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Forms of Conviviality: A Historical Comparison of Modern Multifaith Spaces and Pu-Jing Culture (铺境文化) in Quanzhou, China

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Abstract

In a multi-cultural world, problems of living together are often focused on how different faiths accommodate each other. One the basis that we can take lessons from how inter-religious relations were handled in the past, I compare modern Multifaith Spaces (MFS) and the religiously diverse Pu-Jing culture (铺境文化) in Quanzhou, China. I will try to avoid anachronistic application of modern terms to historic situations, and vice versa by treating both as context-specific responses to the same problem of managing religious diversity. I found that they were similar insofar as there was a perceived need for 'conviviality', produced through negotiations. In both cases this accommodation was encouraged by top-down legislation and regulation leading to faith activities to be de-privatised. They differed in that there was some syncretic religious art in Pu-Jing culture as well as a lively urban space shared by several faiths. Nothing like this is found in MFS, in which sharing is a matter of time-sharing which allows religions to avoid each other, at a cost of a bland shared small-scale space. I found both cases resulted in a similar spatial solution: standardised spaces are furnished, perhaps temporarily, with elements reflecting the personal beliefs of the users.

Keywords: conviviality; forms of conviviality; multifaith spaces; Pu-Jing culture in China; multifaith cities

1. Introduction

Traditionally, religious affairs have been understood as a matter of church–state relations at the national level. The framework is no longer adequate when religious minorities become visible in urban public spaces requiring authorities to confront the practical challenges of managing such multi-religious spaces and coexistence within multi-religious communities (Burchardt and Giorda 2021). Scholars have thus shifted their focus from how an individual religion interacts with secular institutions, to something more dynamic. How urban policies can manage multifaith societies and promote coexistence has become a central concern in the fields of the sociology of religion, urban studies, and public policy[1]. This raises my core question: As cities become vessels of religious diversity, and in the pursuit of coexistence, what form should multifaith urban landscapes and multi-religious public spaces take?

From my perspective, there are two forces converge in the context of a multifaith city: On the one hand, 'top-down', there are the considerations of those who design the spaces, such as the state, urban elites, city administrators, and institutional managers; on the other hand, 'bottom-up', there are the diverse needs of spatial users, such as the 'us'

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and 'them' within multifaith communities. Unlike the places where political institutions and the social elite hold their discussions, the culturally vibrant spaces of multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities are where urban cultural development is determined and shaped, as Kuppinger (2013) notes. On the one hand, the elites maintain their cultural hegemony by asserting their urban vision; on the other hand, communities are equally engaged in shaping their own future. These two positions constitute the core tension of the multifaith urban landscape.

I have observed that Multifaith Spaces (MFS) show the interplay of an established public order and diverse religious traditions. In Western countries, MFS are found in secular settings such as airports, hospitals and schools, with the aim of providing convenient spaces for prayer for people of different faiths (Crompton 2013). The origins of MFS lie in secular organisations responding to a globalised workforce and clientele (Crompton and Hewson 2016; Biddington 2021, pp. 119–28)[2]. However, in the practical experience and development of MFS, it has been reshaped to a greater extent by individuals and religious communities (Kilde 2024). On the one hand, MFS embodies the social elite's vision of standardised spatial management, seeking to promote orderly interfaith coexistence and public order through spatial management. On the other hand, it also faces tensions arising from the differing religious traditions of its users, which manifest as informal interfaith dialogue and competition at the individual or community level.

An early case of multi-religious city management can be found in Quanzhou, China, known as Pu-Jing culture (铺境文化). The establishment of the Pu-Jing system was motivated by the need, during the Ming Dynasty (late 14th century), to transform a multi-religious city—which had served as a major maritime trading port between the 10th and 14th centuries—into a cohesive military stronghold (Wang 1995, p. 33). 'Pu 铺' and 'Jing 境' were the terms used for administrative divisions within the urban space of Quanzhou at that time, with 'Pu' being a higher-level spatial administrative unit than 'Jing', similar to modern urban subdistrict and streets (Wang et al. 2019). At that time, many different faith communities coexisted in Quanzhou, sharing the same urban environment. Each faith community possessed its own distinct sacred spaces and objects of worship, but due to the constraints of physical space, different faiths encountered one another in public space. In an effort to govern Quanzhou, a city of diverse faiths, the city's administrators at the time attempted to interpret the relationships between different faiths through Confucian and Daoist thought, thereby forming a unified cosmology (Wang 2021, p. 246). However, in practice, Pu-Jing tends to manifest itself more as a form of multi-religious community that develops from the bottom up. These include religious competition between individuals, neighbours and communities; the negotiation of allocations for the use of public spaces during rituals; and daily interactions and mutual trust.

Nevertheless, current research on MFS has focused almost exclusively on contemporary Western contexts, primarily concerning design and user experience within secular institutions such as airports, hospitals and universities. Academic research on Pu-Jing culture in Quanzhou, by contrast, has consistently been grounded in historical and regional contexts, focusing on imperial governance in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties (from the mid-14th century to the early 20th century), community rituals and indigenous religions. However, the differences between them in terms of time, geography and disciplinary frameworks obscure a potentially illuminating structural comparison, which is their shared example of how urban authorities and multi-religious communities negotiate coexistence through spatial means. However, the differences between them in terms of time, geography and disciplinary frameworks obscure a potentially illuminating comparison, which is their shared example of how urban authorities and multi-religious communities negotiate coexistence through spatial means. This research facilitates a dialogue

between the two through the concept of 'conviviality', and its main contribution lies at the conceptual level. The study demonstrates that, despite fundamental differences in political and religious order between MFS and Pu-Jing, a recurring spatial solution has emerged.

As I hope to show, there are surprising parallels between contemporary MFS practices and historic multi-religious communities in Quanzhou, in terms of religious architectural art and the management of interfaith spaces. In both cases, urban landscapes are shaped by the tensions between the governing intentions of urban elites, and the dichotomy of 'us' and 'others' at the community level. I term this configuration as 'The Forms of Conviviality'. The term 'conviviality' is borrowed from Bieler et al. (2025); it is not only used as a descriptive term, but also is a modern heuristic for describing how different religious communities coexist. I use it as a way of describing as a practical matter how groups live together, and as a practical analytical tool for researching how groups actually coexist. Thus, overlooking obvious differences between MFS and Pu-Jing they are both ideal solutions designed by urban elites that during actual practice, undergo redefinition, reconstruction and reinvention. The original design concept is partially retained as a framework for spatial order, but this structure is adapted to the faith-based needs of the users, resulting in an overlap of the spatial nature and functions. Furthermore, multifaith communities negotiate to establish mechanisms for allocating the use of space over time. This gives rise to a spatial form characterised by multiple demands. I term this finding: forms of conviviality, filling the standard spatial framework created by designers with elements of the users' personal faiths.

2. Literature Review

To describe the results of the relationship between interfaith groups and municipal authorities today, I will use the concepts of 'deprivatisation' and 'domestication governance'. Griera and Nagel use 'deprivatisation' to describe how modern religions, driven by migration, rights claims, globalisation, move from the private to public domain, while using 'domestication governance' to illustrate how government authorities respond to issues of religious pluralism. Griera and Nagel (2018) argue that this has led to deprivatisation, meaning that religious communities are no longer silent presences in the private domain, but are actively asserting their rights and seeking visibility in the public space. From this perspective, urban policy towards Muslim groups seeking permits for mosque construction or Buddhist communities applying for festival parade approvals should be viewed as a response to the legitimate demands of religious communities. On the other hand, the 'domesticate governance' perspective places urban religious policy within the context of urban management and the securitisation of public order. Under this lens, interfaith initiatives and the management of interfaith spaces are utilised by the state as governance techniques to 'domesticate' religion. Particularly, the monitoring and disciplining of religious communities perceived as 'Others' are employed to alleviate tensions in inter-religious relations and foster an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence.

Contemporary inter-religious initiatives in Europe are being incorporated into the policy toolkit for the governance of religious diversity (Duemmler and Nagel 2013; Griera and Nagel 2018). The concept of 'governance of religious diversity' emphasises a multi-level, multi-actor coordination mechanism that transcends the singular authority of the nation-state. Within this framework, municipal authorities, religious communities, civil society organisations and interfaith initiative networks jointly participate in the regulation and management of religious diversity. The core of this paradigm lies in the fact that religions are no longer merely an object of management, but are increasingly becoming active participants within the governance network. Furthermore, within the model of multi-religious cities, two interpretative frameworks exist: 'deprivatisation' originating

from religious communities; and 'domestication governance' enacted by urban authorities. Whilst the former emphasises the agency of religious groups and their claims to the right of public participation, the latter reveals how inter-religious initiatives may be utilised by state power as governance technologies in the multi-religious city.

This is not to say that people in old Quanzhou thought in those terms or that how they dealt with multiple faiths is a precursor to modern pluralism. 'Deprivatisation' and 'domestication governance' presuppose a modern distinction between private and public spheres, which did not apply in Pu-Jing culture. In ancient China, imperial authority took precedence over all religions (Ye 2018, pp. 15–8). As the representative of imperial authority, the state religion—sometimes Confucianism or Buddhism—provided a justification for the existence of other religions and regulated them. Ritual, governance, cosmology, and public order were deeply intertwined and the state actively managed and categorised religious groups. From the perspective of political and religious structures, ancient China inevitably differed from contemporary democratic societies. In other words, in ancient China, all social institutions—including religious organisations—were monitored with the aim of consolidating imperial power. In contrast, in modern democratic societies, the 'governance of religious diversity' serves the purposes of public safety and the mitigation of religious conflict.

However, if we consider solely the structure of urban governance—particularly the relationship between urban elites (managers) and multifaith communities (the managed people)—ancient China is no different from modern society. 'Deprivatisation' and 'domestication governance' correspond to the negotiation of religious visibility within public and state-regulated frameworks. In other words, in a multifaith city, two requirements coexist: the urban order devised by the city's elites to ensure urban unity and security; and the desire of multifaith communities to have places that cater to their religious lives and to preserve their distinct religious identities. Moreover, urban space is not a neutral physical entity; it is often an extension of the will to power (Massey 1994). The city serves as a tool for those in positions of authority to address social realities and shape an ideal order. Similarly, the management, planning and design of urban space are often the material manifestation of the will to govern society. Therefore, in this research, I regard urban elites as the 'designers' of the space, and multifaith communities as the 'users' of the space. Furthermore, I will look at whether the drive to accommodate different faiths was top down or bottom up. This is a structure that is more readily transferable between historic periods. Top-down pressures included the promotion of state or imperial governance and mainstream ideologies or cultural hegemony; bottom-up pressures were trade networks, local coexistence, intermarriage, shared urban spaces and so on. All these have modern analogues. By focusing on forms of coexistence, we can avoid projecting modern ideals like 'tolerance' backward, and let each period illuminate the other.

In my case studies, I will apply Andrea Bieler's concept of 'conviviality' (Bieler 2025a, 2025b). Conviviality is a modern analytical tool for describing how different religious groups achieve coexistence. And conviviality is a dynamic, embodied social practice. It refers to the way in which people, within asymmetrical, asynchronous and diverse relationships (particularly in contexts where significant differences exist, such as in religion, ethnicity and language), create a fragile, temporary and unstable 'withness' through concrete negotiation rather than presupposing harmony or consensus. Conviviality does not seek fixed identities or durable community belonging, but focuses on how even fleeting, localised sensations of togetherness arise in everyday interactions—such as emotional resonance during rituals, brief encounters between strangers, or multilingual communal prayer. This practice encompasses both formal rituals and institutional cooperation, as well as informal daily improvisation and emotional exchange. It does not pursue the elim-

ination of differences, but rather emphasises sensitivity to difference—treating differences as conditions that must be navigated for coexistence, rather than as barriers.

For Bieler, conviviality is not a permanent achievement, but a process. Thus, I treat conviviality as a something enacted and observed, rather than as underlying disposition or explanatory principle. The advantage of applying this tool lies in its ability to explain, from a practical standpoint and without presupposing any ideal of harmonious coexistence, how groups coexist within a governance context of religious diversity, as well as how this process influences and shapes the urban landscape. As preconceived concepts include views on history, politics and religion, the application of the analytical tool of 'conviviality' also avoids the anachronistic imposition of modern concepts onto historical contexts.

3. Research Methods

This study focuses on the research question: As cities become vessels of religious diversity, and in the pursuit of coexistence, what form should multifaith urban landscapes and multi-religious public spaces take? To answer this question, I examined two strikingly contrasting case studies: contemporary MFS within Western secular institutions, and the Pu-Jing culture of Quanzhou, China. The MFS case reveals how contemporary Western secular institutions manage diverse religious needs and services through spatial neutrality and time-sharing arrangements; the Pu-Jing case, meanwhile, demonstrates how the imperial order of China during the Ming and Qing dynasties managed religious diversity in the urban environment through grid-based segregation and administrative categorisation. Although there are fundamental differences between the two, do these two models produce similar spatial solutions when faced with same challenges of the tensions between the urban elites and multi-religious communities, and managing the coexistence of multiple religions?

In his book The Idea of History, Collingwood (1986, pp. 217–28) says that a historian should not ask what happened, rather they should enquire why did such and such action make sense at the time? This complicates historical comparison; we might misinterpret the purpose of historic events unless we grasp how concepts such as nature and the sacred were understood in the past. In the case of Pu-Jing culture, however, we are helped by the stability of Confucian thought and the enduring interest of the State in peace and political stability. Thus, we can measure Pu-Jing against MFS using pragmatic criteria, in this case by asking how each system encourages—or fails to encourage—conviviality.

Therefore, this study adopts an interpretative and comparative research design. Its aim is not to test hypotheses, but rather to reveal the structural patterns through which urban authorities and multi-religious communities negotiate coexistence via spatial strategies within two distinct historical, religious and political contexts. This comparison is not based on direct historical influence or continuity between Pu-Jing and MFS, but rather on a shared fundamental issue concerning how to manage religious diversity within limited urban space. Moreover, to ensure the comparability of the two cases, each is analysed using the same dual-force framework—the top-down intentions of designers and the bottom-up practices of users—as a constant. As the study applies the theory of 'conviviality' as an analytical tool, it allows differences in specific religious–political orders and the zeitgeist of each era. Finally, the respective findings are comparatively analysed to identify recurring patterns in spatial negotiation.

With regard to data selection, the MFS case studies featured in this paper are drawn from Andrew Crompton's database, which contains over 350 MFS examples from around the world, supplemented by my own field research in the UK and Hong Kong[3]. The selection criteria included: (1) geographical distribution across different countries and regions; (2) diversity of venues such as airports, hospitals and universities; (3) differences in design

style, positive and negative types. Whilst the cases presented in this paper are representative of a broader range of MFS types, I do not claim that they are statistically representative. Rather, they are illustrative examples that reveal recurring scenarios in the spatial negotiation process between users and designers. Data relating to Pu-Jing is primarily drawn from two editions of the Quanzhou Prefecture Gazetteer (泉州府志), 1573 and 1763, and supplemented by my fieldwork at religious sites in Quanzhou between 2022 and 2023[4]. In particular, primary historical sources provide official administrative records and the regulatory basis for the Pu-Jing system; secondary interpretations of historical sources, notably the research of scholar Mingming Wang, offer an interpretative framework for understanding community reactions in Quanzhou, ritual practices and the social dynamics of interfaith negotiation (such as community resistance, ritual competition and the transformation of official spaces into religious sites).

In terms of data collection, this research employed a non-interventional observation approach. I conducted field visits to these sacred spaces and documented them, but did not carry out interviews or questionnaire surveys, nor did I implement any interventions that might alter the users' spatial practices. The choice of a non-interventional research method enabled me to observe the material traces left by the negotiations between users and designers. These traces are manifested within the built environment itself, including the arrangement of furniture, the presence or absence of religious symbols, the modifications made by users within standardised spaces, and the spatial overlaps between different faith traditions. And these material traces demonstrate how users appropriate, reinterpret or challenge the spatial orders established by designers. Furthermore, the advantage of a non-interventional approach lies in its ability to effectively conduct the 'conviviality' analytical tool, whilst avoiding the subjective and preconceived data obtained through interviews. Its limitation, however, is the inability to capture users' subjective intentions and feelings of experience, as well as the designers' motivations for construction. To address this limitation, I will draw upon the existing literature and historical research (e.g., Biddington 2021; Wang 1995, 2021) to interpret the observed material patterns within their specific contexts.

4. The Designers' Vision

Quanzhou Pu-Jing culture achieved control by containing diverse religious communities within defined urban areas. In contrast, modern multifaith spaces that are inside secular institutions such as airports, hospitals and schools seek to create a neutral container transcending specific religious traditions. These two models are the product of distinct power structures of the 'imperial order' and 'contemporary secular institutions'. The similarity between them lies in the fact that both attempted to address the social anxieties arising from religious pluralism through managing a boundary within which sacred activity is confined.

4.1. Pu-Jing: A Grid of Segregation Under Imperial Order

The establishment of the Quanzhou Pu-Jing system was a direct projection of the imperial will onto the local landscape in the early Ming period. Pu-Jing system originated from the military garrisons and civil militia organisations of the late 14th century, its initial purpose being to counter the threat of Japanese pirates along the coast and to consolidate internal imperial security (Wang 1995, p. 33). The administrative intent is manifested in two aspects: Firstly, security and grid-based organisation. The authorities divided Quanzhou City into four tiers of tightly structured administrative geographical units—from highest to lowest: 'Yu (隅), Tu (图), Pu (铺), and Jing (境)'—forming a grid-based management system covering the entire city (Quanzhou Prefectural Gazetteer 1573, 1763). The core of this

segregation strategy lay in fixing the mobile and religiously diverse Quanzhou, a free commercial port during the Song and Yuan periods (10th–early 14th centuries), into clear, monitorable geographical units, facilitating the achievement of unified urban cohesion, public security patrols, household registration, and information gathering.

The second aspect concerns symbolisation and centralisation. The authorities' administrative ambitions extended beyond mere geographical control to the pursuit of legitimacy in a cosmological sense. From the 15th to the 19th centuries, Neo-Confucianism served as the official orthodox doctrine underpinning religious beliefs and ritual practices. The governing authorities of the time applied Neo-Confucianism to the administration of Pu-Jing (Wang 2021, p. 245). Furthermore, in accordance with the principles of Feng-Shui, the number of Pu-Jing was meticulously designed as 'four Yu, sixteen Tu, thirty-six Pu, and seventy-two Jing (Figure 1)'[5] to align with traditional cosmological symbolism, invoking spatial harmony and peace (Quanzhou Prefectural Gazetteer 1573, 1763). Meanwhile, the authorities reshaped the urban landscape by rebuilding the city walls and establishing official institutions such as the prefectural office and temples as the sole centre of the city, thereby diminishing the religious pluralism that had characterised Quanzhou as a free commercial port during the 10th–14th centuries. This series of measures was intended to embed the empire's centripetal authority within the local, multi-religious social environment on both administrative and symbolic levels.

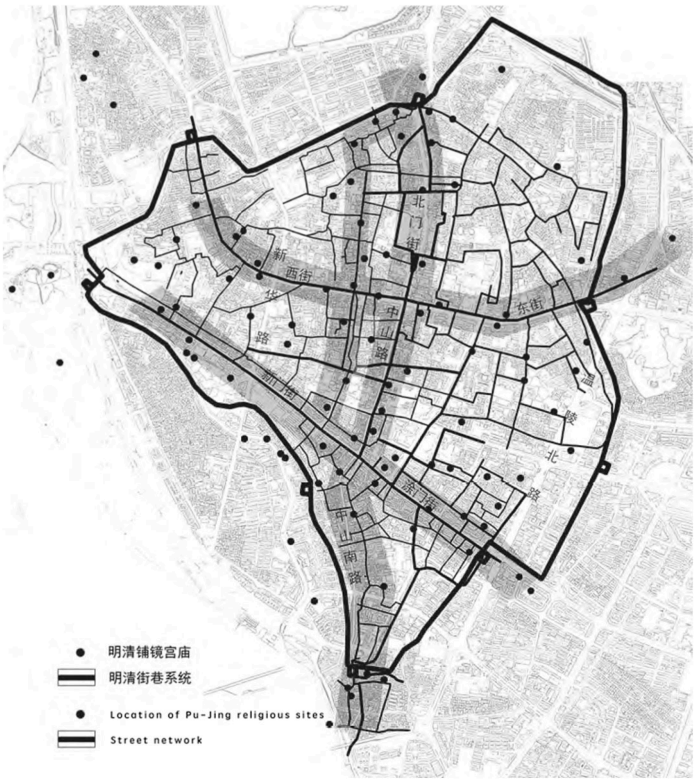


Figure 1. Shows the relationship between Pu-Jing Shrines and the urban street and block today (Wang et al. 2019, p. 80). The black dots represent religious sites; the thin black lines are city streets; the thick black lines are the city walls.

4.2. MFS: The 'Neutral' Space That Transcends Religious Differences

In contrast to the imperial order displayed by Pu-Jing, contemporary MFS tends to reflect the concerns of secular administrators, who seek to avoid legal disputes and accommodate employees' religious needs, adopting a stance of 'tolerance' and 'neutrality' on religious matters (Crompton and Hewson 2016; Bobrowicz 2018). In response to changes in the social environment, the demand for multi-religious services and legal requirements

(see Notes 2), sites such as airports, hospitals and schools have adapted existing single-faith spaces into facilities capable of providing multi-religious services (Biddington 2021, pp. 39–44). For example, (1) Vienna International Airport, opened the first explicitly Multifaith Space in Europe, named 'Andachtsraum' or 'devotional space' in 1988; (2) in the UK, hospitals historically had a Christian chapel, but since the year 2000 added separate prayer spaces for other faith groups. These spaces are often adjacent to each other off a corridor, which became, in effect, the true multifaith shared area. Later MFS combined these into a single shared room. (3) There does not seem to be any explicit legal reason to provide these spaces. In the United States, however, the 1965 Immigration Act made it necessary for American hospitals to cater for the multi-religious requirements of Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh faith-based staff and patients. The transformation of single-religion spaces in hospitals into MFS followed. Froedtert Memorial Lutheran Hospital in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for example, had established a multifaith chaplaincy team and redesigned an 'all-faith chapel' in 1994; (4) also, at universities, the decades around the Millennium confronted religious and cultural diversity on campus, as well as the religious service demands of students and staff. A number of mono-religious spaces were demolished and replaced by MFS (Smith 2016).

In MFS architectural design practice, designers avoid conflict of beliefs, iconoclasm and inclusiveness as the 'design criteria' to meet the successful design cases of MFS (Crompton 2013, p. 474). The design styles of MFS can be categorised into two types: the 'negative style' and the 'positive style'. The 'negative style' of minimalist and non-religious ornamentation allows for a space that is not biased towards any one faith position, strictly enforcing the neutrality of the space without favouritism. On the contrary, the 'positive style', which divides a space into a number of separate small spaces filled with religious elements, fairly provides any faith group with a space that is exclusive to them, and thereby avoiding conflict through the physical partitioning of the space. It can be argued that both MFS design styles fulfil the 'design criteria' for meeting MFS to some extent.

5. The Struggle Between Spatial Users and Designers

Reviewing the above analysis, we can clearly discern the intentions of the designers. The Quanzhou Pu-Jing system represents a strategy for geographically consolidating religious differences and conducting surveillance. It attempted, through a 'segregated' grid approach, to incorporate multi-religious communities into a rigidly hierarchical imperial cosmic order. The modern MFS, however, has created a seemingly 'neutral' container to deliver diverse religious services. However, the reality is that even the most meticulous planning cannot entirely stifle the initiative of those who use the space. The rejection of preconceptions is primarily reflected in three aspects: spatial order, the ways in which space is used, and the emotional resonance of space.

5.1. Pu-Jing: Overt 'Transformation' and Ritual Competition

Similarly, we know that the citizens of Quanzhou, through vibrant rituals and communal clashes, rewrote the imperial Pu-Jing grid of control into a dynamic script imbued with the distinctive characteristics of their respective religious traditions. The official management system sought to place residents into a strictly hierarchical administrative grid. However, the people of Quanzhou did not passively accept this arrangement, but instead redefined this spatial system in their own way. Wang's (1995, pp. 46–53) research reveals the significant tension between administrative intentions and actual experience. The residents of Quanzhou creatively modified the official spatial framework. They transformed the official offices 'Yuesuo 约所' for handling community affairs into community shrines 'Jingmiao 境庙' for their own religious needs. Through religious festivals and celebrations,

such as 'Zhenjing 镇境' and 'Pudu 普度' rituals, as well as periodic communal clashes, they turned the administrative grid into a dynamic and competitive arena for community identity. In other words, in practice, the official regulatory tools ironically, became a platform for the people to express their religious demands and engage in religious competition with their neighbours.

First, administrative units were 'transformed' into boundaries demarcating differences between communities' faiths. Official 'Yuesuo 约所' were originally intended as sites for implementing village regulations and proclaiming imperial edicts. In the hands of civilians, however, 'Yuesuo' gradually evolved into community shrines 'Jingmiao 境庙' dedicated to local or community guardian deities 'Jingzhu 境主' (Quanzhou Prefectural Gazetteer 1573, 1763). This transformation reflected the communities' resistance to imperial governance at the time. An administrative unit 'Jing 境' defined by the empire was redefined as a community territory with sacred boundaries and religious identity.

Second, there were alliances, clashes and periodic violent conflicts between neighbourhoods. The Quanzhou people created a new structure—the two major alliances of 'Dongfo 东佛' and 'Xifo 西佛'—which had not been anticipated in the official planning of the Pu-Jing system (Wang 2021, pp. 245–312). These two alliances reorganised the scattered Pu-Jing into two competing camps bound by religious ties, and periodic armed clashes became a common feature of urban social life. The annual 'Zhenjing 镇境' ceremony is a particularly illustrative example—residents parade their own deity statues along the community boundaries, ritually reaffirming the religious demarcation between 'us' and 'them'. The 'Pudu 普度' ritual is no exception. Communities compete to demonstrate their prestige through displays of rivalry—such as which household offers the most lavish offerings or hosts the liveliest festivities. The surface cause of violent clashes is often merely that a parade crosses some invisible boundary. The root issue, however, is the tension and competition between different community religious identities. This violent struggle for space demonstrates that when the official framework (grid-based management) fails to meet local needs for religious identity, communities will create their own, more potent collective identities and reinforce them through dramatic means.

A folk story that undermines the Pu-Jing system is worth pondering. A famous Feng-Shui master of the time, Zhou-Dexing was invited by the authorities to participate in the design of the Pu-Jing system but the city walls, official temples and wells he designed—symbols of official order—are interpreted in the story as stifling local vitality and natural destiny (Quanzhou Prefectural Gazetteer 1573, 1763). This folk story reflects citizens' rejection, and even condemns the Empire's suppression of the development of community religions (Wang 1995, p. 65).

5.2. 'Negative' MFS: Silent Negotiations and Everyday Practices Among Users

Compared to the overt conflicts found in Pu-Jing, users in MFS appear more restrained. Yet, in their own way, users continue to express their conflicts, diverse religious identities and practical needs within a space where is supposed to be 'neutral'. This is particularly evident in 'negative' MFS.

Firstly, there is the issue of dominant use and occupation of space. Biddington (2021) notes in his research that many MFS face a notable phenomenon: due to their religious practice of five daily prayers, Muslim users have become the most frequent users of the majority of MFS. Although this high frequency of attendance is not driven by any intention to occupy the space, it has, in fact, shaped the patterns of use of MFS. Some spaces have gradually been arranged with Muslim requirements at their core, such as the provision of Wudu and the laying of prayer mats. At certain times, users of other faiths may even choose to avoid the space, due to feeling like a minority. This silent presence has

become an unspoken spatial practice, subtly altering the nature of MFS. As described by Biddington (2021, p. 153), a Christian employee brought his own statue of Jesus into an airport multifaith prayer room. Although he removed the statue after praying, during his use of the space, he effectively sanctified this corner temporarily, imbuing a specific religious significance upon the space.

Secondly, there are the day-to-day challenges of maintaining neutrality. Managers of MFS typically require the space to be reset after use, which is for all religious items to be returned to storage cupboards (Crompton 2013). For example, Christians may be reluctant to remove the crucifix from the altar; Muslims may wish to maintain the orientation of the prayer mat; Jews may wish to keep the Torah in a fixed position. During my visits to MFS, I even observed users attempting to carve religious symbols on wall corners or onto interior furnishings; or deliberately placing religious objects in the wrong place (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. 'QIBLA' cards are placed on the windowsill, but are not pointing in the correct direction. At the Interfaith Chaplaincy, University of Glasgow, UK, 2024.



Figure 3. A storage shelf at the MFS. I observe that someone has covered the Bible with a Muslim prayer mat. Manchester Airport Terminal 2, UK, 2024.

In addition, there are complex emotional experiences and the negotiation of spiritual boundaries. Users may experience complex emotional reactions within MFS. A Jewish

writer described being in an airport chapel with Muslims, 'sharing the same space, praying softly, as if performing a quiet duet in praise of God'—an experience of empathy that transcends boundaries (Rabins 2018). However, in another scenario, when people cross a threshold from the familiar cultural environment of their 'homeland' into another unfamiliar MFS, it often creates a sense of cultural dislocation (Biddington 2021, p. 160). This disconnection between the ideals and reality can evoke feelings of inner shocks of devastation, confusion, revulsion, and fear. These subtle emotional reactions constitute a form of internalised boundary negotiation. Users are constantly engaged in psychological adjustment, navigating the tension between embracing shared spaces and maintaining their unique identities.

6. Doing Conviviality

Faced with a social environment characterised by religious diversity within the city, urban elites seek to manage issues of social pluralism through an institutional framework. They attempt to resolve the tension between 'pluralism' and 'unification' through spatial design. Examples include spatial planning and naming; the categorisation of religious groups; management and integration; or the utilisation of a universal ideology to eliminate the uncertainty arising from differences in faiths. In particular, they seek to realise and establish a governable spatial order by drawing boundaries.

Pu-Jing responded to the imperial imperatives of security and social control, utilising a 'segregated' grid approach to manage differences in faiths; MFS respond to the practical demands of religious pluralism, by establishing a container that is a neutral sacred space.

However, as clear the intentions of designers are, users have their own ideas. They will utilise, interpret, negotiate and even challenge the spatial framework provided by designers. This results in space being a perpetual arena of tension and negotiation. We find that in both the Pu-Jing and MFS case studies, the relationship between designers and users is not one of simple domination and resistance, but rather a sustained dynamic and partial witnessing maintained through daily practices, shared rituals, and spatial negotiation within an asymmetrical structure. This witnessing is based on practices through which people develop feelings of exclusion, belonging, conviviality and connection whilst facing powerful social and religious asymmetries. Borrowing Bieler's (2025a) term, 'doing conviviality' is used to describe this phenomenon. The concept of 'doing conviviality' emphasises mutual adaptation and negotiation among different groups in shared living. In the development of spatial practices at Pu-Jing and MFS, the research reveals that conviviality is primarily manifested in the overlapping of spatial functions and meanings, and in the mechanisms for negotiating the allocation of ritual time.

6.1. Conviviality in Pu-Jing

In the process of 'doing conviviality', a dynamic balance was established between the Empire and diverse communities. Through pre-established institutions, the Empire extended its governance reach to the grassroots level of urban communities, regulating community beliefs through segregated and Neo-Confucian frameworks. However, the communities did not accept this passively. Instead, within the official framework, communities filled it in with content reflecting their own distinctive beliefs. This constituted a mutual compromise and adaptation: the authorities gained a degree of control over grassroots communities, whilst the communities retained the distinctive features of their own beliefs.

In spatial dimensions, the authorities sought to alleviate tensions with communities and maintain their position by providing religious service spaces for community. They would, where appropriate, transform official ritual sites into community religious

spaces, and would even transfer management of these sites to the community (Wang 2021, pp. 303–4). By the 17th century, many official ritual sites had become centres of community religious activity, such as the Pu-Jing Shrine. At this time, it had a dual spatial function: it was both a hub for the dissemination of official information and the administration of household registration, as well as a venue for community belief and gatherings. The same space accommodated two forms of power—imperial authority and community faith—which, in practice, were not strictly separate but rather intertwined.

With regard to the mechanism for allocating time, Wang (2021, pp. 292–95), in his research on Quanzhou folk customs, discovered that a practice of 'rotating sacrifices' emerged among communities in the 17th century: through negotiation, communities agreed to hold ritual activities in turn, following a specific sequence. This practice of allocating ritual times through negotiation also applied to other festivals. For example, during the 'Mid-Autumn Festival', community ritual ceremonies were held sequentially over a thirty-day period from the 29 June to the 2 August of the Chinese lunar calendar, in accordance with the agreed order. The aim was to avoid the chaos caused by overcrowded streets and disputes over the use of ritual spaces. This is like time-sharing in modern MFS.

6.2. Conviviality in MFS

Convivial life in MFS is primarily reflected in a shift in design style and perspective, from 'positive style' to 'negative style'. Kilde (2024) points out that MFS's design underwent an epistemological shift from failure to success. In the early days, based on the surge in the 1940s and 1950s in the United States to build churches shared by the 'three faiths' (Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism), the Chapel of the Four Chaplains in Philadelphia and the Brandeis University chapels were typical examples of MFS with 'positive style'. Both were confined to the 'Tri-Faith America' paradigm, attempting to present each religious tradition equally in the spatial arrangement and to achieve 'equal coexistence'. However, this model failed due to its deep-rooted religious exclusivity—any shared space was inevitably perceived as being dominated by a particular 'host' religion (Kilde 2024, pp. 5–10). In other words, when religions are understood as traditions that are independent of one another and possess exclusive claims to truth, no shared space can escape the awkward question of 'who owns the space'. It is a religious and ethical issue that cannot be resolved by a simple slogan of 'equality'.

The challenges encountered in the practical operation of MFS gave rise to a revolution in ideology. The MIT Chapel (an example of 'negative style' MFS, Figure 4) marked a turning point. Its success stemmed from an entirely new approach to design and spatial management—a shift towards phenomenology, metaphysics and anti-materialism (Kilde 2024, p. 26). MIT's administration abandoned the notion of serving specific religious groups, instead defining the chapel as a space dedicated to the individual's spiritual experience. This is a transcendent, quiet container named after no specific deity, created solely through light, the shadow of water, and solid brick walls. Its designers no longer insisted on categorising groups, but instead, by removing all external religious symbols, created a space which anyone could interpret in their own way.

Users are free to arrange the timing of their rituals and define the sacred meaning of space according to their own needs, and even to allow these to overlap. For example, in terms of space, when people of different faiths or non-believers coexist in the same time and space, the sacred meaning of MFS takes on an overlapping form (Xia et al. 2023, p. 636). Likewise, in terms of time, users range from internationalists who embrace other faiths and are willing to pray together, as well as individuals who wait for others to leave (Xia 2026, p. 13). Users can freely select their prayer style and timing based on the current conditions of the MFS.

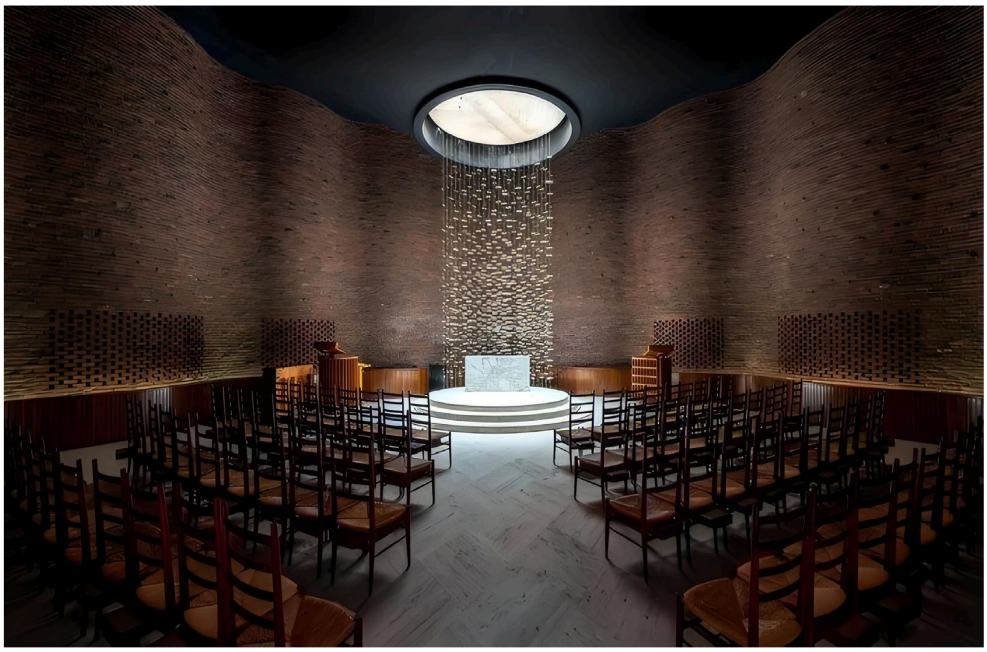


Figure 4. The MIT Chapel at the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

7. Forms of Conviviality: Introducing Particular Religious Article into a Neutral Space

In any social context, the definition of art cannot be confined entirely to the realm of aesthetics. The core connection between art and collective life lies in symbols (Geertz 1983, pp. 95–97 and 118–19). As a vehicle for human social life, artistic symbols interpret how people observe, interpret, define, listen to and create within their real-life environments. They then bring specific spiritual worlds and ways of thinking into the physical world through the materialisation of artistic forms, allowing people to see, touch, smell, taste and hear. However, decorative arts and architecture are the finest vehicles for interpreting symbols. Necipoğlu and Payne (2016, pp. 1–2) point out that, in the past, architecture and decorative arts were often linked to the inner spiritual world of human beings and were used to express emotional significance, memories, values and social relationships. We can therefore gain an understanding of 'Forms of Conviviality' by observing the architectural styles of both Pu-Jing and MFS. During my fieldwork visiting Pu-Jing Shrines and MFS, I observed and compared the two type of spaces and found that, in expressing 'conviviality', the architectural styles of Pu-Jing and MFS share a similar approach: that is, filling the standardised spatial frameworks created by the designers with elements reflecting the personal beliefs of the users. The objects are combined in incongruous ways.

In Quanzhou, the architectural facades of various religious sites adopt local traditional Chinese architectural styles and apply the principles of Feng-Shui. Inside these sacred spaces, however, different religions, sects or indigenous deities are worshipped, and elements reflecting the beliefs of individuals or communities are displayed. Figure 5 demonstrates that the styles of their architectural facades are almost identical. This convergence in architectural facades resembles a form of standardisation and uniformity, reflecting more the city administrators' perspective on the urban landscape and the extension of their authority within the urban space. Inside the buildings, however, the differences in faith and religion are fully evident, representing the aspirations of different faith communities regarding their religious lives.



Figure 5. Nine different religious sites in Quanzhou, China, 2023. Numbered 1 to 9 respectively are: (**1**). Quanzhou Confucius Temple (Confucian site); (**2**). Qingjing Mosque (Islamic site); (**3**). Kaiyuan Temple (Buddhist site); (**4**). Zhenwu Temple (Taoist site); (**5**). Cao'an (Manichaean site); (**6**). Tianhou Temple (indigenous religious site); (**7**). Guan Di Temple (indigenous religious site); (**8**). Huxin Gong (indigenous religious site); (**9**). Quanjun Huangdi Gong (indigenous religious site).

For example, the Qingjing Mosque, Quanzhou (Figure 6), was rebuilt in 1609 after the 1607 earthquake. At that time the Muslim community was not as wealthy as formerly and needed help from their neighbours. This was given because local Confucian scholars considered that: (a) the restoration of the mosque was public service and public benefit, in line with Confucian social thought; (b) Islam advocated the purification of the mind, and had similarities with Li school; (c) the issue of funeral ethics was again similar to the Confucian culture of filial piety; (d) there were also similarities between Islam and Buddhism and Taoism, (Wang 2021, pp. 190–91). A stone tablet recording the restoration of the Qingjing Mosque (now exhibited in the Qingjing Mosque), mentions that the rebuilt mosque was laid out in a west–east orientation (the west side is the direction of Mecca), rather than the south–north layout of the traditional Chinese architecture. But the entire layout of the building conforms to the Feng-Shui principles of 'Tai Ji', 'Two Modes' (两仪), 'Four Images' (四象), 'Eight Trigrams' (八卦), etc. It is clear that the Confucians tried to incorporate more indigenous Chinese elements while retaining the core of Islamic culture.

In addition to religious sites, the same design approach applies to tombs. During my visit to the Baiqi Hui Ethnic Minority Village in Quanzhou[6], I found two tombs belonging to local residents that shared the same architectural form (Figure 7). The tombs adopt the locally common enveloping style, but one tomb displays a Taoist Taiji symbol, whilst the other is carved with the Islamic star and moon totem. The occupants of these two tombs belonged to the same Hui family, yet held different faiths. As evidenced by the architectural form and decorative style of their tombs, they adopted the same design style whilst still expressing their distinct religious identity.



Figure 6. Inside Qingjing Mosque, in Quanzhou, China 2022.



Figure 7. Family tombs, in the Baiqi Hui Ethnic Minority Village, Quanzhou, China 2022.

In another dimension of time and space, MFS's negative style appears to have become a reasonable and default style in contemporary MFS architectural design (Crompton 2013, p. 474). The large-scale, standardised adoption of the negative style by institutions such as airports, hospitals and schools (Figure 8) also signifies the emergence of a standardised style within MFS. However, the real situation is that MFS is not entirely a 'blank' space. Although no religious symbols are displayed in the prayer areas, the differences between faiths are vividly demonstrated at the entrance to MFS and in its logo design. For example, in the poster display area and the storage area for religious items at the MFS entrance (Figures 3 and 9), different religious communities highlight their religious differences by displaying posters and using distinct religious artefacts. Another example is the MFS logo, which is designed to comprise numerous religious symbols (Figure 10). If we consider

MFS's 'blank' prayer area, poster display area, storage area, and logo design as a single entity, the form—diverse religious symbols presented a standardised style—becomes particularly evident.



Figure 8. MFS with negative style spread throughout four areas, numbered 1 to 4 respectively, are: (**1**). Interfaith Chaplaincy in the University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK, 2024; (**2**). Multifaith Prayer Room at Heathrow Airport Terminal 3, London, UK, 2024; (**3**). Multifaith Prayer Room at Manchester Airport Terminal 2, Manchester, UK, 2024; (**4**). Prayer Room at Hong Kong International Airport, Hong Kong, China, 2023.



Figure 9. Noticeboard at Interfaith Chaplaincy in the University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK, 2024.



Figure 10. MFS logo at Heathrow Airport Terminal 3, London, UK, 2024.

8. Discussion: Asymmetry Between Cases

The comparison undertaken in this paper reveals the similarities that exist between contemporary MFS and Pu-Jing culture. Both face a root issue that needs to be resolved, which is how to manage religious diversity within limited urban space. Simultaneously, the tensions surrounding this issue stem from the opposing positions of urban elites and multifaith communities. However, there are also significant asymmetries between these two cases. Recognising similarities and asymmetries is crucial for assessing how far the comparison can be extended and what contributions can be achieved.

As we can see from case studies, Pu-Jing boasts a vibrant shared urban space where communities of diverse faiths intersect by living on the same street and participating in the same religious processions. Settled coexistence fostered ceremonial alliances as well as periodic violent conflicts, which stemmed from the competition and recognition of religious community identities. Moreover, over six centuries of development, Pu-Jing has evolved into a distinct regional culture, which has generated rich, syncretic religious art, such as the Qingjing Mosque and gravestones. Conversely, the phenomenon of syncretism finds no direct counterpart in MFS. In contemporary MFS, sharing is manifested in the allocation of time. Users with different faiths occupy the same room at different times, often avoiding rather than meeting others. Temporal separation minimises direct contact whilst also reducing the potential for conflict and interaction. Temporal separation minimises direct contact whilst also reducing the potential for conflict and interaction. The result is a mundane, small-scale and quiet space that accommodates religious differences through scheduling rather than through sustained coexistence.

This asymmetry is no accident, reflecting the distinct historical, political and religious contexts in which each case is embedded. In Ming and Qing China, religion was inherently public and supervised by imperial authority. The imperial regime actively incorporated religious activities into urban governance, treating rituals as an extension of administrative control. By contrast, the modern secular institutions that support MFS operate within a framework of separation between the public and private spheres, treating religion as a private matter to be accommodated in private or semi-private spaces separate from the institution's functions. Secular institutions sought to constrain and moderate the potential for religious conflict, whilst providing the minimum facilities necessary to ac-

commodate religious services. This explains why Pu-Jing gave rise to the syncretic arts and community rivalry, whilst MFS resulted in time-sharing arrangements and unremarkable interior design.

However, in light of the concept of 'conviviality', these asymmetries do not render the comparison meaningless, but rather enrich it. As defined by Bieler, conviviality is not a fixed state or a pre-established ideal of harmony, but rather a fragile and temporary state of 'with-ness' produced through specific negotiations within asymmetrical relationships. In Pu-Jing, it appears in a public, conflictual and communal form, whilst at MFS, it takes the form of private, avoidant, and individual practices. Both are forms of conviviality, yet they manifest differently. On the one hand, the Pu-Jing case indicates that conviviality is rooted in dense urban life, where religious differences relate to community identity and territorial competition. Its form can be conflicting, visible, and syncretic. On the other hand, the MFS case illustrates that conviviality occurs in the mobile world (Xia 2026), where users come and go in a hurry and are focused on personal needs. Its form can also be evasive, private and materially minimalist.

Ultimately, comparisons reveal that spatial solutions for managing multifaith communities can emerge in vastly different historical, political and religious contexts. Nevertheless, their specific forms—whether vibrant or subdued; conflicting or avoidant; public or private; syncretic or merely juxtaposed—are all influenced by the environments and ideological contexts in which they are embedded. Recognising the similarities in tensions between urban elites and multifaith communities, as well as the contextual asymmetries, is crucial for a comparative understanding of multi-religious urban spaces across time and place. The asymmetrical nature of these case studies enables us to avoid treating the management of religious diversity in urban spaces as a single model; similarly, our focus is not confined to particular political or religious order.

9. Conclusions

A comparative study of MFS and Pu-Jing shows that when the authorities set boundaries between religious spaces, or encourage sharing, then it is at the boundaries between those spaces that people become aware of each other. This boundary can be in space, as in Quanzhou, or in time in shared space in MFS. It is through rebelling against the constraints imposed by authoritarian orders, or by transcending the boundaries set by its designers, that religions reveal them self, emerge from the private sphere, and come to recognise itself and others. This is akin to how, in modern MFS, faith is revealed to others because the room has not been tidied or rearranged.

In these liminal zones some kind of 'conviviality' union can begin to occur. In Pu-Jing this takes the form of a merging of icons. In MFS it is seen in displays of religious items from different faiths all mixed on shelves, as well as in ways the room is set out, e.g., with chairs or mats, and also mixing icons in the logo. It was obvious in both the Pu-Jing system and MFS that the authorities approve and desire this mixing. This is officially sanctioned conviviality. Although spaces for each faith are defined, this is done in the expectation that they will be respected and conflict between faiths channelled into arguments about an interface rather than anything more fundamental.

When authorities are faced with complex interplay of competing religious traditions, conviviality, as something in between union and complete separation has been an acceptable compromise. Conviviality should not be understood in terms of syncretism in the religious or theological sphere. Rather it enables opposing sides to retain their core beliefs while undergoing a degree of change, allowing them to adapt to and take into account the feelings of their neighbours, even whilst holding differing views to a degree. This has led, in terms of spatial development, to the emergence of phenomena such as the overlapping

of spatial functions and meanings, and the negotiated allocation of time. Ultimately, conviviality shapes the urban landscape of a multi-religious city by filling the standardised spatial frameworks devised by designers with elements of users' personal faiths.

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Notes

[1] Special Issue: Urban Governance of Interreligious Dialogue and Freedom of/from Religion. Available online: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/8I034K24I1 (accessed on 10 September 2026).

[2] Crompton and Hewson (2016) noted in their UK study that decisions regarding MFS are reinforced by organisational and legal mechanisms, yet the underlying belief—that employers have a duty to provide such spaces—is largely mistaken. Legally speaking, there is no mandatory requirement for organisations to establish prayer rooms; however, if an employee requests a quiet space to fulfil religious obligations, and the provision of such a space would not adversely affect the business or other employees, the employer's refusal may constitute discrimination. This principle applies equally to those without religious beliefs and is supported by the Equality Act 2010 and the Public Sector Equality Duty to promote. The key legal concept is 'reasonable accommodation', with the associated costs shared by all stakeholders. The key legal concept is 'reasonable accommodation', with the associated costs shared by all stakeholders. Based on the principle of 'equal opportunities', the employer's duty is to fully consider the statutory equality objectives, rather than to take specific measures or achieve a particular outcome.

[3] These remarks are based on field observation and literature of MFS including: The Sacred Space at Kelowna General Hospital, Canada; Multifaith Space, Manchester Royal Infirmary, England, UK; A Hospice Reflection Room, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK; A Sanctuary Space at the Royal Infirmary, Bristol, UK; 'Rum för Stillhet', Karolinska University Hospital, Stockholm, Sweden; Northeastern University's Center for Spirituality, Dialogue and Service, Boston, Massachusetts, USA; The MIT Chapel at the campus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA; The House of Religions, Bern, Switzerland; Multifaith Prayer Room at Heathrow Airport, London, UK; Prayer Room at Hong Kong Airport, Hong Kong, China; Interfaith Chaplaincy in the University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; Multifaith Prayer Room at Manchester Airport Terminal 2, Manchester, UK.

[4] These remarks are based on field observations of religious sites in Quanzhou and relevant literature reviews, including: the Quanzhou Confucius Temple; the Qingjing Mosque; Buddhist sites—Fengtian Temple, Tongfo Temple, Yanfu Temple and Kaiyuan Temple; Taoist sites—Zhaohui Temple on Jiuri Mountain, the East Peak Taoist Temple on Jiuri Mountain and Zhenwu Temple; Manichaean sites—Cao'an; indigenous religious sites—Tianhou Temple, Guan Di Temple; Pu-Jing Shrines—Ciji Shrine, Huxin Shrine, Lirang Shrine, Quanjun Huangdi Shrine, Quanjun Lingying Shrine, Yichun Shrine, and Zoukui Shrine.

[5] 'Yu (隅), Tu (图), Pu (铺), and Jing (境)' correspond to the numbers 'four Yu, sixteen Tu, thirty-six Pu, and seventy-two Jing': 'Four Yu (plural)' refers to the division of the city (the area within the city walls) into four major districts: south, east, west and north. 'Sixteen Tu (plural)' refers to the division of the suburbs (the area outside the city walls) into 16 districts. 'Thirty-six Pu (plural)' refers to the further subdivision of the city's four major districts, with each district administering its corresponding Pu. There were originally 36 Pu, with two more added in the 18th century. 'Seventy-two Jing (plural)' refers to the further subdivision of the Pu districts. These can be understood as today's city streets and blocks, such as the Chinatowns in Liverpool and Manchester. There was a total of 72 such blocks. Typically, people of the same faith would choose to live in the same Jing. Therefore, Pu-Jing culture can be described as a form of multifaith communities' life.

[6] In the late 14th and early 15th centuries, a number of Arab traders settled in Quanzhou intermarried with local Han Chinese and other ethnic groups, and their descendants gradually became Hui ethnic minority (Chen 1988).

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