CHAPTER 8

Sacred Dwellings: Protestant Ancestral Halls and Homes in Southern Fujian

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It was a typical Monday evening as the Christian residents of Shicuo 施厝, all of whom are relatives of a branch of the local Shi lineage, gathered in the central hall of the branch’s ancestral home. The back wall of the room displayed a painted red cross, topped by a silver crown and flanked by portraits of deceased ancestors looking down on those in attendance (see Image 8.1). Children ran in and out, scrambling among the feet of the twenty adults sipping tea and snacking on fruit around the room’s long table. The local pastor hurried into the room to lead the mid-week services as hymnals and Bibles were passed out to those in attendance. The ceremony commenced with the communal singing of hymns, followed by a sermon the pastor largely read from her cell phone. The service ended with a time of sharing and prayer, after which the family members slowly dispersed, flashlights illuminating their paths as they returned to their homes in the village. Such mid-week religious gatherings are common for Protestants in rural South Fujian, or minnan 闽南, where Christians may attend Sunday morning services at the nearest church building, as well as one (or more) mid-week meeting. What is interesting about the service here, though, is that it is lineage-based and held in the family’s ancestral home.

In the post-Mao years, China has experienced a revival of many traditional customs, and in South Fujian the building or refurbishing of ancestral halls and the repurposing of ancestral homes as focal points for family activities and religious rituals are manifestations of this resurgence of once-banned practices. This chapter, based on fieldwork and interviews throughout the region,

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1 The author is grateful to the Kay Family Foundation for providing a grant that supported much of the fieldwork for this chapter.

2 At one Monday evening service of the Shi family that I witnessed in the fall of 2014, about twenty adult members of the family attended (though only three were male), along with seven or eight children.

will detail the recent phenomenon of constructing distinctly Christian ancestral halls and homes in the coastal county of Huian in South Fujian. The analysis presented here is unique because it not only clearly shows how Christianity is being indigenized, or in this case “sinicized,” but suggests that this process is a rather natural or organic expression of a religious identity that often dates back generations. In other words, this chapter hopes to show that the construction of Christian ancestral halls and homes demonstrates the localization of Christianity in South Fujian, but also argues that this phenomenon is more reflective of a Christian heritage rather than simply a manifestation of devout belief. Overall, the portrait of Protestantism seen in the description of ancestral halls and homes found in this chapter reveals a greater diversity and versatility of Christianity in China than previously realized.

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4 This chapter focuses on Protestant families and therefore, unless noted, "Christian" will refer to Protestant. The cases presented here all come from Huian or Quangang, an area historically belonging to Huian but for the last two decades directly administered by Quanzhou City.