

**From “Congregations” to “Small Group Community Building”:
Localizing the Bahá’í Faith in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China**

David A. Palmer

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Abstract

In the second half of the 20th century, the Bahá’í faith experienced rapid growth in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Consolidating large numbers of new believers into viable communities has presented great challenges to Bahá’í institutions, including in Chinese communities. Since the late 1990's, a new pattern of discourses and practices has emerged with the aim of nurturing a sustainable pattern of Baha’i community building. One aspect of this approach has been a critique of a "congregational" religious culture which implies boundaries between believers and non-believers, leaders and laypersons, and private religiosity and community service. Instead, an approach centred on study, devotion, and action in small groups at the grassroots, is becoming the focus of Bahá’í communities. This article compares the dynamics of small group community building among Bahá’ís in Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, and the evolving relationship between small groups and Bahá’í electoral institutions characterized by practices of “religious citizenship” at the local and global levels. The study illustrates the localization of a global religion in three different Chinese socio-political contexts.

On a weekday evening in a large, second-tier city in northwest China, a group of six friends gathered in the living room of a seven-story concrete block apartment. Sitting on the brightly colored leather sofas around a tea table laden with sliced apples, oranges, peanuts, dried plums and cups of tea, they took turns reading passages aloud from a green covered book entitled "Igniting the Heart" published by the Macau Bahá’í Institute. *The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct*, stated one passage. Later, another participant read the passage, *Without truthfulness progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are impossible for any soul*. After each passage – each a short quotation from Bahá’í scripture -- the friends answered some questions in their workbooks, then began a more broad ranging discussion about the application of the passages to their lives and to society. At times

silent and thoughtful, at other moments expressing their thoughts with much animation, frequently breaking into joyful laughter, now and then expressing doubts or skepticism, their comments ranged from the ethical dilemmas of truthfulness in everyday life, handling work relationships with integrity, resolving marital disharmony, raising children, and the relationship between the lack of truthfulness and China's social problems. The host, a junior lecturer in a local university, took turns inviting the other participants, who included his wife and two other young couples, all junior lecturers in subjects such as Chinese history, English and economics, to read a passage or to share their comments, and move onto the next passage after some ten or so minutes of discussion.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the large living room and next to the balcony window, five children aged 7-9 sat at a table, drawing pictures of friends performing acts of generosity. These were the children of the three couples engaged in the study circle, as well as two other children of families living nearby. Looking over them was a twenty-year old female university student, who volunteered to teach this Bahá'í childrens' class. They had begun the session with a few short prayers memorized by the children, then discussed the quote "*That one is a man, who, verily, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race*", which she illustrated with a story from the life of `Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), one of the central figures of the Bahá'í faith. The children were perplexed about the notion of service to the entire human race, but, prompted by their teacher, they volunteered examples from their own experience, ranging from helping their parents to do family chores to helping with school clean-ups. They sang a song, then moved on to the activity of drawing acts of generosity.

The study circle and the childrens' class described in this vignette, have been the focus of Bahá'í community building around the world since the turn of the 21st century. Characterized by non-hierarchical, self-initiated, self-organized small groups engaged in study, teaching and action, they are held in tens of thousands of localities on all continents.

In this article, I explore the localization in Chinese societies of the Bahá'í faith since the early 21st century, at a time when, throughout the world, Bahá'í community life has placed an increasing emphasis on community building through small group formation. The Bahá'í faith, which appeared in Iran in the mid-19th century, is best known for its universalistic teachings on the oneness of humanity, the unity of religions, the equality of the sexes, the harmony of science and religion, and social justice. Formally

established in over 218 sovereign countries and dependent territories, it is second only to Christianity in its global reach (Britannica 2010), forming one of the most globalized communities on the planet. Among transnational religions, the Bahá'í faith is not only highly globalized in its geographic dispersion and ethnic composition, but it sees its mission as working toward the emergence of a new, global civilization based on spiritual foundations, bringing about the realization of Baha'u'llah's statement "The world is but one country, and mankind its citizens" (Warburg et al. 2005).

Sociological studies of contemporary Bahá'í communities have focused on the United States (McMullen 2000, Garlington 2005), Denmark (Warburg 2006), India (Garlington 1997, 1999) and Papua New Guinea (Were 2005, 2007). These accounts are based on fieldwork conducted between the 1970s and 1990s, and depict a specific stage in the development of the Bahá'í world, characterized by the "congregational" culture discussed below. Since the late 1990s, however, a new phase began, bringing about a profound transformation to Bahá'í communities – one which I describe here as focused on "small group community-building." None of the academic literature makes more than a passing reference to this process, which has become the dominant focus of Bahá'í institutions and communities throughout the world in the past decade. In this article, I hope to contribute to filling these gaps by discussing this trend as it can be observed in three different polities of the Chinese world – Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the mainland Peoples' Republic.¹

The dynamics of small group community building provide an angle through which we can observe how a global religion, such as the Bahá'í faith, localizes itself at the grassroots of Chinese societies. It also offers some insights on how religious communities adapt and grow in the face of objective limitations that exist in Chinese societies – not only political, as in mainland China, but also limitations of physical space, especially in Hong Kong. In this article, I argue that while these conditions have prevented the institutional development of the Bahá'í faith in mainland China, they have allowed, and to a certain degree have even facilitated, an approach to spiritual life which has been outlined by the Bahá'í institutions since the late 1990s and has become increasingly prevalent throughout the Bahá'í world. Indeed, this approach, which is increasingly referred to in Bahá'í discourse as one of "community building," encourages Bahá'ís, regardless of where they live, to focus their energies on building community through small, informal, low-key groups in the types of social spaces that are accessible

to them, in China as elsewhere: natural networks of family members, friends, neighbors and coworkers.

Data for this article was obtained primarily through participant observation, as a member of the Bahá'í community located in Hong Kong from 2004 to the present. During this period, I became involved in the types of activities described in these pages, and participated in many study and consultation sessions with local Bahá'ís, on letters and guidance from Bahá'í institutions regarding this process. I was also a member of the Bahá'í institutions, first as an elected member of a Local Spiritual Assembly from 2005 to 2007, then as an appointed volunteer community advisor (“Auxiliary Board Member”) from 2007 onwards. In the latter capacity, I periodically visited and consulted with most local Bahá'í small groups in Hong Kong, as well as with institutions at the Asian and world levels, giving me an intimate familiarity with the community in Hong Kong as well as global trends. For data on Taiwan and mainland China, I have relied more on second-hand descriptions, through conversations with Bahá'ís visiting Hong Kong, or during my own frequent visits to China, during which I met several Chinese and foreign Bahá'ís in various cities and was able, through them, to come to an understanding of conditions and dynamics there. A few times, I was able to participate in local activities in believers' homes. I personally visited several Taiwanese communities in April and October 2012.

The development of a small group community-building approach in the Bahá'í world

The trend toward a focus on small groups as the foundation of community building was the result of the challenges caused by the exponential growth undergone by the worldwide Bahá'í community in the second half of the 20th century. Between 1953 and 1985, the number of localities in which Bahá'ís resided increased by a factor of 45, from 2425 concentrated in the Middle East, Western Europe and North America, to over 111,000, dispersed in virtually every country and region on the planet (Smith 1987: 161). The number of Bahá'ís worldwide increased from a few hundred thousand, primarily residing in Iran, to around 5 million, shifting the global community's demographic centre of gravity to the peasant and tribal populations of India, Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Oceania. However, Bahá'í institutions were only able to integrate a small proportion of the masses of new converts into Bahá'í community life. Without resident clergy or experienced local Bahá'ís, and only volunteer travel teachers making occasional

visits during their free time, it proved impossible to adequately train the new believers in Bahá'í teachings and practice. By the 1990s, the rapid growth of the previous few decades had, in most areas, come to a halt.

These challenges were the subject of many deliberations and consultations in Bahá'í communities around the world and at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel. The first elements of a new approach to community growth were introduced to the Bahá'í world in messages released by the Universal House of Justice in December 1995 and April 1996 (UHJ 1995, 1996), and have been developed in subsequent messages, widely studied in the Bahá'í world. The new approach, described by the Universal House of Justice as a “change in culture” (UHJ 2000), focused on community growth through small groups of individuals engaged in study and service.

This “new culture” was often contrasted, in the words of those active in this approach, to an “old mindset” of Bahá'í communities which had been operating as “congregations”, implying boundaries between sacred and secular spaces, believers and non-believers, leaders and laypersons, and private religiosity and community service. In this “congregational” culture, the Bahá'í community could be defined as the aggregation of individuals who are formally affiliated to the Bahá'í Faith. Community activities are primarily held by and for members of the religion. There is a clear distinction between “Bahá'í” and “non- Bahá'í”. Bahá'í social teachings on the oneness of humanity and social development were accepted as a matter of faith and celebrated as a common belief, but with little systematic action to carry them out beyond personal ethical behaviour, efforts to teach the faith to non-believers, and public campaigns to promote principles of religious, racial, ethnic and international unity. “Teaching the Faith”, in such a context, typically involved promoting adherence to these principles and recruitment into this congregation of like-minded believers. In larger communities, most activities were held in the physical premises of the local Bahá'í centre of a city or town.

In contrast to most Christian congregations, however, in the Bahá'í institutional structure (the “Administrative Order”) any form of clergy is strictly forbidden and religious authority is conferred on elected bodies rather than on individual leaders. Local communities are governed by “Local Spiritual Assemblies” (LSA) elected annually by and among the local believers in any locality with nine or more resident adult believers; and these Assemblies are fully integrated into a global system of National Assemblies (NSA) elected annually by local delegates, under the ultimate authority of the supreme institution of the Bahá'í faith, the Universal House of Justice, elected every five years by

the world's NSA members and located in Haifa, Israel. At the local level, the 19-Day Feast, which includes a portion of time specifically dedicated to community deliberations, is designed to provide a channel for regular consultations between the LSA and the grassroots community. Establishing and participating in the Administrative Order is considered to be a sacred duty with special spiritual significance for Bahá'ís; this involves the practices of what I call Bahá'í "religious citizenship" -- participating in elections, accepting to serve on Assemblies when elected² or on committees when appointed by an Assembly, and even relocating to a community to prevent the "lapse" of an LSA if the local Bahá'í population drops to less than 9 believers.

The "congregational" culture thus appears as a community of believers meeting regularly at a designated place of worship (Ammerman 1997), but in which the priestly and sacramental functions of religious hierarchies are replaced by the practices of religious citizenship. However, in traditional institutionalized religions, it is the clergy which takes the lead in socializing and training the community, and "holds the ship" when the believers are busy or uncommitted. By eliminating clergy, the Bahá'í faith dispensed with traditional forms of priest-led socialization, training and continuity, while requiring, on the part of each individual believer, a higher level of participation in community leadership and administration. But without an effective, non-clerical mechanism for training and mobilizing Bahá'ís, believers often lacked the capacity to establish and sustain their nascent local communities and institutions. The desired universal participation in religious citizenship seemed to be an elusive goal. Thus in 1986, less than one fifth of the 32,854 LSAs worldwide were actively functioning (Warburg 2006: 222).

The newly emerging small group community building approach aimed to overcome this challenge by building the capacity to serve and participate at the grassroots. The change in approach was portrayed, not as a rejection of past efforts and practices, but as the beginning of a new stage in the collective learning and organic development of the Bahá'í faith. The previous phase of mass teaching had succeeded in spreading the religion to virtually all corners of the planet; now, the focus would be on nurturing community life at the grassroots, integrating training, expansion and consolidation. This was defined as an "educational process" aiming at the "twofold purpose" of "individual and collective transformation" in which participants "walk together on a path of service", simultaneously pursuing their personal spiritual development and engaging in acts of service of increasing complexity, both for the Bahá'í

community and for the broader society, in “a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development” (UHJ 2010). Although this path of service is defined as “drawing on the power of the Word” through group study of Bahá’í scripture, at no point are the participants required to convert to the Bahá’í Faith. Whether or not they identify as Bahá’ís, all participants are described as walking towards the common goal of service to humanity. Along this path, some may formally join the Bahá’í faith early on in the process, many later on, and others never. This approach consciously blurs the boundaries of religious identity and community, without eliminating them altogether. The concept of “community” in this Bahá’í discourse at times refers to the religious community per se, i.e. the declared believers in Baha’u’llah; at times to the broader “community of interest” of individuals who participate in community activities without joining the Bahá’í faith, and at times to the entire population of a village, neighbourhood or social space. The discourse on community building consciously attempts to collapse the distinctions between these three concepts, stressing that an important purpose for the existence of Bahá’í groups and communities is to serve the broader community within which they are located, ultimately extending to the entire human race. The process of community building is thus described as operating simultaneously in all three spheres of community, with the understanding that ideally, they should and are destined to become one and the same. In this approach, a Bahá’í “congregation” whose activities are primarily or exclusively held for its own members, or an outreach which attempts to “pull people out of their own communities in order to bring them into ours,” in the words of one Bahá’í, would defeat the purpose of its own existence by creating dichotomies between insiders and outsiders.

The main instrument of this process of study, service and community building is the “study circle”, a group of typically three to twelve participants who study a series of books designed by the Ruhi Institute, a Bahá’í training centre located in a town near Cali, Colombia (Ruhi Institute 1991). As described in the opening vignette to this article, study circle participants engage in discussions on scriptural passages in a semi-structured format, in which a “tutor” or “facilitator” ensures that all participants have their say and that the progress of the group keeps at a good pace, without dominating the discussion or imposing his or her views.

Each course is designed not only to impart knowledge, but also skills and attitudes; after completing one 40-hour course, the participants are ideally able and motivated to initiate one of a set of collective activities designed to strengthen the fabric

of community life. After the first book in the series, participants host small-scale, informal devotional gatherings in their homes or other spaces. In the second book, they learn to elevate social discourse by applying spiritual principles and perspectives in conversations on topics such as education, the status of women, social unrest, world peace, and dealing with diversity. The third book provides concepts and skills for becoming a teacher of a small childrens' moral and spiritual education class. As they advance in the sequence of courses, participants learn how to start a group for adolescents (aged 11-15) devoted to applying moral and spiritual principles to their own lives and to small-scale social service projects. By the seventh course, they learn to become a study circle tutor themselves.

An effective study circle, as it progresses through the sequence of courses, acquires capacities of group communication, consultation and planning, and experience in initiating and conducting regular devotional gatherings, childrens' classes, junior youth groups and study circles for older youth and adults. The participants in all these activities tend to be drawn from the study circle's natural networks of family members, friends, co-workers or neighbourhood acquaintances. Not all are self-identified Bahá'ís; they may identify as followers of other religions or of none at all – but it is the organic links between these participants and the activities, which constitutes the initial nucleus of community growth through face-to-face study, consultation, prayer and service. No special status or rank is given to study circle tutors, childrens' class teachers or so on – all are considered purely voluntary services; there is no formal leader. Besides the study materials, no equipment or objects are needed. At this small group level, there is no formal organization.

Once the capacity to nurture community life at the grassroots has taken root, the practices of religious citizenship may become more firmly established and LSAs become revitalised. Groups can also begin to focus their attention on social action to improve the material and social conditions of their community. This typically begins with simple, one-off service activities. Out of thousands of such activities of a fixed duration worldwide, a few hundred have evolved into sustained projects, some of which, as they have accumulated experience, have grown into NGOs capable of managing complex development programmes. Such organizations have emerged in South America, Africa, India and Cambodia (TTC 2011: 47-56), but the development of Bahá'í communities in the Chinese world has not yet reached such a stage.³

The approach described above is an ideal, illustrated by the Bahá'í World Centre in newsletters and reports from localities around the world, to be studied and learned from by Bahá'ís worldwide (ITC 2008). In most cases, the adoption of the approach has been a long and uneven process. While at the time of writing, the four core activities of the system – study circles, childrens' classes, junior youth groups and devotional gatherings – were in place in virtually all Bahá'í communities around the world, the self-perpetuating, self-sustaining, intensifying and mutually reinforcing community building process was only beginning to take root, in some 5000 geographic “clusters” around the world. The growth and expansion of this small-group model also implied a readjustment of the role of Bahá'í institutions and their relationships with believers, giving more space and encouragement to individual and small group initiatives. Overall, however, communities in which small-group community building became part of the Bahá'í culture, experienced a revitalisation and renewed and intensifying growth. Not only did the faith spread into new networks and social spaces, but the new vitality inspired many older, inactive Bahá'ís to become more involved in the community. Hong Kong, Taiwan and China offer excellent cases for comparing how the small group approach has developed, in three jurisdictions which share a common Chinese culture, but have different socio-political systems and Bahá'í institutional configurations.

Hong Kong

The Hong Kong Bahá'í community is a good case to illustrate the co-existence and transition between “congregational” and “small group” approaches. The Bahá'í presence in Hong Kong dates back to the 1880s when Bahá'í merchants from Iran settled in the British colony, but a permanent community came into being only after 1953 when Bahá'í families from India, Iran, the United States and Canada settled in Hong Kong, followed by the adoption of the faith by a handful of Chinese. The LSA of the Bahá'ís of Hong Kong was established in 1956 and incorporated two years later. Since 1974, Hong Kong has had its own NSA, hereafter referred to as HKSA (Hassall 1998, Datwani n.d.).⁴

During those years, the Bahá'í faith hardly penetrated into the local Chinese population. This changed dramatically between the 1970s and 1990s, after an influx of Chinese Bahá'ís from Malaysia visited or settled in Hong Kong and taught the faith by distributing flyers and approaching passers-by in the streets. These campaigns were

remarkably successful and the number of declared Bahá'ís in Hong Kong increased from around 100 in 1974 to around 2000 by the late 1980s.

The challenges mentioned earlier, of integrating and consolidating the large influx of new believers, proved to be daunting for the small handful of committed members who were at the core of the community's life. By the beginning of the 21st century, the "community" of Bahá'ís who at least occasionally attended Bahá'í activities, consisted of some 220 or so, around one tenth of the total enrolled population. Although the vast majority of the Bahá'ís were Chinese, the most active core of the community, involved in most organizational work, was almost entirely composed of non-Chinese. English remained the main language of community activities.

Whether at the Hong Kong-wide level or at the district level, activities, as well as the elected Assemblies, typically included both Chinese and Westerners. Following deeply-engrained habits and dispositions inherited from the colonial era, in such gatherings the Chinese would tend to take a quiet, more passive role, while the Westerners dominated discussions. With time, many Chinese simply didn't feel at home and drifted away.

This situation began to change after the introduction of the small group approach described above. After the courses of the Ruhi Institute were introduced in 1997, for around five or six years most of the active Bahá'ís joined study circles in which they studied the courses of the Institute. By around 2003, most of the 150 or so Bahá'ís who were willing and able to do so, had completed at least the first of the series of courses. If new study circles were to be formed, it could only be by inviting non-Bahá'ís to participate. In order to do so, Bahá'ís would need to break out of a mindset which divided the world into "Bahá'ís" and "non-Bahá'ís" and assumed that "Bahá'í" activities must necessarily be strange and difficult to accept for "non-Bahá'ís". Gradually, they learned to introduce the concept of the study circle, not as a form of deepening for Bahá'ís, but as a path of spiritual study open to all, regardless of religious background.

In one case, for example, an Iranian couple living in a New Territories village, offered a Bahá'í childrens' class for village children on Saturday mornings. This woman could not communicate well with the local villagers, few of whom speak English. However, she was assisted by some local, Cantonese-speaking Bahá'ís who, after a few months, invited the childrens' parents to form a study circle. This study circle was composed entirely of villagers and was conducted in Cantonese. After a few months, some of these parents had become Bahá'ís, and later, one of them hosted regular

devotional gatherings in her home. Later, a Chinese Bahá'í woman and her 17-year-old son from a nearby public housing estate, replaced the Iranian woman as the childrens' class teachers, using Cantonese instead of English. Through this study circle, the devotional gathering and the childrens' class, a new social space was created in which a small group of villagers and neighbourhood residents, building on their pre-existing neighbourly ties, could engage in mutual study, organize their devotional life, and provide for the moral and spiritual education of their children, all in the language, idiom, and cultural context in which they felt most comfortable.

Similar experiences were replicated with increasing frequency throughout Hong Kong. It was in these small groups that the vitality of Bahá'í life emerged. These groups, each growing out of one or two study circles and associated activities, such as devotional gatherings, childrens' classes or junior youth groups, often (though not always) took root in pre-existing social networks and spaces. By 2012, there were groups of New Territories villagers, Cantonese housewives, mainlander Chinese graduate students, local undergraduate students, Philipino and Indonesian domestic helpers, Western expatriate families on Hong Kong Island, music industry performers and professionals, neighbours in Kennedy Town and Lam Tin, and so on. The number of groups began to multiply, reviving a dynamic of growth which had stalled since the 1990s. In the four years from 2008 to 2012, the community grew by 39%, from 216 to 300 individuals. Furthermore, Chinese Bahá'ís acquired confidence and initiative in their small groups; they now play a far more active role in the Bahá'í institutions, ending the earlier reality of an expat-centred community.

This pattern also involved a shift in the use of physical spaces, away from a primary reliance on the two centrally-located Bahá'í centres, and into other spaces for activities. Finding space for activities is a major challenge for any social association in Hong Kong. In the congregational culture, it was difficult to hold activities outside Bahá'í properties except by renting banquet halls or hotel meeting rooms. Small groups, however, rarely exceed 10 participants, who can flexibly adapt to limited space. Activities are held in private homes, in the dormitory-sized flats of public housing estates, in the clubhouses of more upscale condominiums, around a table at university cafeterias, in library study rooms, in office cubicles, in community centres, on rooftops, or in village houses. Bahá'í properties continue to be used for both small group activities and Hong Kong-wide events as well.

At the time of writing, it was not yet clear how the institutions of Bahá'í local religious citizenship could articulate with this dynamic. Ambiguity has appeared in the membership of the Bahá'í community. Institutionally, the formal membership of the Bahá'í community includes all individuals who have declared their faith in Baha'u'llah. This list of Bahá'ís, classified by district, constitutes the roster of individuals who are eligible to vote, to be elected, to attend 19-Day Feasts, to donate to the Bahá'í Fund, and to go on pilgrimage. This list includes many names of individuals who have not attended activities in years, as well as long-time Bahá'ís who have a strong faith and commitments to its institutions of religious citizenship, but have not participated in the community building processes described in these pages. Individuals in both of these categories are frequently elected to the LSA. On the other hand, active participants in the small groups, have often not declared as Bahá'ís, and so are not on the list of voters. As a result, there is often a disconnect between the most local of Bahá'í institutions – the LSA – and the most local level of Bahá'í community life – the small groups. The role of LSAs remains unclear and, at the time of writing, many of them meet only a few times per year to schedule 19-Day Feasts. On the other hand, at the Hong Kong-wide level, by 2008 the delegates to the annual convention and elected members of the HKSA were almost all personally involved in small group community building, so that consultations in these institutions were more attuned to the evolving grassroots reality of Bahá'í community life.

Taiwan

The case of Taiwan in many ways parallels that of Hong Kong. When the Suleimanis, Iranian Bahá'ís who had previously lived in Shanghai, moved to Taiwan in 1954, they found ten Chinese Bahá'ís living scattered in different parts of the island, including some who had accepted the faith in mainland China and others in the United States. The first LSA was elected in 1956, and in 1970, the Bahá'í faith was officially recognized and registered as a religion (Chen 2008). By 1968, there were 488 Bahá'ís living in all parts of the island (Sims 1994). Mass teaching campaigns were held in the 1990s, through which over 20,000 Taiwanese enrolled as Bahá'ís. But as elsewhere, lack of human resources made it impossible to sustain this growth and to consolidate the new believers. By the early 2000s, the majority of those individuals never attended any Bahá'í activity. Overall, the community also found it difficult to translate the small group

approach into a new dynamic of growth. There were some notable exceptions, however, in a few cities of southern Taiwan which became models for other communities, including Hong Kong.

One Saturday afternoon in April 2012, I visited a neighbourhood devotional gathering in a modern apartment block in Kaohsiung, Taiwan. The hostess, a mother of three children, had had her first exposure to a Bahá'í study circle one year before; now she had become a tutor, started her own study circle, and hosted regular devotional gatherings at her home. This afternoon, around eight of her study circle participants came to her home. After chatting for a while in the living room, one of them requested that prayers be dedicated to the health of her ill mother. Another dedicated prayers to the Bahá'ís suffering increased persecution in Iran. Around three rounds of prayers were said, each person present taking turns to read or recite a prayer from the Bahá'í prayer book, for about 20 minutes. After a moment of meditative silence, the hostess served cold bubble tea and rice cakes, and happy chattering ensued for an hour.

Everyone then drove to the 19-Day Feast, scheduled for that evening, to be held in the rented premises of a local tutorial school. While childrens' games and activities were held in a side room, some thirty or so adults, almost all middle aged, middle class women but with a small handful of husbands present as well, sat in a circle in a large room. The atmosphere was happy, noisy and very informal, rather than solemn or strictly organized. The devotional programme began with prayers read by children standing in a line in front of the room, followed by a few adults sitting in the circle. There was then a group reading and discussion on passages from Bahá'í writings on health and healing. The consultative part of the programme began with reports by LSA members on the community's activities and finances, announcements of the upcoming LSA elections and the Taiwan National Convention, and open discussion and suggestions. A number of women shared their experience of the benefits and blessings their Bahá'í service had brought to themselves and their families, while one man suggested to diversify the activities to reach out to other segments of the population. A pot-luck of simple Chinese dishes was then served, and merry chatting, with children running around, continued until late in the evening.

This fully-fledged community building process took root in Kaohsiung around 2010. When a Bahá'í couple from Taichung moved there at that time, there were only one or two active Bahá'ís in the city. The process began after the wife of the couple

initiated conversations with neighbours about the moral education of children. Seeing that these mothers were deeply concerned about their childrens' behavioural problems and attitudes, she told them about Bahá'í childrens' classes and their focus on developing the moral qualities of children. The parents were keenly interested in enrolling the children in such a class, but the Bahá'í woman, rather than offer to teach the class herself, offered to train the parents to become teachers themselves. Indeed, she said, rather than passively expect the childrens' behaviour to improve by dropping them off once a week at the childrens' class, they were, as mothers, the primary moral educators and role models of their children, and could gain the capacity to play that role more successfully. By studying the courses of the Ruhi institute, they could gain the spiritual insights and moral concepts to have a good influence on their children, and could acquire the skills to become childrens' class teachers themselves. Two mothers were willing to try it out, but the Bahá'í woman encouraged them to invite some of their own friends as well, so that the study circle could be larger and more dynamic.

Through the study circle, the mothers found a space to discuss their concerns about children, and learned moral principles that they could apply in a constructive and productive manner with their children. They also discovered a new meaning and sense of purpose in life through their reflections on the Bahá'í writings, and enthusiastically encouraged their own friends to join this study process. But the Bahá'í woman told them that she could not tutor new study circles for so many of their friends; it would be best for them to learn how to tutor study circles themselves, so that they could form their own groups with their own friends. Thus the participants in the initial study circle started their own childrens' class and their own study circles. The childrens' classes were not only for their own children, but for the children of their friends and neighbours – on the condition that the mothers of these children also join a study circle. Thus, within two years, dozens of mothers were leading their own study circles or teaching childrens' classes, and over 130 parents, children and youth were participants in those activities. A vibrant and growing community, focused on mothers and their children, was coming into being.

In the beginning none of these mothers were Bahá'ís, nor were they “spiritual seekers” looking for or comparing religions (Warburg 2006: 321-330); and they lived in a Chinese culture in which formal enrolment in a religious organization is a highly unusual practice. The entry point for the mothers was their childrens' moral education; they began the study process with the instrumental goal of educating their own children, and

were open to the Bahá'í religious content of the study circles and childrens' classes insofar as it could help them achieve that goal. This was sufficient to generate significant initial enthusiasm, as the mothers saw the palpable results in their children, their own lives, and their relationship with their husbands. Gradually, however, as they progressed in the study, they gained a deeper awareness of the spiritual foundations of their course, and were exposed to the broader Bahá'í vision of service to humanity and contributing to building a new global civilization, beginning with their own service at the grassroots. Many adopted a Bahá'í identity.

As this community of mothers grew larger and stronger, it formally organized itself, electing an LSA in April 2011. Five of the nine elected members were new Bahá'ís active in the community building process. Besides managing the local fund and coordinating the development of the educational and devotional activities, the LSA began to organize summer camps for children and youth, and held regular 19-Day Feasts and Bahá'í holy day celebrations. In this Taiwanese city, one study circle had thus developed into dozens of study circles and childrens' classes, forming a densely connected community which acquired the capacity to elect a formal Bahá'í Assembly, part of the global Bahá'í institutions. In contrast to Hong Kong where the connection between LSAs and small groups remained unclear, here the local institution was a natural outcome of the growth of the community; an organic connection thus existed between the local community and its Bahá'í institutions.

Mainland China

The Peoples' Republic of China's administrative structure has directly and indirectly impacted on forms of religious organization. Although there is growing space for unregistered groups to exist and expand, there are clear limits on their ability to institutionalize (Palmer 2009, Goossaert and Palmer 2011). The overall picture, then, is one of highly institutionalized and bureaucratized state-sponsored religious organizations on the one hand, and myriads of more-or-less tolerated, dynamic but fluid groups and networks on the other. The latter category include Protestant "house churches" and "home gatherings," underground Catholic communities, Chinese folk religious temples, informal Buddhist lay study groups, and Bahá'í groups, among others. At the other end of this spectrum are some movements derived from Chinese traditional religion and/or

Christianity, such as Falun Gong and “Eastern Lightning”, which enjoy no toleration, are banned as “evil cults” and are the subject of active repression campaigns.

By the early 21st-century, China's State administration of religious affairs had recognized that the reality of China's religious landscape extended beyond the state-sponsored official Associations for Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam. Associations of foreign Bahá'ís, Mormons, Russian Orthodox and Jews have been established with official approval in some cities, and the State Administration of Religious Affairs has engaged in exchanges and conferences with Macau Bahá'ís, American Mormons and Taiwanese Yiguandao. Academic institutions and official think-tanks have publicly held joint conferences and collaborations with overseas organizations associated with these religions. None of this has, at the time of writing, translated into the ability of Chinese believers of any but the “big five” religions to formally register a religious association; however, these developments have generated a certain degree of legitimacy and tolerance to the above-mentioned religious groups, and have afforded them a much greater space within which to exist.

The Bahá'í Faith in the PRC regulatory environment

How does this complex regulatory and political environment impact on the dynamics of Bahá'í communities in China? The Bahá'í faith is growing rapidly in mainland China, with Chinese believers known to be living in at least 33 cities. While the Bahá'í faith, known as Datong jiao (the “Teachings of the Great Oneness”)⁵, had been established in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou during the Republican Era (1911-1949), all traces of Bahá'í activity ceased during the Mao era. In the period from 1979 to 1999, a small number of mainland Chinese became Bahá'ís, mostly in the course of overseas study or travel, or through encounters with foreign Bahá'ís living and studying in China. By the early 21st-century, however, the increase in the number of Chinese Bahá'ís began to accelerate, as the faith began to spread primarily from Chinese to other Chinese. By 2009, the number of Bahá'ís in mainland China was estimated at 20,000 (Jiang 2009) and has continued to rapidly increase since then.

This growth has been a relatively smooth process, with no incidents of tension or conflict with Chinese authorities, and no generalized dissatisfaction or resentment on the part of Bahá'ís at being unable to establish formal Bahá'í institutions. One reason for this is the principle of obedience to the law and government, central to the Bahá'í teachings.

Generally speaking, civil law trumps religious law in the Bahá'í faith. Furthermore, the Universal House of Justice, as well as Chinese Bahá'ís, have been careful not to put pressure on Chinese officials by submitting requests, applications or demands for registration which would be theoretically legal according to the constitution or recent regulations on religious affairs, but are not carried out in practice. They have also scrupulously avoided creating underground Bahá'í institutions; there are no unregistered LSAs or NSA. At the organizational level, lacking formal institutions, the Bahá'í community in China is thus in a radically different configuration from most other parts of the world, including Hong Kong and Taiwan. On the other hand, the PRC regulatory environment does not hamper small-group community building, and may even reinforce it.

Unlike elsewhere, there was no pre-existing “congregational” culture among Chinese Bahá'ís. From the 1980s till the late 1990s, there were on average a few hundred foreign Bahá'ís living in mainland China at any given time, mostly working as English teachers, business people, or other categories of “foreign expert”. Most were extremely cautious about sharing their faith to their Chinese friends or acquaintances, but through such contacts – as well as others returning from studies overseas – some Chinese did eventually come close to or embrace the faith, and by the end of the 20th century there were perhaps a few hundred Chinese Bahá'ís in mainland China. However, since there was no Bahá'í community, these Chinese Bahá'ís remained dependent on their foreign friends for their connection to the religion, a connection which could easily be broken due to the vagaries of personal friendships or changes of residence.

By the late 1990s, however, as the Ruhi institute courses were introduced to the Bahá'í world, foreign Bahá'ís moving to China included growing numbers of trained or experienced study circle tutors. Unlike in other countries, in China foreign Bahá'ís were dispersed and restricted from forming “congregations,” so they could only form small study circles with their non-Bahá'í, Chinese friends. Study circles became the main type of Bahá'í activity, and were the main entry point for Chinese becoming Bahá'ís. By around 2005, a sizable number of Chinese Bahá'ís had completed the sequence of seven Ruhi courses, and had acquired capacity in initiating their own study circles. Once this happened, a new generation of Chinese Bahá'ís appeared, who had had no contact with foreign Bahá'ís. The sociological profile of Bahá'ís changed, moving beyond the early core of English majors with frequent contact with foreigners. At this stage, the number of Bahá'ís began to grow rapidly.

Although some Bahá'ís yearned for the chance to meet their fellow believers residing in the same city, not only did the regulatory environment not allow it, but the small group approach also discouraged it, rather enjoining on Bahá'ís to focus on building ties through their own natural networks and neighbours. Thus, although by 2009 a few officials, in informal settings, had indicated that gatherings of up to 20 persons would be allowed, in fact, the home-based small group gatherings rarely surpassed 10 persons, although the number of such groups multiplied rapidly. When groups reached a certain size, they would naturally split into smaller groups, as the participants acquired the capacity to independently initiate their own study circles.

The mainland Chinese political environment, with its restrictions on large gatherings and organized associations, makes small groups a virtual necessity for any dynamic religious movement. Indeed, patterns of small group development can be observed in most religious traditions in contemporary Chinese societies, and are most salient in the case of the home Buddha halls of Yiguandao (Lu 2008, Billioud 2011, Lim 2012) and of Christian house churches (Hunter & Chan 1993, Xin 2009). It has been argued that it is the dynamic, low-key, small group network pattern which allowed Yiguandao to thrive and expand under martial law in postwar Taiwan (and in the contemporary Peoples' Republic), and for unregistered Protestant churches to experience phenomenal growth during and since the Cultural Revolution.

The Bahá'í small group pattern shares some features with those of Protestant Christianity and Yiguandao, notably a self-replicating training system which rapidly generates the human resources needed to form and multiply small groups. On the other hand, structural differences also exist between the three cases. Most salient is the absence of charismatic authority and clerical hierarchies in the Bahá'í groups. Protestant and Yiguandao small groups have formal and sometimes full-time leaders with clerical functions, such as pastors, deacons, “pillars,” “initiators” and “hall masters”, and hierarchical networks and lineages of “discipleship” between charismatic trainers and their trainees. These create lines of authority within networks of small groups, leading to the formation of criss-crossing networks of competing lineages, branches or sects. In Bahá'í small groups, on the other hand, individual hierarchies are minimized and there are no differences of status; a “study circle tutor,” for instance, is not a title but a temporary role played by a more experienced individual, and which involves providing encouragement and informal guidance, but comes with no religious, spiritual or

organizational authority. The institutions which are the only legitimate holders of religious authority in the Bahá'í faith, are absent in mainland China.

Another difference lies in the relationship between small groups and formal places of worship: while Protestant house churches often divide when they grow large, it is not uncommon for a house church to grow to one hundred or even several hundred members without dividing -- a far larger number than the dozen or so members who comprise a typical Bahá'í small group. These larger house churches may have a tendency to evolve into a full-fledged congregation, needing its own physical place of worship, leading to tensions with government authorities. The Shouwang church in Beijing, for instance, having grown from a small handful to over 1000 believers, and refusing to subdivide, entered a prolonged standoff with the police over the location of its Sunday services. On the other hand, while the number of Bahá'ís in Beijing is probably comparable to that of the Shouwang church, their small groups continue to divide before they reach 20 participants, and the question of finding a place of worship outside of Bahá'ís' private homes has never arisen. In Yiguandao, home Buddha halls require a dedicated room with an elaborate shrine and prescribed ritual acts, effectively turning the home into a temple (Lim 2011: 31) and, in Taiwan, even when Yiguandao was banned in the martial law period (1949-1987), branches vied with each other to build grandiose places of worship under the cover of temples to popular Chinese deities. Bahá'í small groups, on the other hand, require no other material props than a few prayer books and study manuals, and there is no expectation that other places of worship are required outside the home.

Finally, Bahá'í study circles appear to place far less emphasis on theology, doctrine and canonical corpus than the Protestant and Yiguandao training systems -- though firmly grounded in Bahá'í theology and scripture, the courses focus on ethics, spirituality and prayer, social issues, acts of community service, and the moral and spiritual education of children, youth and adults. The practical orientation of the courses helps to overcome potential differences of belief between Bahá'ís and those of other backgrounds, and to generate a "community" which undermines the barriers between the purely "religious" and "secular" spheres.

Around 2009, a new type of activity began among some Bahá'í groups in mainland China, called the "19-day spiritual gathering". These gatherings could be initiated by tutors who had more than one study circle at an advanced stage of progress. The participants of this tutor's study circles would meet every nineteen days, at the same

time as the “19-Day Feasts” in other parts of the Bahá’í world. Similar to Feasts, these gatherings have a three-part structure including devotions, community consultation and socializing. But while Feasts outside of China are a formal component of Bahá’í institutions, “19-Day spiritual gatherings” in mainland China are informal affairs with significant differences from Feasts. Rather than being organized by an LSA and open to all enrolled Bahá’ís within an administrative jurisdiction, they are initiated by experienced Chinese study circle tutors, who invite only their own small groups, regardless of the place of residence of its members. They take place autonomously, without formal channels of communication with other groups or overseas Bahá’í institutions. Instead of consulting on Bahá’í administrative affairs during the consultative portion, they consult on the concerns of their own small group and the wider community within which it is embedded. Consultations often revolve around the application of Bahá’í teachings to the participants’ personal, family and professional lives. Individuals share problems and challenges with their fellow believers, who explore and suggest solutions in light of the Bahá’í writings. Often, the topics of consultation are the progress of the core spiritual and community-building activities of the group members, especially their study circles and childrens’ classes. In other cases, the gathering initiates small-scale acts of community service such as street cleaning, visiting orphanages and old age homes, or sending aid to victims of natural disasters (Mahony 2010). Some 19-Day spiritual gatherings have tried to evolve toward more systematic planning and organization, but the deliberately informal, flexible, and small scale of the gatherings has not been favourable to such efforts. The overall trend has been for the gatherings to become a space for group consultation on individual actions and plans, rather than on collectively organized projects, albeit related to the application of Bahá’í teachings to life in the broader society.

On the one hand, it is clear that the 19-Day “spiritual gatherings” are laying the foundation for the future practice of Bahá’í religious citizenship through Feasts and LSAs, if and when China’s religious policy were to allow it. On the other hand, the fact that this has not been possible, has led to innovations reinforcing the gatherings’ orientation toward the concrete challenges they face in their immediate lives and communities. A member of the Universal House of Justice once mentioned that this development carried valuable lessons for the rest of the Bahá’í world, where consultations at Feasts and LSAs have tended to focus inwardly, on the affairs of the Bahá’í institutions per se. Indeed, in a letter of 28 December 2010, the Universal House

of Justice wrote that the development of LSAs required that they develop a sense of responsibility for the entire population of their locality, and be drawn further into the life of society, so that “consultation at the 19-Day Feast creates a space for the growing social consciousness of the community to find constructive expression” (UHJ 2010b).

Concluding remarks

Sociologists have observed the growing popularity of voluntary small groups at the grassroots of American society, including self-help groups, peer counseling groups, drug awareness groups, and so on, and have noted the increasing role of small groups to foster spiritual life and faith in Christian and Jewish communities (Wuthnow 1994, 1996). Although the Bahá’í small group pattern emerged in the very different context of rural Latin America, it is also becoming the core of Bahá’í community life worldwide, as the outcome of a process which has sought to nurture the spiritual life of individuals and families and to establish social foundations for the vision and practice of religious world citizenship. In the cases described in this article, small groups have facilitated the localization of the Bahá’í faith, rooting it in Chinese social spaces. In Hong Kong, the small group community-building approach has emerged and co-exists, sometimes ambiguously, with the institutions of religious citizenship and older patterns of community life. In Kaohsiung, Taiwan, a newly formed small group has multiplied, growing into a full-fledged community with its own elected LSA, organically integrated into the Taiwanese and international Bahá’í institutions. In mainland China, in the absence of religious institutions, Bahá’í life is *entirely* focused on small groups, and growth occurs through the horizontal multiplication and division of small groups.

In this context, mainland Chinese Bahá’ís are prevented from participation in the practices and processes of Bahá’í religious citizenship. Small groups are built around natural affinities and common backgrounds; this facilitates intimacy and the natural integration of Bahá’í small groups and wider social spaces and networks. Through involvement in Bahá’í institutions, on the other hand, individuals are required to consult, plan, and work together with people of vastly different backgrounds, who otherwise never interact as equals in conventional social settings. In Hong Kong, for instance, the nine members of the HKSA include people of Chinese, Indian, Philipino, and American ethnic backgrounds, and cover a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds from petty entrepreneur to housewife and high ranking civil servant. Through the International

Bahá'í Convention held every five years in which the HKSA joins all the other NSAs of the world in electing the Universal House of Justice and deliberating on the world affairs and plans of the faith, this religious citizenship acquires a truly global dimension. Numerous other interactions between international, national and local Bahá'í institutions and local Bahá'í communities, connect individual believers to this process. At the same time, it is through these institutions that religious authority is exercised in the Bahá'í faith. The practice of religious citizenship is the crucible through which the Bahá'í ideal of “unity in diversity” is forged and tested; it is one of the most challenging aspects of Bahá'í community life but also one of the most significant to the very existence of the Bahá'í religion.

In this article, I described how global expansion from the 1960s to 1990s led to a crisis in the Bahá'í faith, as newly formed communities often lacked the capacity to practice Bahá'í religious citizenship, to sustain themselves and to further expand. In response to this challenge, the Bahá'í world began to shift its efforts toward grassroots training and community building, moving away from a “congregational” culture and focusing on the development and multiplication of small groups in natural social spaces. I then considered the articulation between Bahá'í small group community building and religious citizenship in three Chinese polities. While the latter cannot be practiced in mainland China, Bahá'í communities based on small groups continue to develop, in different socio-political contexts, in all three Chinese societies.

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¹ For basic historical sketches on Chinese Bahá'í history until the 1980s, see Seow 1991 on East Asia, Cai 2006: 563-679 on China, Sims 1991 on Macau, Sims 1994 and Chen 2008 on Taiwan, Hassall 1998 and Datwani n.d. on Hong Kong.

² There are no nominations or campaigning in Bahá'í elections; all adult Bahá'ís in the jurisdiction are automatically candidates. During elections, Bahá'ís write nine names of their choice on a secret ballot. It is not unusual for individuals to be elected who did not expect to, or who are not even interested in serving on administrative bodies.

³ There are NGOs in China founded and operated by Bahá'ís, but they operate as purely secular entities, separate from the community building processes described here.

⁴ From 1974 to 1989, Macau was under the jurisdiction of the NSA of the Bahá'ís of Hong Kong. It became "independent", with its own "national"- level spiritual assembly, in 1989.

⁵ *Datong* refers to an ideal of world unity, derived from a passage in the Confucian *Book of Rites*. The term *Datong jiao* continued to be used in Taiwan until the early 1990s, when the Chinese name was standardized, based on pronunciation, as *Babayi*.