place, coupled with the emotional disconnect, had limited positive effects on fostering a deep sense of unity among the members. Without a strong emotional resonance or a sense of belonging, the space lacked the power to bind individuals and forge a strong communal bond. The absence of a more meaningful connection to their beliefs and daily lives hindered the development of a shared identity and purpose within the community.
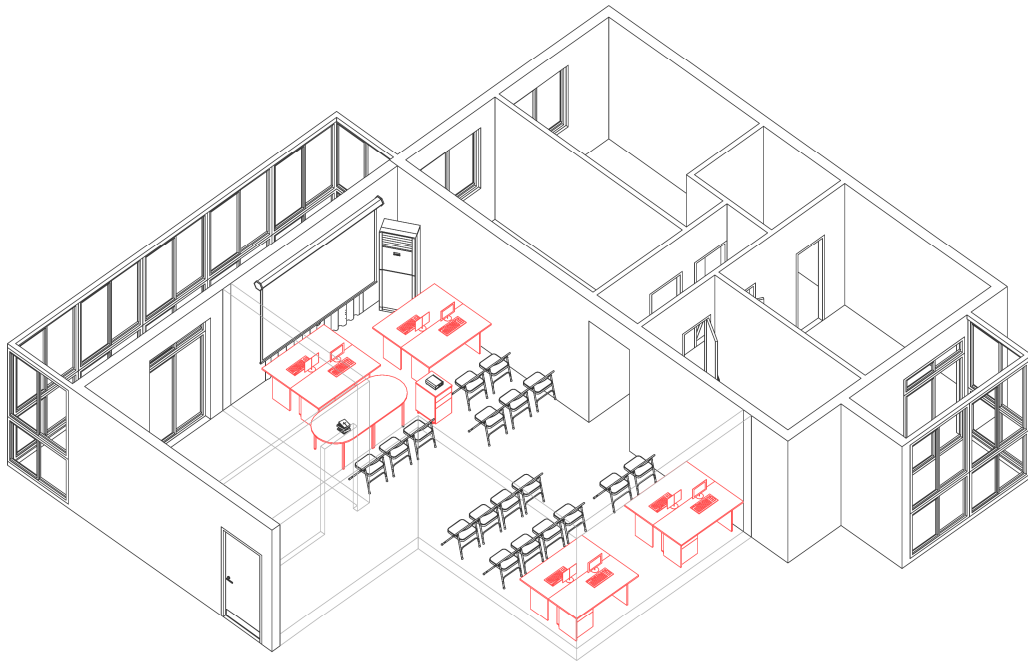
Fig. 3.109
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a working scene
Source: illustration by author

3.2.4 Comparison and Summarisation

Protestant members of house churches in Chinese cities have strategically relocated their fellowships to secular spaces, such as houses and other buildings. By doing so, they create a sacred space-time within common areas, bringing about a material transformation in architectural space. This not only impacts individual religious experiences but also reshapes the identity of the church group by disconnecting it from specific buildings and locations. While transforming secular spaces into places of worship, the church group disposed of physical materials in two kinds of sacred spaces, makeshift and contingent, which are space materials. Together, they constitute the spatial strategies of these house churches, exhibiting certain regularities in spatial adjustments, location handling, and material usage, although differences exist among them.

The case study collected spatial information from eight different cases (Table 3-9 & Table 3-10), including the place's status before and after worship, the spatial order after converting secular spaces into worship spaces, the resulting spatial power, and the elements related to religion and daily life established in the locale. This information presented four perspectives: the rearrangement of spatial sequence, the reconfiguration of spatial power, the re-establishment of space identity, and the reshaping of the space atmosphere. These aspects are interconnected and collectively represent the unique essence of the house church phenomenon. This approach transcends the boundaries between sacred and secular, fostering a religious sentiment that extends across various architectural spaces through their cross-relocation. Translating these social strategies into spatial practices highlights the decentralized nature of Christian places of worship. Religious sentiment is nurtured through the intersection of worship spaces and other types of spaces, transcending the traditional boundaries of sacred and secular domains.
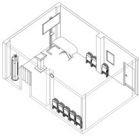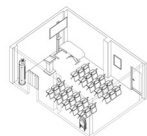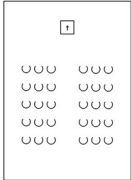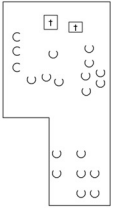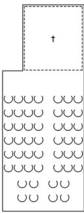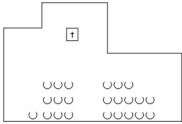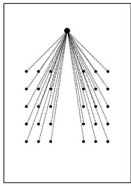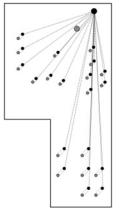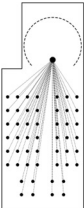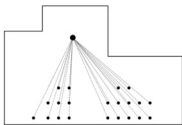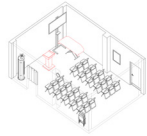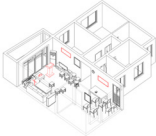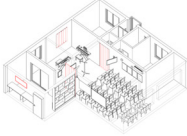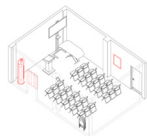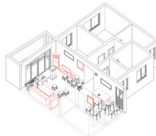
Spatial Information of Cases 1-4				
	Case1	Case2	Case3	Case4
Spatial Settings Without Worship				
Spatial Settings During Worship				
Spatial Sequence				
Spatial Power				
Religious Factors				
Everyday Factors				

Table 3-9

Collection of spatial information from Cases 1-4

Source: illustration by author
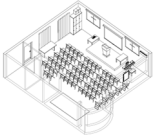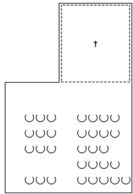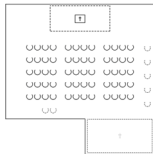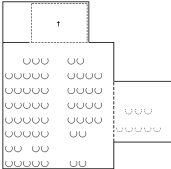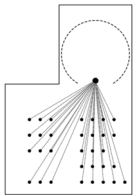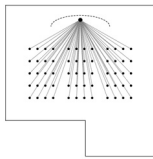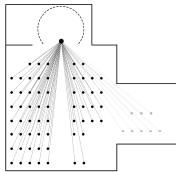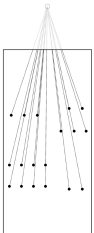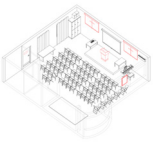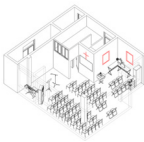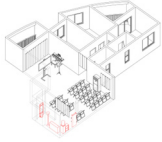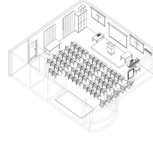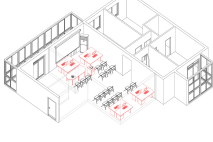
Spatial Information of Cases 5-8				
	Case5	Case6	Case7	Case8
Spatial Settings Without Worship				
Spatial Settings During Worship				
Spatial Sequence				
Spatial Power				
Religious Factors				
Everyday Factors				

Table 3-10

Collection of spatial information from Cases 5-8

Source: illustration by author

Rearrangement of Spatial Sequence

The refurbishment of house churches typically initiates with the repositioning of furnishings, thereby establishing novel spatial orders and environmental characteristics. When infused with religious significance, this positioning and relational furniture configuration cultivates a stable and symbolically meaningful space. The concepts of 'center' and 'direction' are paramount in these churches, mirroring the congregants' beliefs and serving as identifiable elements within the context-specific place model. The 'center' often symbolizes God's presence within the community relationships of the church, while 'direction' signifies the pursuit of core values and spiritual longing for God. However, the center's physical manifestation varies across the examined cases.

In certain instances, as observed in Case 1, Case 2, Case 4, and Case 6, a designated podium visually establishes a dominant central point for preaching services. Conversely, Case 3, Case 5, and Case 7 leverage the inherent morphological attributes of the space to construct an alcove-like region that condenses the visual focus, forming a central field. Case 8 does not present a tangible center within the place itself but rather bridges the physical and abstract virtual space through a projection screen, situating the center at a perceptible yet intangible distance.

These centers correspond to the service's focal points in different ways. Unlike traditional churches that designated the geographical 'East' as the sacred orientation[10], such geographical directions are no longer a reference for furniture arrangement in these house churches. The arrangement is governed by the positional relationship

---

[10] Kenneth G. Holum (2005) stated, "The early church fathers, influenced by both theological and practical considerations, determined that the orientation of the church should be towards the east." This decision was based on a combination of theological and practical reasons, including the symbolism of the sun rising in the east and the direction of the Second Coming of Jesus. The orientation of the church to the east also provided a way to orient the congregation toward the altar during worship (Kieckhefer, 2008). Bron Taylor (2008) also stated that "the orientation of sacred places toward the east has been a consistent theme in the world's religions since ancient times. This orientation often symbolizes the sun's daily journey across the sky and its connection to the spiritual domain of the gods or God (p.748)."

between the congregation and preaching service areas. In Case 1, Case 3, and Case 7, seats are systematically aligned facing the pulpit, with a pronounced axis marking the connection between the seating area and the preaching center at the front. Case 2 and Case 6 create a sense of direction through a vertical height differential, with the elevated sermon center and the lower seating area encouraging an upward gaze. Case 4 and Case 5 engender a sense of gathering towards the center through an irregular distribution of seating areas, offering a spatial configuration that directs focus towards the central location. Case 8, with its intertwined virtual and physical spaces, does not establish a fixed spatial structure with solid positional relationships, introducing uncertainty in the perception of the center in the virtual domain.

In these house churches, the spatial sequence is continually reshaped every week, reflecting a recurring life cycle. While the sacred sites originate from a central point, this specific center does not prescribe a fixed geographical direction. The center's influence on direction is apparent, but their expression and integration can be versatile and adaptable. Despite this variability, common features exist in the spatial sequences of these locales. They are directed towards the sermon's center, maintaining a front-to-back arrangement rather than a centripetal structure. The furniture arrangements respond to the preaching ritual, emphasizing ideological instruction and reception rather than collective transcendence. These spatial transformations involve the positioning and posture of the body, engaging multiple senses, including hearing and vision. Through the reconfiguration of the spatial sequence, the body is rearranged, reoriented, and assimilated into a new perceptual system governed by hierarchical relationships and internal discipline within the theological framework of Chinese house churches.

Reconfiguration of spatial power

The resetting of spatial sequence within these house churches prompts a comprehensible delineation of religious relationships and power within the setting. This

process restricts the site into distinct zones, creating a field characterized by a power hierarchy. The place's segmentation into differentiated zones generates a hierarchically ordered field that influences the interaction between the body and the religious service. Individuals carefully decipher the significance embedded within this spatial mapping, thereby contributing to the construction and content of the theological system.

The analyzed cases illustrate how the updated positional relationships of furnishings embody Calvinist theology's values with Chinese characteristics, molding a power hierarchy. The importance of various religious services is manifested in the furniture arrangement, forming distinct power zones within the location. These zones are not dictated by the architect's spatial blueprint but are instead autonomously redefined by the users via furniture placement, resulting in spatial reproduction. The areas, signifying different service levels, extricate specific domains from the architectural space, establishing a spatial disposition. The user's understanding of the worship service's significance governs their autonomous judgment in partitioning spatial power.

The establishment of a central point that serves as the preaching center triggers the spatial re-empowerment of the original site. The presence of a distinct spatial hierarchy of the original space varies among the cases. In some instances, such as Case 1, Case 2, Case 3, Case 4, Case 5, and Case 6, the room before the worship's presence did not have a clear spatial hierarchy, and the same ground style connected different areas without distinction. Conversely, others, like Case 7, presented different zones but lacked a precise hierarchical arrangement. Case 2 preserved the residential functional logic devoid of power characteristics, while Case 8 is an office space without partitions. Yet when they were purposed as places of worship, the central zone, recognized as the most critical, influences the arrangement of the seating area, irrespective of the absence of physical demarcations.

The center's influence is disseminated via the order of visual occupancy. Furniture used for preaching becomes the visual core, while other worship-associated furniture is positioned peripherally or in visually obstructed locations. The relationship between preaching and congregation areas forms visual connections, such as the axial channel extending from the pulpit in Case 1 and Case 7. The vertical relationship in Case 2 and Case 6 establishes a power hierarchy, with the preacher standing behind the pulpit, elevated above the congregation. As observed in Case 4 and Case 5, light-dark contrasts between different areas forge a sense of distinction and elicit emotions of awe or longing. The auditory experience, delivered through direct sound transmission or amplified speakers, further emphasizes the importance of power and authority. In five cases, the sound of the preaching service was directly emitted from the preaching position, without utilizing speaker equipment, and transmitted to the congregants. Although the sound is amplified through speaker equipment in the remaining three cases, the speakers are located near the preaching position, shaping a sound field with a clear direction.

Despite being unofficial house churches without dedicated buildings, their theology profoundly influences the place's construction, creating a hierarchical order within the space. The principle of hierarchy within Chinese-influenced Calvinism significantly impacts these churches' spatial production. The restructured spatial locations embody the power of religion, differentiating spaces with power characteristics from the original context. This aids individuals within these spaces to recognize and perceive the logic of power. The focus on sensory perception of the body accentuates the service process and aligns the body with normative religious ethics and moral orientations, transforming spaces in the process.

Re-establishment of space identity

In their distinctive context, these Chinese house churches have fostered a theological milieu imbued with Calvinist hallmarks. This transformation has engendered a more

profound interfusion between the church and society, foregrounding the physical manifestation of Christianity's inherent faith over its religious nature. Consequently, intangible facets such as God's alienation, remoteness, and power have witnessed attenuation within the theological structure. Meanwhile, the immanence aspect, underscoring the intimate relationship between individuals and God, has become critical. This theological metamorphosis has also catalyzed liturgical renovation within these house churches. Sacraments have been relegated in emphasis, with precedence accorded to the sanctity of words, succeeded by celebratory poetry, worship, and praise. This shift in relational gravitas has cultivated a sense of kinship between individuals and God, fostering a communal bond that surpasses quotidian life.

Pertaining to religious identity, these house churches do not depend on iconographic elements such as portraits of Jesus. In the use of symbolic elements, in only Case 6 were numerous crosses employed to dominate individuals' visual purview, fostering a profound influence that subsumed them in religious symbolism upon entry. In this instance, the cross significantly catalyzed holy conduct, invoking a spiritual ambiance that transcended the mundane. A solitary cross was adorned in Cases 2, 4, and 7. This was not the visual epicenter of the location, instead subtly signifying the nexus between Christianity and the revamped residential space without inciting religious sentiment. Religious symbols were absent in the remaining four cases. Instead, they instituted religious identities via textual embellishments representing belief values and doctrinal teachings. These textual decorations, extracted from scriptures or mirroring core beliefs, fabricate Christian spaces predicated on the Holy Word. These words play a pivotal role in fostering conviction in immanence, swiftly discerned in the visual system, and subtly influencing members' beliefs and values. Through sacred words, they bridge the divide between individuals and the divine, rejuvenating life values and lifestyles. This experience extends beyond the church locales and manifests in daily life, molding individuals' identities and fostering sanctification.

Moreover, certain specific materials employed in worship spaces significantly influence individual cognition. For instance, using red and purple velvet materials in Case 1 and Case 3, frequently associated with festivities and ceremonies, elicits potent religious sentiment within the venue. In Case 4, the integration of silver-white reflective material, paired with strategic lighting, cultivates an aura of sanctity, enhancing the worship experience. These instances align with Anttonen's observation (2002, p.31) that humans inherently possess the propensity and inferential capacity to ascribe extraordinary value and meaning to particular facets of time, space, and the human body, particularly in sacred locations. However, in Case 5, despite the deliberate selection of linen material to establish a symbolic connection with Christianity's rich history, its mundane nature attenuates its intended effect. This suggests that a distinctness from the ordinary world is essential for these materials to induce religious contemplation and reasoning.

Unlike quotidian life, religion assumes tangible forms in specific locations via symbols and materials that engender a unique religious sentiment. Although these adornments positively impact the locale, they are confined by their space. Makeshift and contingent sacred spaces differ in terms of constructing religious identities. Due to their transitory nature and varying service groups, makeshift spaces seldom employ religious adornments, constraining their representation of religious identity. On the contrary, contingent spaces enjoy greater liberty in selecting decorations, enabling users to acknowledge the location's sacred nature.

The aforementioned decorative elements foster personal connections between individuals and God. By involving the body and senses in the construction and experience of space, a shared energy is created that unifies the church community. Smaller, more intimate spaces like homes facilitate easier interaction and influence among individuals, fostering a cohesive community. Before the weekly Sunday services, the preparation of the worship space creates opportunities for members to

interact. Members collaborate to arrange the furniture in its designated position, necessitating them to confirm and concur on each other's relative positions via tactile and visual interactions. This fosters a communal dance in the space. Therefore, compared to the method of demarcating seat positions on the ground in Case 3, the more arbitrary arrangement process in other venues offers additional space for interaction between individuals. In-depth participation in the construction of religious sites is not merely a promotion of internality but also forms a cooperative mechanism within the church community. From this perspective, the venue's capacity to drive unity has been activated before the actual worship activities.

Secondly, the density of people in these venues facilitates mutual perception and influence, with inadvertent physical touch and shared auditory experiences, primarily during music worship. In this context, it is evident that an individual's actions can be easily transmitted and have a group impact. For instance, when someone raises their hand, more people around them reciprocate and join in singing. At this juncture, the sound also forms a zone wherein each body is both the sender and receiver of the sound. As listeners of the musical accompaniment, they share the ability to perceive sound events and become part of the community; as listeners of each other's singing, they participate in sound events together, recognizing the existence of other individuals as a whole. The increased density of people amplifies some subtle sensory experiences, making it easier for a crowd of individual bodies to be perceived as a whole. The place transforms into a machine for unity production, where auditory, visual, and tactile interactions occur naturally, fostering a sense of unity among the worshippers.

In conclusion, Chinese house churches have assimilated a theological milieu with Calvinist features, emphasizing the physical manifestation of faith and intimate relationships with God. The liturgy has been renovated, focusing on the sanctity of words and communal worship. The construction of religious identities is facilitated

through textual adornments, and certain materials and symbols evoke religious sentiments. The shared energy within the community is fostered by the involvement of the body and senses in the worship experience, promoting unity and interaction among members.

Re-shaping the space atmosphere

During ethnographic interviews with members of these house churches, it was frequent for respondents to depict the church using familial language, referring to it as "our home," "our house," or "our family." The conception of 'home' forms the emotional foundation for organizing these churches' space and time. The infusion of ideas and relationships related to family hood resulted in a shift of church operations away from institutionalized religious logic towards more dynamic faith relationships. Thus, these worship venues morphed from mere platforms for ritualistic performances into repositories of relationships and emotions.

Contrary to official churches, which possess identifiable church edifices as places of worship, these unofficial house churches lack immediately distinguishable worship spaces. Instead, they organize religious activities within residential areas traditionally associated with familial life. This discordance between function, structure, and form within these appropriated residential spaces permits an interlacing of emotional experiences associated with familial relationships, typically deemed secular. Emotions intersecting religion and everyday life, sacred and secular, are suspended in these material elements where different logics overlap, such as public-private and etiquette-life. These crossroads influence the individual's comprehensive perception of the place, generating a distinctive atmosphere that is arduous to pigeonhole as purely quotidian or sacred. Within these locations, materials of differing attributes amalgamate these two intentions, creating a unique ambiance. The place appears detached from its architecture, redefining self-expression and narrating its own story. While it is challenging to quantify the intensity of an individual's experiential sense and the

strength of the atmosphere across different house churches, it is evident that the blending of a religious atmosphere with familial sentiment is intimately connected to the original edifice and its furnishings.

The sentiment of 'home' is tightly knit with the furnishings within these worship spaces. During interviews, members frequently mentioned home-associated fixtures that engendered a homely feeling within these consecrated spaces. Case 2 is particularly notable, as it was initially a worship space temporarily created within the pastor's residence, thereby preserving the residential imagery and evoking a strong 'home' ambiance. In other instances, despite the varying degrees of modification and adjustment to the original rooms, vestiges of home furnishings persist, offering members an immediate sense of familiarity and comfort. Such features encompass elements such as a small blackboard in Case 1, a bookshelf in Case 3, door plate decorations in Case 6, tea room fixtures in Case 7, and entrance area elements such as floor lamps, water dispensers, and tea cabinets in Case 5.

The scale of the space also impacts the home's emotional resonance. For instance, although renting an office, Case 1 has a spatial scale akin to residential living spaces, allowing members to perceive a homely atmosphere without disturbance. In Case 4, even with significant decorative changes and the construction of a sacred image using reflective curtains and lighting, the familiarity of the house's scale remains unaltered. This permits members to differentiate the space from the image of a traditional church edifice and associate it with a familial environment. In contrast, the space transformation of removing the wall in Case 6 and Case 7 weakened the sense of home in the space.

Moreover, the arrangement of seating and the materials employed for the floor in these converted worship spaces significantly affect the individuals' emotions during religious activities, thereby obfuscating the demarcation between quotidian and religious

experiences. In Case 2, the non-prescriptive seating arrangement and fluid movement during worship foster a relaxed and comfortable environment reminiscent of an intimate family gathering. In Case 6, despite eliminating spatial partitions and introducing a stage setup deviating from the typical image of a family home, members nevertheless highlight the wooden floor pavement, which invites them to kneel and experience the home's intimacy during prayer.

While a sense of 'home' pervades these house church sites, it is vital to acknowledge their inherent complexity. This complexity emerges from the interaction between different images portrayed by the space's furnishings. In most cases, the experience of 'home' during worship is coupled with feelings of ease and freedom, akin to everyday life. The home-like atmosphere in these situations is characterized by close relationships founded on familial affection. However, in Case 4, the influence of a sanctified backdrop wall engenders an experience of 'home' that aligns more with a stringent ethical relationship typified by familial hierarchy. In Case 8, the sense of 'home' arises more from interpersonal relationships among the church community members than from the physical space itself, partly attributable to the presence of office furniture that does not stimulate family-oriented emotions.

Despite these variations, it is clear that the reconfiguration of the atmosphere in these house churches disrupts the boundaries of the sacred. The sentiment of 'home' bridges the chasm between the disparate sacred space and the expansive world of everyday life. Rather than intruding upon the domain of the home, the sacred space is founded on the emotional bedrock of the house. The distance between individuals and God, and among individuals themselves, is further diminished in this intimate sacred field anchored in familial emotions.

4 Conclusion & Discussion

The development of Christianity in China since 1949, particularly its rapid growth following the country's reform and opening-up in 1980, is an undeniable social phenomenon. However, determining the exact number of Christians in China has been debated, with significant variations in figures reported by different agencies. For instance, in 2018 alone, estimates ranged from 38 million in official institutions to 70 million to 100 million in private and overseas institutions. This discrepancy underscores the divide between the official Three-Self churches and the underground house churches in China, as well as the marginalized position of Christianity within Chinese society.

Unlike the continuity and discontinuity experienced by Christianity in Europe today, Chinese Christianity grapples with the need for change and adaptation as it becomes integrated into Chinese society. This has given rise to a cultural phenomenon that has received less attention—the shift from explicitly Western forms and meanings to the appropriation of distinctly Chinese variants. The worship spaces of Chinese house churches serve as visible manifestations of the often precarious position of a minority religious group representing a heterogeneous culture within mainstream society. These spaces also reflect the challenge of adapting Christian ideology within non-European contexts. Specifically, in translating from a social strategy to a spatial one, this ideologically marginalized population crafts their world in resilient and resource-constrained ways.

In particular, the material means employed in creating these spaces reflect a de-formalized approach to worship places. They embody a decentralized and de-Europeanized pattern that complements a history that has often been excluded, particularly in the context of religious buildings. The worship spaces of Chinese house churches challenge the typological framework of traditional church buildings and

cannot be solely defined in terms of material or spiritual aspects. Instead, they reflect the interconnected relationship between consciousness and the material world. The creation of these sacred spaces suggests that consciousness shapes the material world while the material world, in turn, influences consciousness. They exist simultaneously as material and spiritual entities, transcending a simplistic juxtaposition of the two and embodying a spiral transcendence.

4.1 Transformation of Social Strategies to Spatial Strategies

As proposed by Lefebvre (1991, p. 419), space isn't merely a passive, vacuous entity. Instead, it's a dynamic social construct deeply influenced by sociopolitical and economic systems. Consequently, spaces aren't stagnant but can undergo unforeseen evolution and repurposing. This is especially visible in the worship spaces within Chinese house churches, where mundane environments are manipulated to transcend their customary functions. Informal church spaces trace their origins back to early Christian house churches of the Roman Empire's Dura Europos between 233 and 256 AD. However, this kind of worship setting proliferated across China post the inception of the People's Republic of China in 1949. These spaces are devoid of traditional iconic church edifices or interiors. Instead, the Christian community rents secular locations—like apartments, offices, or basements—and metamorphoses them into sacred havens for worship.

The nature of Chinese house churches reflects ideological and political intertwinement, epitomizing various doctrines while continually evolving. History sculpts these spaces, making them sensitive to political processes. The Chinese house church movement began in the late 1950s and saw significant growth in the 1980s, evolving in strategic response to the government's religious policies related to Christianity. It underscores the inherently political facet of the movement.

China's economic liberalization and reformation in the 1980s significantly transformed house churches, aligning them with the country's social modernization and urbanization trajectories. Previously, house churches were primarily rural, operating with relaxed organizational structures. However, the shift to urban areas allowed contemporary urban house churches to incorporate and expand upon rural characteristics. Despite retaining their discreet presence and close-knit community ties, urban house churches have also been institutionalized, becoming more organized with formal leadership structures and training programs. The theological focus shifted from Pentecostal practices and supernatural experiences, common in rural house churches, towards a form of Chinese Calvinism emphasizing biblical teachings. These changes have significantly influenced the establishment of worship places and religious practices within urban churches.

Indeed, the house churches in China that diverge from the state-sanctioned Three-Self churches have elected a path of discretion, withdrawing from the public sphere for more covert gatherings and activities. Functioning in a semi-underground capacity, these house church groups manage to operate through a series of smaller-scale worship services, scripture studies, and fellowship events. Their practices, including renting residential or secular buildings and leveraging virtual spaces, are strategically designed to reduce public visibility. This concern for visibility stems from the ongoing ideological tension with mainstream society, where the public's perception of Christianity plays a significant role. In the architectural context, the symbolic divergence of these church buildings from standard public structures presents challenges. The Western and private nature of these church buildings, along with their affiliations to like-minded communities outside of the mainstream ideology, make them potentially problematic to the dominant ideological and cultural representation of space. They are seen as threats to national sovereignty and subjectivity, undermining the concept of a cohesive national space and disrupting the image of a uniform national identity and homogenous national space. The visibility of these house churches

becomes a critical instrument in negotiating political discourses' impact on theological teachings and countering pressures from external communities. The religious phenomenon in these house churches thus finds itself delicately poised between visibility and invisibility - a balance that allows the expression of religious beliefs in semi-public spaces while simultaneously preserving the autonomy of religious practices.

The invisibility strategy adopted by house churches indeed serves two primary goals. First, it allows them to persist within local communities while circumventing potential censorship or intrusion from governmental entities. By choosing to operate in a semi-underground manner, these Christian groups safeguard themselves from the restrictive measures enforced by the authorities. They intentionally limit their public visibility and the size of their congregations, fostering an unspoken agreement with local government bodies. This approach cultivates a degree of trust with local governments, which exists in a gray zone between the roles and powers of local religious management agencies (agencies under the United Front Work Department of the Central Committee) and local security agencies (agencies under the Ministry of Public Security), thereby carving out a somewhat autonomous space for their religious practices. Secondly, the invisibility strategy aids house churches in mitigating unnecessary external conflicts within the cultural sphere. By operating on the edges of the public cultural space and striving to maintain a hidden presence, they protect the sanctity of their community from disruptions or hostilities. These house church groups stake their territories within secular constructions, consciously evading participation in cultural debates. The external appearance of the buildings and the ordinary spaces surrounding these sanctified territories serve as a buffer, protecting the religious heart from the broader cultural milieu and preserving the community's distinctiveness. The transition from secular to sacred spaces typically occurs within the architectural structure's inner confines, fostering a sense of identity among insiders. As a result, outsiders do not view these spaces as challenging traditional cultural or national

representations, further reducing the risk of conflict or tension. This careful navigation of public and private, sacred and secular, helps these house churches to maintain their religious practices while minimizing disruption or conflict with the broader cultural and political context.

Implementing this spatial strategy within an ambiguous legal and political context can concurrently engender instability within the territories of house churches while solidifying their self-contained domains. The house churches I studied attained a semblance of stability in their current locales for a minimum of six months, effectively mitigating confrontational scenarios and recurrent relocations. However, they are persistently susceptible to unforeseen shifts instigated by modifications in local governmental policies or the culmination of leasing agreements. Church communities have adopted an array of mobility strategies to circumnavigate potential territorial disturbances. Complementing this with mobile technologies, such as online streaming and video conferencing, to conduct worship services and other communal activities, several churches have capitalized on their organizational structures to contend with relocation challenges effectively. They have recognized the inherent limitations of traditional assembly practices and have decentralized their larger congregations into smaller, more versatile clusters. This modus operandi safeguards the integrity of the primary church entity by limiting the repercussions of relocations to individual departments. Furthermore, it expedites the pursuit of suitable relocation sites since smaller residential spaces are more accessible to lease than larger public venues. Additionally, the utilization of intricate decorations and non-dismantlable furniture is curtailed, supplanted by portable elements that are economically viable, conveniently replaceable, and promote pragmatic flexibility. Concurrent efforts are employed to lessen feelings of dislocation during relocation phases by maintaining a homogeneous pattern of furniture and decoration, thus preserving an aura of familiarity and continuity. It is imperative, however, to underscore that mobility is not the ultimate aspiration but rather a means to acclimate to inescapable relocations. This significantly impacts the

design and material choice for the space, ensuring practical flexibility while accommodating the inherently dynamic nature of house church environments.

The necessity for concealment and the inherent instability of their territorial presence have impelled house church communities to prioritize constructing robust internal networks. By fostering a culture of cooperation and mutual respect, church organizers endeavor to cultivate a profound sense of unity and interconnectedness among their members, thereby ensuring the resilience and stability of these internal networks. Concurrently, they strategically leverage pre-existing connections to extend their reach, establish new affiliations, and access crucial organizational resources. The role of church members in this context is twofold. They serve as vital internal network nodes and critical agents in the church's external outreach initiatives. Through active involvement in evangelism and gospel propagation beyond their immediate community, they catalyze the expansion of the network's structure. This dual role underscores their integral contribution to the continuity and growth of their respective house church communities.

The house churches under my study employ various strategies to forge and nurture internal networks. Firstly, they underscore the significance of spiritual empowerment, emphasizing the centrality of the Holy Word (biblical teachings and preaching services), which fosters a shared understanding among community members. This spiritual empowerment forms the bedrock of their network-building initiatives. Secondly, these congregations prioritize respect, tolerance, and open dialogue, curating an atmosphere that is supportive and inclusive and which allows individuals from diverse backgrounds to express their ideas freely. By doing so, they aim to cultivate a climate of acceptance and mutual understanding within the community. Lastly, these congregations orchestrate activities beyond the traditional Sunday worship service, such as educational sessions, shared meals, and recreational events, to foster ongoing interaction and a sense of camaraderie among members.

At the spatial level, these strategies manifest in designing and utilizing multifunctional spaces within the house churches. These spaces are imbued with a profound sense of introspection, drawing on both physical and spiritual elements of the church environment. Owing to economic constraints, house churches frequently opt to rent private residences for their gatherings. This choice facilitates the creation of an intimate atmosphere, preserves a degree of privacy and security, and establishes a circumscribed presence within the local community—all of which support the expansion of the church network. These residential church sites are typically accessible only to church insiders, providing a secure and welcoming environment shielded from external distractions and focused on internal activities. Within these spaces, the essence of the domain is not only perceived visually but is also experienced through embodied engagement. Individuals continuously manifest and refine their faith by organizing and periodically altering the configuration of the worship and activity venues, cultivating a sense of fellowship and shared identity. From this standpoint, the introverted spatial strategy privileges experiential engagement and active participation bolsters inner confidence, and makes the divine presence more palpable. While this introverted spatial approach serves as a provisional solution under the current circumstances, its significance should not be overlooked. It serves as a critical component contributing to the sustained success of house churches.

The spatial strategy adopted by Chinese urban house churches, characterized by **concealment**, **mobility**, and **introversion**, provides a robust framework for these communities to adapt and thrive within an ever-changing policy landscape. While their locations may appear precarious from a territorial perspective compared to traditional church edifices, these house churches exhibit remarkable resilience by exploiting site-specific attributes. The perceptible architectural form of these sites often assumes a secondary role, with the built environment receding into the background of the activities it houses. This phenomenon diminishes spatial presence itself, creating a supportive

backdrop that gracefully yields to the actions undertaken within these spaces. Individuals embody these environments' "comprehensive beauty[11]" through active, immersive engagement with their everyday surroundings. The physical manifestation of these places, while reduced, plays a critical role in shaping the congregants' lived experiences and spiritual journeys.

4.2 Place-making Practice through Reduced Intervention

The sanctuary-like spatial strategy utilized by contemporary house churches echoes the early Christian church practices from the first to third centuries. However, unlike their historical counterparts, today's house churches operate within an environment of advanced religious education and institutionalization. This institutionalized system predicates established patterns of teachings and rituals, thus presenting unique challenges. A critical issue for house churches today is the transposition of these institutionalized rituals into spaces not initially designed for such use. They must reconcile any conflicts or dissonances in meaning that may arise during this recontextualization process. The ultimate aim is to harness the power inherent in these spaces to facilitate and bolster their religious beliefs. This delicate task necessitates an astute understanding of the sacred rituals and the symbolic potency of spatial environments, striving to cultivate an alignment that fosters a robust and meaningful religious experience.

Urban house churches of my research, in their adoption of rural counterparts' open-mindedness, exhibit a degree of flexibility in their treatment of religious ceremonies, allowing them to adopt new worship forms. Ceremonial rituals, such as communion

---

[11] In his *The Production of Space* (1991, pp. 76-84), Lefebvre's concept of comprehensive beauty can be described as a holistic approach to beauty encompassing all aspects of the environment, including the physical, social, economic, and cultural factors. Comprehensive beauty recognizes the interconnectedness between all parts of the environment and seeks to create a harmonious balance between them. This approach is rooted in the understanding that beauty is found in the physical landscape and the social, economic, and cultural aspects of our surroundings. In this way, comprehensive beauty provides a framework for creating sustainable and livable communities.

and baptism, are abstracted into simple, commemorative forms, thus emphasizing the importance of preaching. Prayer, music, and other spiritual activities supplement this focus, orchestrating a progression from individual to collective spiritual and identity empowerment. While house churches foster more casual and intimate forms of interaction that diverge from the experiences commonly found in official religious institutions, the spatial structure continues to reflect the inherent ecclesiastical power dynamics integral to the ritual. This worship structure, centered around preaching and sermon listening, informs the spatial context. The positioning of elevated podiums, seating arrangements, and other functional furniture elements, such as distance and height, correspondingly adjust. The areas designated for the preacher and listeners converge centrally, thus redefining the spatial order. Through simple furniture rearrangements or the manipulation of light and shadow, the functional center of the space is visually emphasized, altering the spatial force field. This force field establishes a clear directional and hierarchical relationship, facilitating a simplistic gathering format that revolves around preaching. This central-directional spatial structure metaphorically reflects the power hierarchy within the space, offering the participants a streamlined, purposeful arrangement. Building upon this foundation, other ceremonial aspects, accentuated by visual cues, further reinforce these locations as sacred worship spaces. Programs like prayer sessions, hymn singing, and other activities contribute to a rich, shared spiritual experience, fostering unity and purpose among church members.

Collectively, the spatial design intertwines with the ritual program and supplemental spiritual activities to orchestrate a comprehensive and meaningful worship experience for house church congregants. The strategic spatial arrangement observed in the house churches I investigated facilitates the migration and adaptation of standardized rituals, thereby fostering a sense of individual sacrifice and religious identity among participants. This communal identity is further amplified by the dense spatial structure engendered by a higher seating density in these venues, as geographical proximity

encourages more intimate interactions. In this regard, these spaces themselves metamorphose into integral constituents of the construction material. Their scale attributes also serve as positive aspects that can enhance human perception. The residential-scale space and its dense occupancy stimulate sensory comprehension, such as sight and hearing. This sensory engagement allows individuals to readily locate each other and foster connections within visual and auditory fields.

In this context, elements of Christian decor play an essential role in establishing a spiritual ambiance within these house churches. The cross, as a definitive religious symbol, continues to convey the sanctity of these spaces. Concurrently, textual decorations related to biblical scriptures serve an educational function, subtly influencing the ideological orientation of the members. In these settings, elements such as velvet curtains, silver reflective drapes, and even the form of the pulpit have been observed to evoke traditional church imagery in participants' minds, igniting religious sentiment. In these environments, when religious order is articulated through a distinct spatial form and paired with recognizable religious symbols and text decorations, it activates a human characteristic trait and corporeal essence with unique referential and interpretive potential. This process eradicates the temporal and spatial boundaries, associating the present setting with religious imagery stored in people's memories or imaginations, thereby, to some degree, filling the visual gap of these spaces. In the broader context, employing Lefebvre's concepts of diversion and appropriation can further illuminate the relative stability and instability of religious forms across various sites. Even in constrained instances, it is apparent that places adorned with fixed, specialized religious decor contribute more significantly to collective memory formation than transient and temporary sacred spaces.

Unlike the rigid demarcation between sacred and profane territories characteristic of conventional church structures, the religious boundaries within these house church spaces appear more fluid. The building's entrance does not mark a distinct transition

265

from the secular to the sacred but rather functions as a security filter distinguishing insiders from outsiders. The walls of these venues do not operate as dividers shutting off the outside world but rather as protective barriers for those within. These physical boundaries delineate the interior and exterior realms of the congregation. While they confine the extent of the religious community's activities, they do not strictly exclude secular elements or objects. These house church spaces maintain porous and flexible religious boundaries, permitting the incorporation of mundane materials into creating sacred spaces. Commonplace furnishings, decorations, and materials – not initially intended for worship sites – are frequently observed within these domestic-scaled environments, albeit scattered and fragmented. These elements coexist alongside items crafted explicitly for religious purposes, together forging a cozy and welcoming intimate space. It is crucial to interpret these everyday facilities not as mere stand-ins or detractors from the religious experience but as pivotal points within the religious networks that meaningfully infuse the space. They facilitate connections among individuals of shared faith, engendering a sense of community and belonging. These elements allow fragments of the secular world to be incorporated into the sacred domain, thus enabling the fusion of daily personal experiences and religious emotions.

This approach dismantles the conventional dichotomy of the secular and sacred. Not only can ordinary materials assume a sacred character within these spaces, but they also inform the distinct religious sentiment of these locations. House church congregants frequently characterize the ambiance of their worship venues as homelike, harmoniously merging religious and quotidian realms, private and communal spaces, formal and casual interactions, and elements of stability and flux. However, it is crucial to recognize that the conception of home in this context diverges from notions advanced by phenomenologists such as Heidegger's 'Heimat.' Instead, it is firmly embedded within the traditional Chinese family ethic known as 'Familism.' For adherents of house churches that I investigated, 'home' extends beyond the physical domicile of an individual to encompass one's position within the intricate web of kinship

relationships deeply entrenched in Chinese family values and customs. In this setting, the notion of 'home' detaches from the confines of blood relationships and broadens to incorporate religious emotions grounded in faith-based connections within a theological framework. This interpretation of 'home' facilitates a transcendent broadening that liberates the signification of religion from its attachment to a specific locale, anchoring it instead within the sphere of community relationships.

In addition to the permanent material components, modifying and maintaining a space play a pivotal role in fostering collective memories and expectations associated with these sites. Many of these venues serve multiple functions beyond Sunday worship and may even accommodate daily activities. However, due to spatial constraints, these functions cannot be allocated distinct zones, thereby necessitating weekly adjustments to the spatial configuration. In essence, these worship sites undergo cyclical transformations. As such, the conversion from sacred functions to secular ones presents a unique challenge for these house churches: mitigating the loss of the sacred aura and preserving the spiritual essence of the space to ensure its ongoing resonance with the worshippers' emotional experiences of faith. In the face of this conundrum, house church members emerge not merely as passive recipients of spiritual education but as active agents who synthesize action and reflection. Rather than reducing the site's significance to mitigate attention towards it, they combat the potentially detrimental effects of these spatial reconfigurations through proactive and effective reconstitution efforts. The discordance between form, structure, and function within these worship spaces—along with the process of rectifying it—carries substantial implications for engendering a sense of sacrifice and facilitating particular devotional practices.

Establishing worship spaces for these communities is not a static endeavor but an ongoing dynamic process characterized by continual evolution. This process is delineated by cyclical patterns of creation and re-creation, emergence and dissolution,

as evidenced in these worship spaces' weekly construction and deconstruction. It resembles a tidal flat on the seashore, periodically surfacing and retreating with the ebb and flow of the tide, adhering to a predictable spatiotemporal rhythm. Each week, members of these house churches spontaneously participate in setting up the venues, an activity that imposes a rhythmic pattern upon both time and space. This routine generates a regular spatial order, with the setting up process transforming into an embodied religious ritual that is repeated, often unconsciously, over time. The bodies of these "church builders" adjust and align themselves with this spatial rhythm grounded in theological order, often without conscious recognition. This continual physical adaptation to religious norms infuses the practice with a sense of devotion and sacrifice. Interestingly, this repeated, seemingly ordinary act parallels the Christian tradition of contemplation. Just as contemplation entails sustained reflection and meditation, the consistent arrangement of the worship space promotes a form of physical and spiritual discipline. This is far from a passive engagement. Rather, it actively involves the participants in a practice deeply woven into their faith's fabric.

Preparing the worship space entails a regionally specific, repetitive practice of reconfiguring both the spatial layout and faith practices. Notably, the cooperation and spontaneous communication amongst the members involved in this process fosters stronger inter-individual bonds within the religious community. Thus, through collective construction, subtle physical interactions generate emotional connections among individuals. Moreover, within these traditionally regarded as secular spaces, furnishings initially not intended for worship activities are manipulated to compose a sacred environment. In this context, the arrangement process metamorphoses into an act of secular sanctification. Hence, for the congregants of house churches in my research participating in this collective construction endeavor, it is not merely a passive resistance against secular space encroachment. Instead, it is viewed as an active mechanism for sanctifying the secular. This continuous engagement in creating and re-creating worship spaces surpasses the physical and permeates the spiritual domain.

It functions as a channel for spiritual nurturing, interconnecting space, faith, and community in a distinctive, enduring ritual reflective of the resilience and adaptability intrinsic to Chinese house churches. Through these practices, not only is a physical space for worship constructed, but the spiritual edifice is continuously fortified as well. Thus, the interplay of the physical and the spiritual consolidates the sense of religious belonging, underlining the exceptional dynamism of these house churches.

In conclusion, within the house churches I investigated, architecture does not originate the essence of religious meaning; instead, it offers a framework wherein these meanings can materialize. The repurposed residential spaces that function as places of worship bridge the domains of worship and daily living. Creating opaque boundaries fosters a distinction between interior and exterior, the church and residential communities, religious rituals, and quotidian behavior. This generates a sense of curiosity from the outside world and acceptance from within. Based on this foundation, diverse meanings are visible via calculated architectural manipulations. They are organized and amalgamated in distinctive modes of spatial visibility, cultivating a holistic and balanced new perspective. This helps individuals within these spaces to navigate the intricate spatial hierarchy and discern critical information, thus recognizing their identity and orienting themselves appropriately. Ultimately, it contributes to establishing a logical, self-consistent correlation between religious beliefs and everyday emotions within the individual's spiritual sphere. However, it is worth noting that overtly intrusive architectural interventions can sometimes result in counterproductive effects, potentially leading to a loss of identity and fostering emotional uncertainty.

Though devoid of tangible architectural forms or static material structures, these house churches actively explore innovative possibilities for constructing religious spaces with limited resources. While they may lack proprietary church edifices, they are perpetually constructing churches in a metaphorical sense. This highlights the dynamic essence

of Christian worship places, wherein their significance and self-realization extend beyond exquisite spatial design, sophisticated structural edification, or a captivating ambiance. On the one hand, sacred spaces do not entirely eschew the secular; specific secular elements can contribute to place construction and stimulate religious sensibilities. On the other hand, their relevance is not confined to their physical form or ambiance. Even modest architectural interventions and ambient familiarity can empower the value of belief and incite imaginative resistance and subversion.

Moreover, a place need not be the product of a construction project, nor does it necessitate a fixed structure. Its place identity can arise from its creation process, a spatial practice that catalyzes subjective initiative. Despite their unconventional nature, these house churches' worship spaces contribute constructively to the propagation and development of Christianity in China amid societal transitions. In these worship locations, space embodies a transient and unstable process of territorialization, encapsulating a multifaceted interplay of behaviors, memories, practices, and atmospheres involving people, spatial forms, and material entities. Within this kaleidoscopic moment, the place experience is fundamentally physical and sensory: the rhythm of action, the resonance of words, the ephemeral imagery, and the immersive soundscape stimulate the body and senses. The impermanence and instability inherent to these places are critical, as they provide fresh possibilities for religious habitus, relationship formation, creative activity, and the generation of emotional and meaningful experiences.

4.3 Worship Place as Platform

Charting seemingly unfeasible courses often necessitates retrospection, scrutinizing contemporary alternatives, and discerning temporal opportunities in the present moment (Coleman, 2014, p.14). The placemaking practice of house churches proffers an innovative approach that concurs with the foundational spatial strategy of

Christianity while subtly evolving within China's extant social milieu and daily reality. The prospective trajectory of house churches remains unpredictable, subject to various influences such as shifting economic climates, national and international occurrences, and social trends, all of which could bear both positive and adverse implications.

Nevertheless, viewed through a historical lens, it seems improbable that the state's regulatory framework for the religious sector would be fundamentally relinquished, irrespective of shifts in religious policy. For the foreseeable future, Christianity will likely retain its peripheral status within China's predominant ideological and cultural landscape. Consequently, house churches will likely persist in their autonomy from central governance, contributing to ongoing discourses within the cultural sphere. This suggests the current model of worship spaces will endure for a significant duration, and studying their current functioning will establish a solid foundation for future self-rejuvenation.

Drawing from my case studies, these house churches build chapels through the self-renewal of the Christian tradition within the Chinese societal context, amalgamating European practices with Chinese house church traditions. The extant pattern of worship spaces mirrors an acknowledgment of the necessity for Christian worship, community fellowship, and sanctuaries of safety. With evolving strategies, these worship spaces have garnered acceptance and recognition within the house church community, no longer seen merely as temporary accommodations but as steadfast territories encapsulating church life and fostering a sense of belonging.

To adapt to shifting needs and preferences, house churches should persist in probing the potential of their spatial strategies, striving for continuous enhancement. Instead of perceiving the place of worship solely as an intermediary between the human and the divine, it is vital to delve deeper into its intricate relationship and unearth its affirmative potential. Adopting a systematic perspective is paramount, considering the entire

process from spatial strategy formulation to material interventions, and analyzing how different scenes within these worship spaces intersect, reinforce, and mediate various relationships. Viewing worship spaces as platforms for an array of relationships, behaviors, and associated values, the construction of a place should commence by examining and organizing these relationships and values, ultimately integrating them into the belief system. Considering the characteristics of concealment, mobility, and introversion observed in my case studies, along with the intervention and reshaping of place through minimalistic material means, the following points could serve as preliminary elements for an optimization strategy:

1）For Concealment，

- When optimizing spatial strategies for a house church group, the scale of the venue requires meticulous consideration, accounting for both external and internal dynamics. To ensure optimal outcomes, it is advised to maintain individual gathering spaces at a smaller scale, utilizing the capacity of an apartment[12] as a flexible benchmark. The distributed place mode illustrated in Case 3 can serve as a paradigm for implementation. Several advantages can be realized by partitioning a large church group into smaller congregations of approximately 30-40 individuals and allocating them to diminutive-scale sites. This method facilitates informal negotiations with local governments, aiding in securing recognition and acceptance from urban administrators. Moreover, fostering a small-scale fellowship encourages the cultivation of robust and affirming relationships among members, thereby engendering a tightly-knit community.

---

[12] According to the *China Census Yearbook-2020* data released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China, Chinese households' per capita living area will reach 41.76 square meters, and the average living area per household will reach 111.18 square meters. Based on this and combined with the cases of places of worship in this study, it is roughly estimated that the living space that can be used for worship in a general apartment is approximately 30-40 square meters, and the number of people that can be accommodated is 30-40 (Liao, 2022).

- Considerations of accessibility should be an integral part of the decision-making process for site selection, explicitly addressing the nexus between internal and external spatial systems. Unlike officially sanctioned church sites in urban public spaces, house church venues nestled within residential blocks tend to be private and discreet. Access to these venues is typically regulated by a tripartite access control system for residential areas, buildings, and apartments, each with varying security management degrees. Although access to the building and apartments is managed by church members, access control systems in residential areas are often supervised by security personnel unaffiliated with the church. Thus, access control within residential areas should be a key consideration when prospecting for residential units. A straightforward access control protocol is a critical indicator of venue accessibility, signifying its congeniality and openness.

2）For Mobility,

- Standardizing the characteristics of the worship spaces can provide a viable strategy for preserving the continuity of place memory during the relocation process. This could involve maintaining consistent religious symbols or decorations, such as reproducible textual embellishments. Additionally, the use of recognizable decorative materials or colors, like unique curtains or distinct hues that differentiate the space from everyday surroundings, could be implemented. Furthermore, adopting a uniform furniture style within practical limits, such as easily transportable folding seats with consistent styles and colors, can foster a sense of continuity and familiarity. These measures aim to retain essential elements of the worship space, even amidst location changes, thereby enabling a sense of connectedness and continuity.

- Promoting place identity through collective construction practices holds considerable potential. By consciously providing opportunities for members to contribute, whether through donations or active participation in various aspects of

the worship space, more personal emotions can infuse the venue, allowing individual memories to become a part of collective memory. On the one hand, this shared construction process serves as spatial training, enabling individual participants to continually align and adapt themselves within a framework of religious morality and order. On the other hand, the diverse yet cohesive memories shaped through collective participation in this construction process help to decouple emotional attachment from a specific location, thereby allowing it to be sustained and transferred throughout successive relocations of the worship space.

- The exploration of constructing spatial bridges between virtual and real-world worship scenes represents a promising direction. Incorporating emerging technologies, such as video streaming, audio interfaces, and digital media, can expand the spatial reach of religious events and create connections between disparate physical locations. However, introducing such technologies into the worship space necessitates thoughtful design, especially in managing the interaction between the virtual realm displayed on screens and the actual spatial sequence. This ensures that technology integration does not disrupt the hierarchical order and sanctity of the worship service.

3）**For Introversion，**

- Consideration should be accorded to the house churches' sustained and autonomous utilization rights of the site. This aspect resonates with the construction of both contingent and makeshift sacred spaces, epitomizing the dual nature of the locale. Contingent spaces allow the church group greater control over the site's temporal and spatial aspects, devoid of daily functions unrelated to church activities. This fosters the establishment of stable and recognizable location features, positively contributing to house churches' identity formation. When conditions are favorable, contingent spaces should be the preferred choice for house church groups. Although makeshift spaces often offer flexibility, they

cannot maintain consistent religious characteristics as they accommodate diverse groups with varying religious and secular needs. They may serve as temporary alternatives in exceptional circumstances.

- The place's religious education attribute warrants continued emphasis. Highlighting the centrality of the pulpit area and utilizing certain decorative elements can positively contribute to this. The pulpit should have a significant presence within the secular scene, flexibly relating to the seating area. It should visually convey the hierarchical order of the church's theological structure through spatial forms. Scripture-based decorations or those about the values of faith can be more prominently displayed in these spaces. These elements can align with the content of sermons to reinforce the foundational establishment of religious ideology under theological education.

- The religious identity of the site and its integration with the everyday environment, including the scale of the space and its contents, should be considered. Changes to the spatial scale should be cautiously approached as alterations to the original structure could interfere with recognizing spatial features. It's advisable to preserve the actual scale of everyday spaces as much as possible, considering them as materials contributing to place creation. The expression of religious identity should take into account the theological position and emotional structure of the church community, including spatial behavior, audio-visual experiences, existing furniture, decorations, and spatial layout. For instance, as observed in Case 2, a seating layout that encourages movement and communication among participants, using existing sofas, low stools, and other domestic furniture, can foster a sense of spiritual intimacy.

- The idea of the "home" and its physical manifestation within worship spaces should be examined independently. The home should be understood as a symbol

of family and intimacy, evolving into a virtual node of community relations. Associated elements should not be randomly distributed throughout the space; instead, they should be assimilated as part of the platform within the spatial system, arranged in appropriate zones in a concentrated way to form specific functions. This integration can enhance community connections and foster a more potent religious appeal.

Lastly, in revitalizing and optimizing house church worship spaces, this framework provides a foundation for discussing future considerations and conceptual ideas. However, designing platform-based worship spaces for house churches necessitates personalized consultations and planning with the church communities to pinpoint the most appropriate architectural interventions. While the prospect of house churches constructing full-scale church buildings seems unlikely, it should not be entirely dismissed. As Deibl (2020) posited, religious communities strive to actively participate in and shape public spaces through architectural design when they manifest in them via buildings. This represents an irrevocable step towards increased visibility of religion. Recognizing the value of place-making practices during periods of underground operations is crucial. Even if house churches eventually transition into constructing full-scale buildings, the thinking around platform-based places of worship, as discussed above, can still play a pivotal role in shaping the tangible manifestations of church architecture within Chinese society. This would mark another step towards integrating Christian worship within the broader social fabric, maintaining its resilience and adaptability even as it emerges more visibly in the public sphere.

4.4 Limitations and Future Research Directions

My research on Chinese house church worship places is a foundation for discussions in this field. It provides a starting point for further in-depth studies within its scope and extension.

The research primarily focuses on specific urban areas in eastern China, leaving regions such as inland China and rural settings, where house churches once flourished, largely unexplored. Furthermore, it mainly considers the prevalent Han ethnic group, thus overlooking marginalized contexts like ethnic minority areas. Future research should broaden its scope to encapsulate these regions and contexts to garner a more holistic understanding of the spatial practices of these worship places that often find themselves on the periphery of broader Chinese Christianity. Specifically, future inquiries could delve into how architectural strategies address public space concerns, cultural traditions, and the interplay of political and religious dynamics within these contexts.

My current research trajectory is honed in on the interior spaces of house churches, holding potential for further exploration into related dimensions. For instance, investigating the effects of sound, lighting, and scent on the worship experience can offer enriched perspectives on these spaces. Moreover, probing the nexus between these worship venues and community spaces, urban areas, and public systems, both internally and externally, could yield intriguing insights. Nevertheless, such research could necessitate confidentiality measures to safeguard the location of these worship venues, calling for meticulous analysis and careful dissemination of findings to ensure research feasibility.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant shifts in worship practices, including the integration of media spaces within worship venues. My research has shed light on the relationship between media and physical spaces within religious practices. However, further exploration is imperative to grasp the phenomenon entirely. For an accurate understanding, the upcoming study should dissect the evolution of media worship spaces and their interconnections with physical worship spaces. The critical examination of the merits and drawbacks of media spaces

in crafting worship environments is necessary to discern their potential to supplant physical worship spaces truly.

Finally, while all cases in my research involved venues with stable gatherings for over six months, there was an observable absence of comprehensive documentation or observation concerning venue relocation. Given the transience of these sacred spaces, I am keenly interested in comprehending how new venues are linked with their predecessors during the relocation process. Unraveling how collective memory persists, and emotions tied to a place are acknowledged and preserved is equally compelling. Subsequent research on house church worship places should meticulously examine and discuss these pivotal issues.

This study illuminates the unique operational tactics employed by Chinese house churches, enabling them to forge safe havens for religious expression despite the hurdles of policy fluctuations and cultural exclusion. Through delineating clear boundaries and infusing religious symbolism, these house churches cater to the spiritual needs of their growing community within the Chinese societal fabric. Comprehending how Christian systems can be assimilated and adapted during cultural transfers is paramount, especially considering the malleable nature of house church worship places. This research is profoundly significant for the sustainable growth of Christianity in China, providing insights into how the faith can traverse and flourish within a complex socio-political landscape. Additionally, the findings and insights gleaned from this study could facilitate the self-renewal of Christianity in Europe as it contends with its shifting cultural and societal dynamics. By dissecting the dynamics of religious spaces and the strategies adopted by house churches, this research deepens our understanding of the role of faith communities in molding and reimagining their environments, fostering dialogue at the intersection of religion, culture, and societal change.

5 Figure List

Figures

Fig. 1.1

Worship places of house churches as a spatial strategy in response to social reality

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 1.2

Epistemological basis of the house church sacred space

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 1.3

Methodological basis of the house church case study

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 1.4

Transformation strategy of conversion of secular spaces into sacred ones

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 2.1

Protestants, % of population in China from 1978 to 2018

Source: https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/09/15/protestant-christianity-is-booming-in-china

Fig. 2.2

On August 23, 1966, the Xujiahui Church in Shanghai was attacked by Red Guards, and the door was pasted with the slogan "Beat to Idealism."

Source: https://www.bannedbook.org/bnews/lishi/20190302/1089931.html

Fig. 2.3

The Three-Self Church on Mishi Street in Beijing reopened to the public in April 1979

Source: A History of Christianity in Socialist China 1949~1997 (Chao, 1997)

Fig. 2.4

Worship of a rural house church in Henan in the 1980s

Source: A History of Christianity in Socialist China 1949~1997 (Chao, 1997)

Fig. 2.5

Policy changes in China after 1949 related to the development of Christianity

Source: illustration by author based on Chao (1997) and Kang (2016)

Fig. 2.6

Changes in urban and rural population distributions in China 1979–2018

Source: illustration by author based on (Chen et al., 2021)

Fig. 2.7

Anti-Christian propaganda cartoons during the Boxer Rebellion. It depicts that when the church was spreading heresies, the Boxers believed that the church was spreading false rumors to deceive the public, but the missionaries took advantage of the opportunity to seduce women.

Source:https://exchristian.hk/forum/viewthread.php?tid=3791

Fig. 2.8

Anti-Christian propaganda cartoons during the Boxer Rebellion. This painting adopts the theme of trial, shooting and beheading "pig" (Chinese homonym for Lord) and "sheep" (Chinese homonym for foreigners).

Source:https://exchristian.hk/forum/viewthread.php?tid=3791

Fig. 2.9

The January 2019 cover of Tianfeng Magazine,

China's official Christian publication. The cover depicts the story of five loaves and two fish in Mark 6:30-44 in the form of Chinese traditional painting.
Source:
https://news.cts.com.tw/cts/international/201911/201911051980098.html

Fig. 2.10
The traditional Chinese roof of Protestant Church in Sanyuan
Source: Make Church Buildings Take Root in the Soil of Chinese Culture (Kan, 2015)

Fig. 2.11
The worship venue of a Chinese house church
Source: https://www.msa-it.org/freedomnews20200321/

Fig. 2.12
Axis-Mundi, which represents the connection between Heaven and Earth
Source: https://paradelle.wordpress.com/2021/02/06/axis-mundi/

Fig. 2.13
Kneeling pads, Saint Paul's United Methodist Church, Tallahassee, Florida
Source: Spaces of Faith: An Affective Geographical Exploration of Houses of Worship (Finlayson, 2012)

Fig. 2.14
Isometric drawing of the Christian building at Dura-Europos
Source: https://buildingcatholicculture.com/a-pilgrimage-to-the-worlds-oldest-house-church-in-connecticut/

Fig. 2.15
Reconstruction of the Christian baptistery at Dura-Europos
Source: https://savingparadise.net/files/2008-08-21-dura-europas-house-church-baptistery-.html

Fig. 2.16
Modular construction of RAD barracks
Source: http://Neuengamme-ausstellungen.info/content/lagermodell/bild168.html

Fig. 2.17
Interior of Mariae Himmelfahrt Church
Source: Neue Kircen in der Diaspora (Anders, 2014

Fig. 2.18
Window with simple stained glass depicting biblical motifs
Source: Neue Kirchen in der Diaspora (Anders, 2014)

Fig. 2.19
Wooden cup-shaped baptismal font
Source: Neue Kirchen in der Diaspora (Anders, 2014)

Fig. 2.20
Sculpture of Maria Immaculata
Source: Neue Kirchen in der Diaspora (Anders, 2014)

Fig. 2.21
Fish-factory-converted church in Schlutup
Source: Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie, Wirkung (Haus, 1999)

Fig. 2.22
Altar of the church in Schlutup
Source: Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie, Wirkung (Haus, 1999)

Fig. 2.23
House church in Travemunde
Source: Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie, Wirkung (Haus, 1999)

Fig. 2.24
Isometric drawing of house church in Travemunde
Source: Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie,

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.36
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.37
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.38
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.39
Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.40
A decorative painting with Bible verses – 2 Corinthians 12:3
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.41
Velvet curtain, reminiscent of a cathedral scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.42
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place， reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.43
The interior perspective before worship - dual image of the place created by
the bookshelf (home-like) and the conference table (classroom-like)
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.44
The interior perspective before worship – the classroom-like space

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.45
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.46
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place， reminiscent of a domestic scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.47
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place， reminiscent of an office scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.48
Plan of the place before and during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.49
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.50
Plan of the place after worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.51
Isometric drawing of the place after worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.52
Diagram of spatial power during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.53
Podium with silver cross
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.54
A decorative painting with Bible verses – 1 Corinthians 13
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.55
A decorative painting with Bible verses – Philippians 1:5
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.56
A decorative painting with Bible verses – John 10:10
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.57
A decorative painting with Bible verses – 1 Corinthians 13:13
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.58
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.59
The interior perspective after worship - place of worship converted to place of education
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.60
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.61
The interior perspective of the foyer with light yellow soundproofing material and a single table
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.62
Two silver curtains, reminiscent of a sacred scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.63
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.64
Isometric drawing of the place before worship

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.65
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.66
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.67
Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.68
A curtain with the words "peace and joy in Christ", hanging at the entrance of the bathroom, brought from the previous venue
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.69
A linen curtain, hanging between the entrance and the hall, to evoke the memory of tabernacles in the Old Testament
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.70
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place， reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.71
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.72
Perspective view of tee corner,
with home domestic furniture
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.73
Perspective view of the entrance,

with domestic furniture
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.74
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a domestic scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.75
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.76
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.77
Plan of the original apartment
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.78
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.79
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.80
Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.81
Exterior door with slogan pad on it - "Jesus is Lord of My Home"
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.82
A decorative painting with cross, love, and Immanuel
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.83
Projection screen with corss on it
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.84
Prayer corner
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.85
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place，reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.86
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.87
Slogan pad on the exterior door,
"Jesus is the Lord of My House "
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.88
Plan of original apartment
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.89
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.90
Isometric drawing of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.91
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.92
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.93
Diagram of spatial power transformation by

furnishing rearrangement during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.94
A large cross deco hanging on the wall
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.95
Decorative painting with bible verses – kindness
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.96
Decorative painting with bible verses – faithfulness
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.97
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place， reminiscent of a religious scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.98
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.99
Tee room opens to the worship hall, reminiscent of a home scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.100
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a domestic scene
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.101
Plan of the place before worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.102
Isometric drawing of the place before worship

Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.103
Plan of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.104
Isometric drawing of the place during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.105
Diagram of spatial power transformation by furnishing rearrangement during preaching service
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.106
The cross flashed across the projection screen, the only religious symbol of the place
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.107
The interior perspective during worship
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.108
The interior perspective before worship
– residential space converted work space
Source: illustration by author

Fig. 3.109
Isometric drawing of decor and furniture in the worship place, reminiscent of a working scene
Source: illustration by author

Tables

Table 2-1

Triad of Space of Henri Lefebvre

Source: summarized by author based on Lefebvre (1991)

Table 2-2

Two types of representational sacred spaces

Source: summarized by author based on Jones (2019)

Table 3-1

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

Table 3-2

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

Table 3-3

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

Table 3-4

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration y author

Table 3-5

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

Table 3-6

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

Table 3-7

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

Table 3-8

Essential information about the church

Source: illustration by author

Table 3-9

Collection of spatial information from Cases 1-4

Source: illustration by author

Table 3-10

Collection of spatial information from Cases 5-8

Source: illustration by author

6 Appendix

Appendix i Confirmation Letter of Field Research

TECHNISCHE UNIVERSITÄT DARMSTADT

Confirmation Letter

To whom it may concern,

We hereby confirm that Mr. Yi Zhang is currently working on his dissertation *The Sacred Structure in China's Informal Worship Space* at the Department of Architecture, Technical University Darmstadt, Germany.

His dissertation is self-financed, and he enjoys the full endorsement of the Chair of Experimental Construction and Design of the Technical University Darmstadt.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me directly. I will be available on phone and email in case of any query.

Kind regards,

Prof. Wolfgang Lorch

Professor
Wolfgang Lorch
Dipl.-Ing. Architekt

Entwerfen und Baugestaltung
Fachbereich Architektur

El-Lissitzky-Str. 1
64287 Darmstadt

Tel. +49 6151 16 · 22030
Fax +49 6151 16 · 22032
lorch@eub.tu-darmstadt.de

Assistenz: Silja Rübsamen, M.A.
ruebsamen@eub.tu-darmstadt.de

Datum
05.05.2021

Unser Zeichen: WL

Seite: 1/1

Appendix ii   Worship Service Program of the Churches

The author attended the Sunday worship services of the eight selected cases, all conducted in Chinese. Translations of the worship service programs are included in the appendix, ordered by case number rather than the service date.

Church Case 1

Date and time:

August 18, 2021, 9:00 – 16:00

Service Form:

On Site

Service Program:

1) Prayer of Invocation (5 min)

2) Affirmation of Faith

3) Hymn (3 pieces, 15 min)

4) Affirmation of Faith

5) Sermon (50 min)

6) Hymn (1piece, 5 min)

7) The Lord's Prayer

8) Silent Prayer (5 min)

9) Pastoral Prayer   (5 min)

Church Case 2

Date and time:

July 7, 2021, 14:00 – 16:00

Service Form:

On Site

Service Program:

1) Pastoral Prayer (5 min)

2) Hymn (4 pieces, 20 min)

3) Silent Prayer (5 min)

4) Affirmation of Faith

5) Sermon (60 min)

6) Holy Communion (15 min)

7) Prayer of Dedication   (5 min)

Church Case 3

Date and time:

September 5, 2021, 9:30 – 11:00

Service Form:

On Site

Service Program:

1) Pastoral Prayer (5 min)
2) Silent Prayer (5 min)
3) Hymn (3 pieces, 15 min)
4) Sermon (50 min)
5) Prayer of Dedication   (5 min)
6) Pastoral Prayer   (5 min)

Church Case 4

Date and time:

August 15, 2021, 09:00 – 11:00

Service Form:

On Site + Online Broadcast

Service Program:

1) Pastoral Prayer (5 min)
2) Bible Reading (5 min)
3) Hymn (3 pieces, 15min)
4) Affirmation of Faith
5) Sermon (45 min)
6) Hymn (1piece, 5 min)
7) The Lord's Prayer
8) Baptism + Testimonial (30min)
9) Pastoral Prayer   (5 min)

Church Case 5

Date and time:

August 15, 2021, 15:00 – 16:30

Service Form:

On Site

Service Program:

1) Bible Reading (5 min)
2) Pastoral Prayer   (5 min)
3) Hymn (3 pieces, 15 min)
4) Sermon (50 min)
5) Report on Church Affairs (15min)

Church Case 6

Date and time:

July 25, 2021, 08:30 – 10:00

Service Form:

On Site

Service Program:

1) Pastoral Prayer (5 min)
2) Hymn (6 pieces, 30 min)
3) Sermon (50min)
4) Pastoral Prayer (5min)

Church Case 7

Date and time:

August 22, 2021, 15:00 – 16:30

Service Form:

On Site

Service Program:

1) Pastoral Prayer   (5 min)

2) Psalms Reading (10 min)

3) Hymn (3 pieces, 15 min)

4) Sermon (50 min)

5) The Lord's Prayer

6) Silent Prayer (5 min)

7) Report on Church Affairs (10 min)

Church Case 8

Date and time:

October 10, 2021, 8:30 – 10:00

Service Form:

Watching of Online Broadcast On Site

Service Program:

1) Pastoral Prayer   (5 min)

2) Affirmation of Faith

3) Hymn (2 pieces, 10 min)

4) Bible Reading

5) Sermon (50 min)

6) The Lord's Prayer

7) Report on Church Affairs (15 min)

Appendix iii   Outline: Semi-structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted 2021 to gather information about the eight selected Chinese urban house church cases.

Interviewer: Author

Interviewee: Church leaders (pastors or full-time preachers, etc.)/church members (believers or non-believers participating in church activities) of the investigated house churches

Note: The interviews were conducted in Chinese, and the translated structure and questions of the semi-structured interviews are provided in the appendix for reference.

Part 1 Introduction

Dear Ms./Mr. X, thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed and taking the time to participate. I greatly appreciate your willingness to contribute to my Ph.D. research. This interview aims to gather valuable insights about your church's worship venue, including its location, setup, involvement, and experiences within this venue. All the information collected during this interview will be used solely for academic purposes. Your responses will be treated with the utmost confidentiality and only be used aggregated and anonymously. This semi-structured interview is designed to encourage open-ended answers, allowing you to share your thoughts and experiences in your own words. The discussion is expected to take approximately 45-60 minutes of your time.

Part 2 Main Questions

Aiming at the two groups of interviewees, the questions were put forward to understand the information about the church and the venue more comprehensively and accurately.

1) For Church Leaders:

I'm curious to know about your leadership at this church.

Background and History

- Have you been leading it for a long time?

- Did you initiate its construction or take it over from someone else?

- What inspired you to become the pastor of this church?

Pastoral Work Practice

- As a church leader, what guiding principles do you follow?

- Which factors do you consider most crucial in your leadership role?

- Could you describe the organizational structure of your church and how it functions?

- What events and activities does your church typically host, and how involved are its members?

Place-making Practice

- Can you tell me about the history of your church's activities in this location?

- What factors influenced your decision to choose this particular place?

- What was the original state of the venue, and what changes have you made to it?

- What was the reason behind these modifications?

- Have you ever considered using the space for other purposes?

- Have you encountered any challenges in using this location for church activities? If so, how have you addressed them?

2) For Church Members:

I want to inquire about your association with the church

Background and History

- Can you please share with me the duration of your membership?

- What led you to join this Church?

- For how long have you been attending services at this location?

Involvement Experiences

- Are you actively involved in any church services?

- How frequently do you participate?

- Will you be assisting with the venue preparation? Could you describe the process for me?

Emotional Experiences

- Do you enjoy attending events here, and if so, why?

- What is your perception of this building - do you consider it a church?

- Do you believe this location is a suitable place for worship?

- What is your initial impression upon walking through the doors?

- Could you describe your place of worship and what stands out most here?

- Are there any features of this venue that align with your beliefs?

- Have you taken part in any other religious activities elsewhere? What sets this place apart from others you've visited?

- Have you had the opportunity to visit a cathedral before? If so, what were some notable scenes that stood out to you? Do you think this location has any advantages or disadvantages compared to a cathedral?

Part 3 Closing Remarks

Is there anything else special you would like mention about this place?

Thank you once again for your participation. Your input will contribute significantly to the advancement of knowledge in this field. If you have any questions or concerns, please let me know.

(End)

Appendix iv   Basic Information on Interviewees

	Name	Gender	Age	Group	Years Since Joining the Church
Case 1	JW	M	40-50	Churchgoer	around 5 years
	TL_1	F	50-60	Churchgoer	around 7 years
	YTL	M	50-60	Pastor	around 14 years
	YZ	F	30-40	New Convert	around 2 years
Case 2	AR_1	F	50-60	Churchgoer	around 10 years
	BDM	M	50-60	Pastor	more than 30 years
	LPW	F	30-40	Churchgoer	around 5 years
	PL_1	M	60-70	Seeker	less than 1 year
	YFM	F	40-50	Churchgoer	around 3 years
Case 3	HYQ	M	50-60	Churchgoer	around 15 years
	LZL	M	50-60	Pastor	around 15 years
	TL_2	F	30-40	Seeker	around 2 years
	TQ_1	F	30-40	New Convert	around 2 years
	YFW	M	50-60	Churchgoer	around 10 years
	YW	M	30-40	Churchgoer	around 5 years
Case 4	AR_2	F	20-30	New Convert	around 3 years
	HH	F	20-30	Seeker	around 1 year
	JPZ	F	30-40	Churchgoer	around 5 years
	PL_2	M	50-60	Pastor	around 15 years
	TLW	F	40-50	Churchgoer	around 7 years
	WL	M	30-40	Churchgoer	around 6 years
Case 5	JR	M	20-30	Churchgoer	around 3 years
	LLW	F	20-30	Churchgoer	around 4 years
	PL_3	F	30-40	Churchgoer	around 4 years
	YPL	F	20-30	New Convert	around 3 years

	Name	Gender	Age	Group	Years Since Joining the Church
Case 6	AR$_3$	M	40-50	Churchgoer	around 15 years
	JPQ	M	50-60	Churchgoer	around 7 years
	PJ	F	70-80	Churchgoer	around 10 years
	ZLZ	F	60-70	Seeker	less than 1 year
Case 7	JJC	F	20-30	Churchgoer	around 5 years
	JL	M	40-50	New Convert	around 3 years
	JWP	M	30-40	Churchgoer	around 7 years
	LL	F	30-40	Churchgoer	around 10 years
	PW	M	50-60	Pastor	around 15 years
	TQ$_2$	F	50-60	Seeker	around 2 years
Case 8	JP	F	20-30	Churchgoer	around 5 years
	TT	F	30-40	Churchgoer	around 8 years
	TZ	F	40-50	Churchgoer	around 5 years
	YM	M	30-40	Churchgoer	around 7 years
	YTL	F	30-40	Seeker	less than 2 years

Total amount of interviewees: 40

AR = Anonymous Respondent

Churchgoer = A congregant who has undergone baptismal rites for a period exceeding one year

New Converts = A congregant who has undergone baptismal rites for a period below one year

Seeker = An individual who is exploring or interested in Christianity but has not yet committed to the faith or the church community.

7 Bibliography

A

Aikman, D. (2006). *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is transforming China and changing the global balance of power*. Regnery Publishing.

Albert, E. (2018). Christianity in China. *Council on Foreign Relations. https://www. cfr. org/backgrounder/christianity-china*.

Alexander, C. (1977). *A pattern language: towns, buildings, construction*. Oxford university press.

Anders, J. (2014). *Neue Kirchen in der Diaspora*. kassel university press GmbH.

Anttonen, V. (2002). *Identifying the generative mechanisms of religion: The issue of origin revisited.* Continuum.

B

Bachelard, G. (2014). *The poetics of space.* Penguin.

Basic Views and Policies on Religious Issues in the country's Socialist Period. (1982). Retrieved June 6, 2023 from http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/folder/290171.htm

Bays, D. H. (2011). *A new history of Christianity in China*. John Wiley & Sons.

Bedford, J. (2020). *Is There an Object Oriented Architecture?: Engaging Graham Harman*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Binte Abdullah Sani, H. (2015). Corporeal poetics of sacred space: An ethnography of Jum'ah in a chapel. *Space and Culture*, *18*(3), 298-310.

Bloomer, K. C., Moore, C. W., Yudell, R. J., & Yudell, B. (1977). *Body, memory, and architecture*. Yale University Press.

Böhme, G. (2014). Urban atmospheres: Charting new directions for architecture and urban planning. In *Architectural atmospheres* (pp. 42-59). Birkhäuser.

Boyce, P. R. (2014). *Human factors in lighting*. Crc press.

Brand, S. (1995). *How buildings learn: What happens after they're built*. Penguin.

Brenner, N., Marcuse, P., & Mayer, M. (2012). *Cities for people, not for profit: Critical urban theory and the right to the city*. Routledge.

C

Cao, N. (2010). *Constructing China's Jerusalem: Christians, power, and place in contemporary Wenzhou*. Stanford University Press.

Casey, E. S. (1993). *Getting back into place: Toward a renewed understanding of the place-world*. Indiana University Press.

Casey, E. S. (1997). *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (1 ed.). University of California Press.

Casey, E. S. (2009). *Getting Back into Place, Second Edition: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. Indiana University Press.

Chang, K.-m. (2018). New Wine in Old Bottles. Sinicisation and State Regulation of Religion in China. *China Perspectives*, *2018*(2018/1-2), 37-44.

Chao, J. C., Rosanna. (1997). *A History of Christianity in Socialist China 1949~1997 (中国基督教发展史 1949~1997)*. CMI Publisching Co , Ltd.

Che, F. (2015). *The Socio-spatial transition of Beijing, in between communal space and associative space* Dissertation, Weimar, Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, 2015.

Chen, M., Zhou, Y., Huang, X., & Ye, C. (2021). The integration of new-type urbanization and rural revitalization strategies in China: Origin, reality and future trends. *Land*, *10*(2), 207.

Cheng, J. (2020). *The Development of Religious Work in China Since the Reform and Opening Up* proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2020),

Cheng, M. M. (2003). House church movements and religious freedom in China. *China: An International Journal*, *1*(01), 16-45.

Chidester, D. (1994). The poetics and politics of sacred space: Towards a critical phenomenology of religion. In *From the Sacred to the Divine* (pp. 211-231). Springer.

Chidester, D., & Linenthal, E. T. (1995). *American sacred space*. Indiana University Press.

China, N. B. o. S. o. (2019). *China Statistical Year Book 2019*. China Statistics Press. Retrieved June 6, 2023 from http://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/ndsj/2019/indexeh.htm

Chow, A. (2014). Calvinist public theology in urban China today. *International Journal of Public Theology*, *8*(2), 158-175.

Coleman, N. (2014). *Lefebvre for architects*. Routledge.

D

Daelemans, B. (2020). Healing Space: The Synaesthetic Quality of Church Architecture. *Religions*, *11*(12), 635.

Day, C. (2002). *Spirit & place: healing our environment, healing environment*. Routledge.

Debuyst, F. (1994). The church: a dwelling place of faith. *Studia liturgica*, *24*(1), 29-44.

Deibl, J. H. (2020). Sacred Architecture and Public Space under the Conditions of a new Visibility of Religion. *Religions*, *11*(8), 379.

Deist, F. (2000). *Material culture of the bible: An introduction*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Della Dora, V. (2011). Engaging sacred space: Experiments in the field. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, *35*(2), 163-184.

Dora, V. D. (2018). Infrasecular geographies: Making, unmaking and remaking sacred space. *Progress in human geography*, *42*(1), 44-71.

Duan, Q. (2010). The effect of an imbalance of religious ecology on the development of christianity—The case study in Yugan County, Jiangxi province (宗教生态失衡对基督教发展的影响——以江西余干县的宗教调查为例). *Zhongguo minzu bao, Sol. 6*.

Duan, Q. (2012). The main events of Chinese Christianity in 2011 and the impact of urbanization on the Church (2011 年中国基督教主要事件及城市化对教会的影响). *Blue Book of Religions 2012, 64-104,* Social Science Literature Press

Durkheim, E., & Swain, J. W. (2008). *The elementary forms of the religious life*. Courier Corporation.

E

Eade, J., & Sallnow, M. J. (2000). *Contesting the sacred: The anthropology of pilgrimage*. University of Illinois Press.

Elazar, G. (2018). Out of Space. *Asian ethnology*, *77*(1/2), 121-144.

Eliade, M. (1959). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion* (Vol. 81). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Elliot, A. J., & Maier, M. A. (2014). Color psychology: Effects of perceiving color on psychological functioning in humans. *Annual review of psychology*, *65*, 95-120.

Enia, M., & Martella, F. (2023). How Buildings Relate Classifying Architectural Interactions.

Esherick, J. (1987). *The origins of the Boxer Uprising*. Univ of California Press.

F

Finlayson, C. (2017). Church-in-a-box: making space sacred in a non-traditional setting. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, *34*(3), 303-323.

Finlayson, C. C. (2012). *Spaces of faith: An affective geographical exploration of houses of worship*. [The Florida State University].

Forty, A., & Forty, A. (2000). *Words and buildings: A vocabulary of modern architecture* (Vol. 268). Thames & Hudson London.

Foucault, M., & Miskowiec, J. (1986). Of other spaces. *diacritics*, *16*(1), 22-27.

Foucault, M., & Rabinow, P. (1982). Space, knowledge, and power. *Material Culture*, 107-120.

G

Gage, M. F. (2015). Killing Simplicity: Object-oriented philosophy in architecture. *Log*(33), 95-106.

Gao, S. (2005). *Christianity and Christians in Contemporary Beijing—A Case Study of Sociology of Religion (当代北京的基督教与基督徒——宗教社会学个案研究)*. Daofeng Shushe.

Gifford, R. (2007). Environmental psychology: Principles and practice.

Global Christianity – A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population. (2011).   Retrieved June 6, 2023 from https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/

Goonewardena, K., Kipfer, S., Milgrom, R., & Schmid, C. (2008). *Space, difference, everyday life: reading Henri Lefebvre*. Routledge.

Gosling, S. D., Ko, S. J., Mannarelli, T., & Morris, M. E. (2002). A room with a cue: personality judgments based on offices and bedrooms. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *82*(3), 379.

Grafton, A. (2014). Heavenly Bodies: Cult Treasures and Spectacular Saints from the Catacombs by Paul Koudounaris. *London Review of Books*, *36*(15), 9-12.

Griffero, T. (2014). Atmospheres and lived space. *Studia Phaenomenologica*, *14*, 29-51.

H

Hackett, S. P. (2011). *The Architecture of Liturgy: Liturgical Ordering in Church Design; the Australian Experience in Perspective* [University of New South Wales].

Hall, E. T. (1966). *The hidden dimension* (Vol. 609). Anchor.

Harman, G. (2016). On behalf of form: the view from archaeology and architecture. In *Elements of Architecture* (pp. 30-46). Routledge.

Harman, G. (2017). Buildings are not processes: A disagreement with Latour and Yaneva. *Ardeth. A magazine on the power of the project*(1), 113-122.

Harvey, D. (2000). *Spaces of hope* (Vol. 7). Univ of California Press.

Harvey, D. (2012). From space to place and back again: Reflections on the condition of postmodernity. In *Mapping the futures* (pp. 17-44). Routledge.

Harvey, D. (2020). The condition of postmodernity. In *The New social theory reader* (pp. 235-242). Routledge.

Haus, F. H. (1999). *Emil Steffann (1899-1968): Werk, Theorie, Wirkung:[Universität für künstlerische und industrielle Gestaltung in Linz, 16. September bis 13. Oktober 1999, Franz Hitze Haus, Münster, 27. Oktober bis 28. November 1999]*. Schnell+ Steiner.

Hayden, D. (1997). *The power of place: Urban landscapes as public history*. MIT press.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. SCM Press. https://books.google.de/books?id=gHEIAQAAIAAJ

Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, Language, Thought.* Harper Colphon Books. https://books.google.de/books?id=EM0ZoAEACAAJ

Hierophany. (2022). Retrieved June 7, 2023 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hierophany#

History of Christianity and History of Chinese Christianity. (2005). Retrieved June 6, 2023 from https://www.gov.cn/test/2005-07/26/content_17214.htm

Holl, S., Pallasmaa, J., & Pallasmaa, A. P. (2006). *Questions of perception: phenomenology of architecture*. William K Stout Pub.

Holloway, J. (2003). Make-believe: Spiritual practice, embodiment, and sacred space. *Environment and Planning A*, *35*(11), 1961-1974.

Holloway, J. (2006). Enchanted spaces: The séance, affect, and geographies of religion. *Annals of the association of American geographers*, *96*(1), 182-187.

Holloway, J., & Valins, O. (2002). Placing religion and spirituality in geography. In: Taylor & Francis.

Huang, J. (2012). *Faith, politics and life in rural communities (乡村社区的信仰、政治与生活)*. Religion and Chinese Society Research Center.

Huang, J., & Zhai, J. (2011). The Reasoning and Politics of the Debate on Christian Population in China. *LOGOS & PNEUMA Chinese Journal of Theology*(35), 301-315.

I

International Confucian Organization Appeals: Oppose the Construction of a Christian Church in Qufu. (2011). Retrieved June 06, 2023 from https://www.rujiazg.com/article/1772

J

Janson, A., & Tigges, F. (2014). Fundamental Concepts of Architecture. In *Fundamental Concepts of Architecture*. Birkhäuser.

Jin, Z., & Qiu, Y. (2010). *ANNUAL REPORT ON CHINA'S RELIGIONS(2010).* Social Science Literature Press.

Johnstone, P., Mandryk, J., & Johnstone, R. (2001). Operation world: 21st century edition.

Jones, L. (2000). *The Hermeneutics of Sacred Architecture: Experience, Interpretation, Comparison*. Harvard University Press.

Jones, R. D. (2019). The makeshift and the contingent: Lefebvre and the production of precarious sacred space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *37*(1), 177-194.

Juergensmeyer, M. (2006). The Church, the Mosque, and global civil society. *Global civil society*, *7*, 144-158.

K

Kan, B. (2015). Make Church Buildings Take Root in the Soil of Chinese Culture (让教堂建筑扎根中国文化土壤). *Zhongguo zongjiao* (2), 16-17.

Kang, J. (2016). *House church Christianity in China: from rural preachers to city pastors*. Springer.

Kang, J. (2019). The Rise of Calvinist Christianity in Urbanising China. *Religions*, *10*(8), 481.

Kao, C.-Y. (2009). The Cultural Revolution and the emergence of Pentecostal-style Protestantism in China. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, *24*(2), 171-188.

Keane, W. (2007). *Christian moderns: freedom and fetish in the mission encounter* (Vol. 1). Univ of California Press.

Kidder, P. (2013). *Gadamer for architects*. Routledge.

Kieckhefer, R. (2008). *Theology in stone: Church architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley*. Oxford University Press.

Kilde, J. H. (2008). *Sacred power, sacred space: An introduction to Christian architecture and worship*. Oxford University Press.

Knott, K. (2005). Spatial theory and method for the study of religion. *Temenos-Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion*, *41*(2).

Knott, K. (2010). Religion, space, and place: The spatial turn in research on religion. *Religion and Society*, *1*(1), 29-43.

Knott, K. (2015). *The location of religion: A spatial analysis*. Routledge.

Koesel, K. J. (2013). The rise of a Chinese house church: The organizational weapon. *The China Quarterly*, *215*, 572-589.

Kong, L. (1990). Geography and religion: trends and prospects. *Progress in human geography*, *14*(3), 355-371.

Kong, L. (1993). Negotiating conceptions of'sacred space': a case study of religious buildings in Singapore. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 342-358.

Kong, L. (2001). Mapping 'new'geographies of religion: politics and poetics in modernity. *Progress in human geography*, *25*(2), 211-233.

Kong, L. (2002). In search of permanent homes: Singapore's house churches and the politics of space. *Urban studies*, *39*(9), 1573-1586.

Kong, L. (2010). Global shifts, theoretical shifts: Changing geographies of religion. *Progress in human geography*, *34*(6), 755-776.

Kong, L., & Woods, O. (2016). *Religion and space: Competition, conflict and violence in the contemporary world*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

L

Lambert, T. (2006). *China's Christian millions*. Monarch Oxford.

Lane, B. C. (2002). *Landscapes of the sacred: Geography and narrative in American spirituality*. JHU Press.

Langer, S. K. (1953). *Feeling and form* (Vol. 3). Routledge and Kegan Paul London.

Langmaack, G. (1949). Kirchenbau heute: Grundlagen zum Wiederaufbau und Neuschaffen.

Latour, B., & Yaneva, A. (2017). «Give me a gun and I will make all buildings move»: an aNt's view of architecture. *Ardeth. A magazine on the power of the project*(1), 103-111.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space* (Vol. 142). Oxford Blackwell.

Lévi-Strauss, C. (2013). *Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss*. Presses universitaires de France.

Li, G. (2010, 2022.03.02). *Survey on the number of Christian churches in the Mainland: the current situation of scarcity of religious supply is difficult to change (内地基督教堂数量调查：宗教供给稀缺现状暂难改观)*. Retrieved June 16, 2023 from https://news.ifeng. com/c/7fZ1mfL 6QdZ

Li, X. (2006). *Religious Activity Space" Centered on "Place"—The Changing "Religious System" in China ("场所"为中心的"宗教活动空间"——变迁中的中国"宗教制度)* Retrieved June 6, 2023 from http://www.pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID =1426

Lian, X. (2010). *Redeemed by fire: The rise of popular Christianity in modern China*. Yale University Press.

Liao, R. (2022). *41.76 Square Meters per Capita, What Level?* Retrieved June 16, 2023 from http://finance.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0810/c1004-32499201.html

Lim, F. K. (2020). New Developments in Christianity in China. In (Vol. 11, pp. 30): Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute.

Lim, S. H. (2017). Forming Christians through Musicking in China. *Religions*, *8*(4), 50.

Lionnet, F., & Shih, S.-m. (2005). *Minor transnationalism*. Duke University Press Durham, NC.

Liu, Q. (2009). A close look into an immigrant workers' church in Beijing. *Nova Religio*, *12*(4), 91-98.

Livezey, L. W. (2000). *Public religion and urban transformation: Faith in the city*. NYU Press.

Löffler, B. (2018). Acculturated otherness. Christian Churches and wedding chapels in modern Japanese Society. *Entangled Religions*, *5*, 312-346.

Lopes, M. S. (2018). *The Catholic Church in China. Resisting against all odds.* n.p. Retrieved 17.02 from https://www.southworld.net/the-catholic-church-in-china-resisting-against-all-odds/

Low, S. (2016). *Spatializing culture: The ethnography of space and place*. Taylor & Francis.

Lu, Y., & Zhang, C. (2016). A Look at the Status Quo of Christianity in Contemporary China: Based on CGSS and CFPS Survey Data. *world religions*, *1*.

M

Macarthur, J., & Stead, N. (2012). Introduction: Architecture and aesthetics. In *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory* (pp. 123-135). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Madsen, R. (2011). Signs and Wonders: Christianity and Hybrid Modernity in China. *Protosociology*, *28*, 133-152.

Madsen, R. (2021). *The sinicization of Chinese religions: from above and below*. Brill.

Makinen, J. (2014, January 21,2023). *China Demolition of Church in Wenzhou Leaves Christians Uneasy*. Los Angeles Times,. Retrieved May 5, 2014 from http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-china-church-20140506-story.html#page=1

Mandryk, J. (2021). *Global Transmission, Global Mission (病毒传播与福音传播)*. Operation World.

Manzo, L. C., & Devine-Wright, P. (2020). *Place attachment: Advances in theory, methods and applications*. Routledge.

Melhuish, N. (1962). Modern Architectural Theory and the Liturgy. *Towards a Church Architecture*, 38-64.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Routledge & Kegan Paul. https://books.google.de/books?id=pTcHAQAAIAAJ

Metcalf, B. D. (1996). *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe* (Vol. 22). Univ of California Press.

Middleton, S. (2013). *Henri Lefebvre and education: Space, history, theory*. Routledge.

Mitton, M., & Nystuen, C. (2021). *Residential interior design: A guide to planning spaces*. John Wiley & Sons.

Moran, D. (2005). *Edmund Husserl: founder of phenomenology*. Polity.

N

Norberg-Schulz, C. (1971). *Existence, space & architecture*. New York: Praeger.

Norberg-Schulz, C. (2013). The phenomenon of place. In *The urban design reader* (pp. 292-304). Routledge.

O

O'meara, S. (2007). *Space and Muslim urban life: At the limits of the labyrinth of Fez*. Routledge.

Otero-Pailos, J. (2012). Architectural Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern. *The SAGE Handbook of Architectural Theory*, 136.

Otto, R., Harvey, J. W., Otto, d., & Press, O. U. (1958). *The Idea of the Holy*. OUP USA. https://books.google.de/books?id=saTUsMrBTUEC

P

Pallasmaa, J. (2012). *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses*. John Wiley & Sons.

Pallasmaa, J. (2014). Space, place and atmosphere. Emotion and peripheral perception in architectural experience. *Lebenswelt: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience*, *4*(1), 230-245.

Parker, S. (2015). *Urban theory and the urban experience: Encountering the city*. Routledge.

Pantle, U. (2003). Leitbild Reduktion: Beiträge zum Kirchenbau in Deutschland von 1945 bis 1950.

Pérez-Gómez, A. (2016). *Attunement: Architectural meaning after the crisis of modern science*. MIT Press.

Pettegree, A. (2000). *The reformation world*. Psychology Press.

Pevsner, N., & Forsyth, M. (1963). *An outline of European architecture*. Penguin books Harmondsworth.

Poewe, K. O. (1994). *Charismatic Christianity as a global culture*. Univ of South Carolina Press.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1984). *Methodology for the human sciences: Systems of inquiry*. Suny Press.

Pollio, H. R., Henley, T. B., & Thompson, C. J. (1997). *The phenomenology of everyday life: Empirical investigations of human experience*. Cambridge University Press.

Protestant Christianity is Booming in China. (2020, 06.06.2023). Retrieved June 6, 2023 from https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/09/15/protestant-christianity-is-booming-in-china

R

Regulations on the Administration of Religions. (2017). Retrieved June 6, 2023 from https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm

Relph, E. (1976). *Place and placelessness* (Vol. 67). Pion London.

Reny, M.-E. (2018). Compliant Defiance: Informality and Survival Among Protestant House Churches in China. *Journal of Contemporary China*, *27*(111), 472-485.

Roberts, T. (2013). *Encountering religion: responsibility and criticism after secularism*. Columbia University Press.

S

Schmidt, J. (1985). *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: between phenomenology and structuralism*. Macmillan.

Schneider, C. (1995). *Das Notkirchenprogramm von Otto Bartning*. Tectum-Verlag.

Schwarz, R. (1958). *The church incarnate: the sacred function of Christian architecture*. H. Regnery Company.

Scott, R. A. (2019). *The gothic enterprise: A guide to understanding the medieval cathedral*. University of California Press.

Seamon, D. (2000). Phenomenology, place, environment, and architecture: A review of the literature. *Phenomenology Online*, *36*, 1-29.

Seamon, D. (2017). Architecture, place, and phenomenology: Lifeworlds, atmospheres, and environmental wholes. *Place and phenomenology*, 247-264.

Seamon, D. (2018). Architecture and phenomenology. In *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary Architectural History*.

Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education*

and the social sciences. Teachers college press.

Shah, R. C., & Kesan, J. P. (2007). How architecture regulates. *Journal of architectural and Planning Research*, 350-359.

Shields, R. (1999). *Lefebvre, love, and struggle: Spatial dialectics*. Psychology Press.

Smith, J. Z. (1978). *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Vol. 23). Brill Archive.

Soja, E. W. (1989). *Postmodern geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. Verso.

Soja, E. W. (1996). Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places. 1996. *DOI: http://dx. doi. org/10.2307/144284*.

Soja, E. W. (1998). Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places. *Capital & Class*, *22*(1), 137-139.

Springer, S., de Souza, M. L., & White, R. J. (2016). *The radicalization of pedagogy: Anarchism, geography, and the spirit of revolt*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Starr, C. (2016). *Chinese Theology: Text and Context*. Yale University Press.

Steffler, A. W. (2002). *Symbols of the Christian faith*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Stuart, E. (2004). Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible. *New York: Continuum*.

Stump, R. W. (2008). *The geography of religion: Faith, place, and space*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Su, X. (2018). Talking about the Sinicization of Church Architecture—Try knocking on the door of Sinicization of Church Architecture (谈教堂建筑的中国化——试敲教堂建筑中国化之门). *Tian Feng* (5), 11-12.

T

Tamney, J. B. (2008). Religious market in Chinese society. *Sociology of Religion*, *1*, 129-159.

Taylor, B. (2008). *Encyclopedia of religion and nature* (Vol. 1). Bloomsbury Publishing.

Taylor, R. (2004). *How to read a church: An illustrated guide to images, symbols and meanings in churches and cathedrals*. Random House.

Tenner, E. (2015). The design of everyday things by Donald Norman. *Technology and Culture*, *56*(3), 785-787.

The Situation of Freedom of Religious Belief in China. (2000). Retrieved June 6, 2023 from http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/1997/Document/307974/307974.htm

Thiis-Evensen, T. (1989). *Archetypes in Architecture*. Oxford University Press.

Tolia‐Kelly, D. (2004). Locating processes of identification: Studying the precipitates of re‐memory through artefacts in the British Asian home. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *29*(3), 314-329.

Tonkiss, F. (2005). *Space, the city and social theory: Social relations and urban forms*. Polity.

Tuan, Y.-f. (1978). Sacred space: Exploration of an India. *Dimensions of human geography: essays on some familiar and neglected themes*.

V

Vala, C. T. (2012). Protestant Christianity and Civil Society in Authoritarian China. The Impact of Official Churches and Unregistered "Urban Churches" on Civil Society Development in China in the 2000s. *China Perspectives*, *2012*(2012/3), 43-52.

Van Der Leeuw, G., Turner, J. E., & Penner, H. H. (1986). *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*. Princeton University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7zv4zm

Veitch, J. A., & Gifford, R. (1996). Assessing beliefs about lighting effects on health, performance, mood, and social behavior. *Environment and Behavior*, *28*(4), 446-470.

Vermander, B. (2019). Sinicizing religions, sinicizing religious studies. *Religions*, *10*(2), 137.

Von Eckartsberg, R. (1998). Introducing existential—phenomenological psychology. *Phenomenological inquiry in psychology: Existential and transpersonal dimensions*, 3-20.

W

Wang, J. (1997). The House Church Movement: A Participant's Assessment. *Word and World*, *17*, 175-182.

Wang, L. (2018). Exploration and Thinking of Sinicization of Church Architecture (教堂建筑中国化之探索与思考). *Tian Feng*(5), 13-14.

Wegner, P. E. (2002). Critical Geography, Space, Place and Textuality. *Introducing Cŕiticism at the 21st Century (Edinburgh 2002)*, 179-201.

Wenzel-Teuber, K. (2020). Statistics on Religions and Churches in the People's Republic of China—Update for the Year 2019. *Religions and Christianity in Today's China*, *10*(2), 21-41.

Wenzel-Teuber, K. (2021). „Statistik zu Religionen und Kirchen in der Volksrepublik China. Ein Update für das Jahr 2020 ". *China heute*(1), 24-36.

White Paper on China's Policies and Practices for Guaranteeing Freedom of Religious Belief. (2018). Retrieved June 6, 2023 from http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/ndhf/37884/ Document/1626520/1626520.htm

Wilford, J. (2012). Sacred subdivisions. In *Sacred Subdivisions*. New York University Press.

Woods, O. (2013). Converting houses into churches: The mobility, fission, and sacred networks of evangelical house churches in Sri Lanka. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *31*(6), 1062-1075.

Wright, B. (1962). The influence of hue, lightness, and saturation on apparent warmth and weight. *The American Journal of Psychology*, *75*(2), 232-241.

Wu, Y. (1953). The future policy and tasks of the Three-Self Reform Movement of Christianity in China—Commemorating the Third Anniversary of the Three-Self Reform Movement of Christianity (中国基督教三自革新运动今后的方针任务——纪念基督教三自革新运动三周年). *Tian Feng*(382-383), 2.

Y

Yaneva, A. (2009). Making the Social Hold: Towards an Actor-Network Theory of Design. *Design and Culture*, *1*(3), 273-288. https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2009.11643291

Yaneva, A. (2013). Actor-Network-Theory approaches to the archaeology of contemporary architecture. The Oxford handbook of the archaeology of the contemporary world, 121-134.

Yang, F. (2005). Lost in the market, saved at McDonald's: Conversion to Christianity in urban China. *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, *44*(4), 423-441.

Yang, F. (2006). The red, black, and gray markets of religion in China. *The sociological quarterly*, *47*(1), 93-122.

Yang, F. (2011). *Religion in China: Survival and revival under communist rule*. Oxford University Press.

Yang, F. (2017). From cooperation to resistance: Christian responses to intensified suppression in China today. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, *15*(1), 79-90.

Yang, L., & Dong, X. (2014). A Review of Research on the Problem of Christian "House Churches" (关于基督教 "家庭教会" 问题的研究综述). *Legal system and society*(6), 174-175.

Yang, M. M.-H. (2004). Spatial struggles: postcolonial complex, state disenchantment, and popular reappropriation of space in rural southeast China. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *63*(3), 719-755.

Yeh, A. (2022). Housing God, Losing Ground: Protestant and Catholic Chronotopic Ideologies in Urban China. *Signs and Society*, *10*(1), 78-105.

Ying, F.-t. (2018). The Politics of Cross Demolition: A Religio-Political Analysis of the "Three Rectifications and One Demolition" Campaign in Zhejiang Province. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, *5*(1), 43-75.

Yorgason, E., & Della Dora, V. (2009). Geography, religion, and emerging paradigms: Problematizing the dialogue. *Social & Cultural Geography*, *10*(6), 629-637.

Yu, J. (2012). *Where does the Chinese Christian house church go?—Dialog with member of house church (中国基督教家庭教会向何处去?——与家庭教会人士的对话).* Retrieved June 23 from http://www.pacilution.com/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=3717

Yunfeng, L., & Chunni, Z. (2016). Observations on the present situation of contemporary Chinese Christians: Based on survey data from cgss and cfps (当代中国基督教现状管窥: 基于 cgss 和 cfps 调查数据). *Shijie zongjiao wenhua*, (1), 34-46.

Z

Zhao, H., & He, X. (2012). The Identification and Construction of Lefebvre's "Spatial Triadic Dialectics" (列斐伏尔 "空间三元辩证法" 的辨识与建构). *Jilin daxue shehui kexue xuebao,* (2), 22-27.

Zheng, Y. (2017). *Sinicizing Christianity*. Brill.

Zumthor, P. (2006). Atmospheres. In *Atmosphères*. Birkhäuser.