



#Failures: Failure is a Feeling

written by Gareth Breen
September, 2020



We were sat upstairs in a favourite hot-pot restaurant in old Taipei, nestled in between a deep red temple and a scooter repair shop, behind a metro station. Between mouthfuls I was trying to conduct an informal interview with Brother Huang, Sister Xie and their fourteen-year old daughter Mei-lin. They are members of a global, fundamentalist church-group, founded by Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972) and Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905-1997), which rejects the hierarchy and denominationalism of Western 'Christianity', as they understand it (Breen 2019). They refer to themselves simply as 'the church' [zhaohui] - a neologism in Chinese). I asked the family what it is that makes 'the



church' special to them. Brother Huang replied that life in 'the church' is "simple" and "predictable". Sister Xie picked up the train of thought and took it along more Biblical lines.

"Jesus washed the feet of his disciples," she said, "in the same way, when we come to the meetings, we wash each other. We are not here to compare, 'my daughter is so beautiful etc.', we just share [fenxiang]". "How do you get dirty?" I asked. Sister Xie chuckled. "It's not sinful," her husband interjected. "It's not about sin," she continued, "but about contact with worldly things, like going on the metro". Mei-lin finally offered her answer, which I felt summed up what her parents were trying to get at very well. "It is just this feeling [ganjue]", she said, "when you see others going to make offerings to temple gods [qu baibai], it doesn't have this feeling". Although Mei-lin and I do not value the difference between Taiwan's temples and 'the church' in the same way, on some level I knew exactly what she meant.

"Jesus washed the feet of his disciples," she said, "in the same way, when we come to the meetings, we wash each other. We are not here to compare, 'my daughter is so beautiful etc.', we just share [fenxiang]".

I want to suggest that failure is constitutive of this distinct 'feeling', perhaps a meta-feeling, which makes 'the church' what it is for many members. We will see, however, that such feelings of failure are not always easy to attain. They occur on the thresholds between 'the church' and the world beyond it. By following the slipperiness of feeling failure in 'the church', this post seeks to help feel for a notion of failure (as feeling) which would be useable beyond my fieldsite in Taipei. In the introduction to *The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Do Wrong*, Carroll et al. sketch out 'a theory of failure'. They state clearly what failure is and is not, and differentiate sharply between failure as an analytic device and as an experience. "[F]ailure' occurs", they write, "when the subject's process of inscribing themselves in the world – that is, the process of objectification – is interrupted or aborted". That is, 'failure' describes that moral moment "when



objectification ceases to adhere” (2017: 26). Without undoing the theoretical work done here, this post aims to remind us that failure can be a productive even if elusive feeling, one that is not always easy to feel, but which can mark the threshold between the inside and outside of a regime of living, such as ‘the church’ in Taiwan. In losing the feel for failure I want to suggest, be we anthropologists or their interlocutors, we risk losing sight of the social worlds it leads into and out of. Failure can be the experience of dropping out of one world and into another.

For him, Jesus wasn't necessarily always the best option. ... (For this reason, he was known to be much better in fact at bringing in potential new members. He was more relatable to a non-Christian and could understand better their position of non-belief.)

Church members reiterated the idea that feelings of (being a) failure outside of the church enriched one's experience within it. I was on a bus with Sister Yan and her husband, brother Yang. We were returning to Taipei after going to visit brother Yang's ancestral home [lao jia] in a nearby township. Unlike her husband, sister Yan does not hesitate to say what she feels. She likes to switch between praising and teasing me. Right now, as we race past fluffy, dark green mountains obscured by dusty-looking boxy buildings along the highway, she is in laudatory mode. She soon switches from me to her sons. “They are too lazy”, she says. Neither had attended very prestigious universities, she sighs. The younger one is “not very clever”, she tells me, “but loves Jesus very much”. The older one is “clever but loves Jesus much less”. As the conversation lulls, we ring the younger one, living in the UK, and tell him all about the tasty treats we'd tried that day and about the dilapidated state of his ancestral home. The older one lives in Taipei. A while later I went to stay with him for a week.

Feeling failure was to feel God.

Older brother Yang understood things differently from other church members.



For him, Jesus wasn't necessarily always the best option. For some problems, the temple gods, or Buddha were likely to be more useful. "Yiguan dao ['Way of Unity']", a popular Taiwanese sect, "are smart", he once whispered to me mischievously. "They worship the Buddha, Muhammed and Jesus." He admitted that for a long time he hadn't felt the same connection to Jesus as his brother had. (For this reason, he was known to be much better in fact at bringing in potential new members. He was more relatable to a non-Christian and could understand better their position of non-belief.) However, he told me of a series of events which had started to change this for him. He had spent some time at graduate school in the US. He told me that he had struggled terribly beforehand with the 'Graduate Record Examinations' (GRE) entrance test, required for admission.

'Always rejoice!' [changchang xile] is a familiar greeting and is uttered as a church equivalent to 'cheeeese!' whenever a photo is taken together.

He felt he was sure to fail. In the end, praying hard before the exam, he scored the lowest possible pass score. He saw this as a message from God. Although God wanted to help, brother Yang told me, He also wanted brother Yang to know that without God, he would surely be a total failure. The low score, for brother Yang, pointed towards a spiritual dependence that he hadn't previously been aware of. The revelation, for brother Yang, was not that God answers your prayers for worldly success (this, he said, was the approach of 'Chinese traditional religion'), but the extent to which we are failures without God. The more we realise how failed we are, brother Yang said, the more we experience the glory of God. What others may have perceived as a success (passing the GRE), brother Yang experienced as a revelation of the extent of his own "failedness" [shibai]. The contours of his failure were also the contours of God's glory. Feeling failure was to feel God.

Church meetings, members say, are all about 'enjoyment' [xiangshou]. 'Always rejoice!' [changchang xile] is a familiar greeting and is uttered as a church equivalent to 'cheeeese!' whenever a photo is taken together. The enjoyment of



‘the church’ is understood to consist in a transition from ‘the mind’ [xinsi] to ‘the spirit’ [ling]. This transition consists partly in the feeling of failure brother Yang spoke of. As sister Xie noted above, ‘sharing’ is a big part of life in ‘the church’. Brother Yang’s words in fact fit a familiar pattern that sharing takes. Sharings would often begin with some mishap in the speaker’s life, often framed explicitly as a failure on their part, before going on to show how the failure had led them to ‘return’ [huidao] to Christ, making their experience of ‘the church’ and its ministry all the richer.

In private, many church members admit that, at times, they lose the ‘enjoyment’ [xiangshou] of, and their ‘feeling’ [ganjue] for, ‘the church’. Given that the late Nee and Lee are the sole authors of ‘the ministry’ [shizhi] the church abides by, things can get rather repetitive. After a decade or so in the church, most aspects of the ministry have become familiar. For the church to become ‘living’ [huode], ‘organic’ [shengji], ‘spontaneous’ [zifa], ‘new’ [xin], ‘fresh’ [xinxian] to them, it is necessary to relive ‘entering into’ [jinru] the ‘churchlife’ [zhaouhui shenghuo], ‘the spirit’ [ling], ‘the Body (of Christ)’ [shenti] again and again. A key aspect of this experiential newness is the feeling of ‘failure’ [shibai] (in ‘the world’) being turned to ‘victory’ [desheng] (in the church). Feelings of failure cause one to (re-)turn to the church anew.

In private, many church members admit that, at times, they lose the ‘enjoyment’ [xiangshou] of, and their ‘feeling’ [ganjue] for, ‘the church’.

It is not always necessary that the failure be directly one’s own of course. Through ‘sharing’, one ideally experiences others’ failures (in the world), and (re)turning to the church, vicariously. We can understand that the distinctive feeling of the church Mei-lin described above is composed, in part, by these feelings of ‘failure’ turned to ‘victory’ shared amongst the group. As sister Xie noted, sharing is not about comparing successes. Rather it is about cleansing each other of feelings of failure, feelings that one must feel in the first place, to get a sense of being ‘washed’ [xijing]. Older brother Yang explained to me a key



difference between the church and the temple religions, in which the majority of Taiwanese religionists engage. When the latter prayed, he said, they expected the gods to take care of everything. In the church however, it was acknowledged that God takes over only at that point where our own capacities are expended. “We must try at first”, he said, and “where we fail, God will take over”.

At times church members became mildly exasperated with me for failing to fail, for failing to feel their failures. We were on a long trip around Taiwan following a church conference held at Taipei arena, where there were over thirty-thousand church members. From the TV there blared out a church documentary on repeat, about the life of Howard Hagashi, a beloved church hymn-writer from Hawaii, with Japanese-Buddhist ancestry. I was on a coach full of non-Taiwanese members, at the back, sitting with Jerome, from South Africa, who had a remarkable life-story, a story that would have been familiar to many students of Christian communities. He had a scar across his face from an encounter with a knife as a gang member. He had owned and run a brothel and spent a good deal of time in prison. He was divorced. As the hours of our engrossing conversation ran on, the depths of his failures, as he saw them retrospectively, grew ever more extensive.

We were interrupted by our arrival at a tour stop. We were at an insect farm and were given a little talk alongside our tour around the farm. Afterwards I was perusing the museum section, peering into a glass case containing a miniature model of an ant colony. Jerome came up to me. “So, what do you think?” he asked. “Pretty amazing, right? If God can change me, he can change anyone.” I admitted that his life-story was amazing and that it was a remarkable change he had undergone. My answers weren’t satisfying to him, however. He was clearly annoyed that his story hadn’t been strong enough to transform me too. As fascinated as I was, our conversation hadn’t changed me, hadn’t made me want to join the church. I wanted to please him but couldn’t emulate the feelings he wanted from me. He left me, I felt, disappointed.

At times church members became mildly exasperated with me for failing to fail,



for failing to feel their failures.

Wandering outside, I went to sit with a church elder who was enjoying a free cup of coffee included in the tour. I told him that I felt I had disappointed Jerome in not being transformed by his story, in the way that he had expected me to be. The elder looked at me and confessed that for him Jerome's story was "not normal". Most church members had not had dramatic lives like Jerome. In fact, he thought that Jerome's experience could be detrimental. Our failures are not meant to make us more attached to our own life story, he suggested, they are supposed to turn us away from ourselves toward 'the church', 'God's plan', the 'brothers and sisters'. It seemed that the feelings of failure, which leveraged members' renewed enjoyments of 'the church', weren't just any kind of failure. There was a right way to fail. Both I and Jerome, for this church brother, were failing to fail. Failure comes in many forms; it lies in many places and it is not always there when you need it.

References

Breen, G.P., (2019). Attuning to 'the oneness' in 'the church in Taiwan': an historical ethnography (Doctoral dissertation, The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)).

Carroll, T.; Jeevendrampillai, D.; Parkhurst, A.; Shackelford, J., (eds.), (2017). The material culture of failure: When things do wrong, Bloomsbury Publishing.

Featured [image](#) by [S. Hermann & F. Richter](#) (Courtesy of [Pixabay](#)).