Seeking meaning: Overseas Chinese students' conversion to Christianity

Hongming Qiao
Iowa State University

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Seeking meaning: Overseas Chinese students’ conversion to Christianity

by

Hongming Qiao

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Sociology

Program of Study Committee:
David Schweingruber, Major Professor
Stephen Sapp
Andy Hochstetler

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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DEDICATION

To Fangheyue Ma
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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the number of Chinese students studying in the United States has been increasing dramatically. The number of Chinese students who converted to Christianity in the U.S. has also risen a lot. The aim of this research is to find out why there are so many Chinese students choosing to believe in Christianity and how they become Christians in the end. The data of this research are drawn from participant observation, interview, and content analysis. Results focus on three topics related to overseas Chinese students’ religious lives. The first topic is the Chinese students’ knowledge and impression of Christianity before they were in touch with the religion. Almost all Chinese students had little to no knowledge of Christianity beforehand. Despite their limited knowledge, their impressions of Christianity were quite different: strange and unfamiliar, skeptical and cautious, favorable and encouraging. The second topic is the social network. On the one hand, a social network, especially the interpersonal bond between religious group members and potential recruits, plays an initial but crucial role in recruitment; on the other hand, the religious community helps Chinese students adapt to a new social environment materially, psychologically, and socially by providing different kinds of social services. Although the social network plays a very important role during the course of Chinese students’ conversion to Christianity, it still cannot be regarded as the main reason why Chinese students become Christian. The third topic is an attempt to discover the main reason why Chinese students convert. Under the broader contexts of the huge social and cultural difference between China and the United States, and the life stage of “emerging adulthood” where the Chinese students are at, the Chinese students realize their current meaning system is not comprehensive enough for them to interpret the challenges and uncertainties brought by these two contextual factors. While searching for meaning and seeking certainties amid the puzzling ambiguities, the
Chinese students find Christianity, both as a comprehensive meaning system and an interpretive framework, that brings meaning and certainties to the lives of the Chinese students and saves them in both spiritual and emotional ways.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Starting in 1966 and ending in 1979, The Communist Party began closing down all churches, temples, and mosques—no religious activities were allowed during The Cultural Revolution. After the Cultural Revolution, The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began its economic reform and officially recognized five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Christianity (Protestantism). These were allowed to reopen for limited religious services as long as they were overseen by the state-sanctioned religious authority. Meanwhile, many religions have flourished, but, Protestant Christianity has become the fastest growing religion in China. In 1949 there were less than one million Protestant Christians in China. In the early 1980’s there were about three million Protestant Christians living in China. Since then, estimates have varied. In 2010 The Party-State insisted on some very low estimates which suggest that approximately 23 million Christians lived in China. Other sources outside China suggest that perhaps as many as 100 million to 130 million Christians lived in China in 2010 (Yang 2014). A Pew Research Center Report of Global Christianity (2011) discovered nearly 58 million Christians and 9 million Catholics lived in China in 2010. Still, the CPP is officially regarded as an atheist party requiring all its members comply. An atheist-led party has strongly influenced the entire population. Even though Marxism permeates the Chinese educational system, it has little religious influence on its devotees. Western religion is sometimes regarded as “the people’s opium” in China, even though Chinese people rarely discuss religion in day-to-day conversations.

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1 In China, Christianity sometimes refers to the combination of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodox Christians; other times, it only refers to Protestantism. Here, it’s the latter situation.
or on public media. All these religious activities are permitted under the close watch of the Party-State’s constant surveillance.

Along with rapid economic reform, Chinese household incomes are rapidly increasing—more families send their children overseas to more developed nations such as the U.S. and U.K. A report by the Institute of International Education (IIE) notes a 11% increase in Chinese studying abroad totaling 304,040 students during the 2014-2015 academic year compared to the previous 2013-2014 academic year. Currently, 1 in 3 of America’s 974,000 international students is Chinese; as the total volume of Chinese students increases so does the number of Chinese students attending church ministries. China Outreach Ministries, which works solely with Chinese scholars and graduate students, provides their services on 50 campuses. In 2010, 322 Chinese students and scholars professed to become Christian on the campuses where China outreach works, up from 189 in 2005 (Kirpalani 2011).

My first encounter with Christianity was at the time when I was an undergraduate student. Once I attended a Christmas party that was organized by a few Christian students from campus. Before that party, I had never participated in any activities relating to Christianity, and I had very little knowledge about it. Christianity was a totally new thing to me. Though my knowledge of Christianity was limited, I still had some stereotypical views toward western religions like Christianity. I was taught in school that there is no God in the world, and religion, such as Christianity, is like “opium” and we should be cautious about it. With so little knowledge and so many stereotypes about Christianity in my head, I felt a little bit uncomfortable at the party. I didn’t know why they were so obsessed with Christianity. I didn’t know why they were praying and what they were praying for. I didn’t know how they were able to believe in an invisible and untouchable God. Because I felt that the other college students were more like me and well-
educated, they should also have a very similar view towards Christianity. This kind of view looks like a sheet of white paper on the surface, but under it, it’s full of stereotypes and biases. So, I was thinking, did they have any conflicts between their atheistic background and their new belief when they were trying to convert to Christianity? What does the experience of becoming and being a college Christian look like?

When I came to study at this public university in the Midwest, I was picked up by an American Christian at the airport. He first drove me to the Chinese church where he was working and gave me a tour of the church. Then he introduced me to the Bible study group he was leading. He told me they were using the Bible as material to learn English and American culture. Before leaving the church, he gave me a Chinese version of the Bible and invited me to the church activities. I didn’t go to the church after that, but I kept receiving invitations to international fellowship or church from Chinese friends. After I had several conversations with these Chinese-Christian friends, I started realizing that there were a growing number of Chinese students converting to Christianity on this campus. All these things brought those questions I used to have to me once again: Why did these overseas Chinese students\(^2\) choose to convert to Christianity? How did they become Christian? Is the atheist background a barrier in the process of becoming a Christian? What do they think about Christianity before and after the conversion?

\(^2\) Due to the fact that social, political, and economic conditions in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau have been different from those in Mainland China, the term “Chinese students” in this thesis doesn’t include students from those areas.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Six Conversion Models

This literature review is a review of six major theoretic models in the sociology of conversion. The aim of this study is not to test these six models, the theories and concepts from the sociology of conversion will be used to inform and theoretically frame this study, thereby allowing for a deeper understanding of the experiences of overseas Chinese Christian students.

Deprivation Model

Deprivation theory was seen by generations of scholars as the cause of both personal religious commitment and sect and cult formation (Clark 1937; Linton 1943; Wilson 1959; Glock 1964; Glock and Stark 1965). Deprivation theory combines assessment of the particular appeals offered by a group’s ideology with an analysis of the kinds of deprivations for which this ideology offers relief (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Deprivation is distinguishable by relative and absolute deprivation. Physical abuse, starvation, and poverty are seen as forms of absolute deprivation, whereas relative deprivation can be defined as the discrepancy between what one expects in life and what one gets. According to Charles Glock (1964; Glock and Stark 1965), deprivation is also distinguishable into five types, depending on the kinds of strain felt: economic, social, organismic, ethical, and psychic deprivation. Since the 1970s, deprivation theory has been criticized by various scholars: its main defect is the absence of any social network consideration.

Process Model

In the sociological studies of religious conversion, John Lofland and Rodney Stark’s (1965) process model has been the most influential. In this model, Lofland and Stark first point out that
all people and all human groups have ultimate values, a worldview, or a perspective furnishing them a more or less orderly and comprehensible picture of the world. When a person gives up one perspective or ordered view of the world for another, Lofland and Stark refer to this process as conversion. Lofland and Stark’s model is based on a study of the earlier devotees of the Unification Church (also known as “Moonies”). The model consists of seven conditions for conversion which the authors formulate as follows: (1) experience enduring, acutely felt tensions; (2) within a religious problem-solving perspective; (3) which leads him (her) to define him (her)self as a religious seeker; (4) encountering Moonies at a turning point in life; (5) wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts; (6) where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized; (7) and, where, if he (she) is to become a deployable agent, he (she) is exposed to intensive interaction. Lofland and Stark also classify these seven conditions into two genres of conditions: dispositional or “predisposing” and situational conditions. The dispositional conditions include condition 1, 2, and 3, which are personality attributes that make people potential converts. The situational conditions, which include conditions 4 through 7, turn a potential convert into an actual convert. Accordingly, the model may be characterized as markedly interactional: conversion is understood as a function of the interaction between (characteristics of) the individual and the social environment.

The conditions of Lofland and Stark’s model have a “tunnel-like” effect. For every subsequent condition met by a potential convert, the factual number of potential converts becomes smaller, but for those remaining, the possibility that they will convert increases. That is, the more conditions are met, the smaller the number of potential converts left, and the greater their chance of actually converting.
Lofland and Stark recognize the importance of the social network in recruiting new members. The cult employed affective bond as a strategy to win potential converts. This technique of seeking prospective converts by encapsulating them with intensive love and affection was known as “love bombing” (Lofland 1977). Affective bonds are a necessary part of the conversion process; usually, people convert not because of the appeal of its ideology, but because of their close ties to the group members. If these bonds did not exist or were weak, the conversion did not occur.

The importance of a social network in recruitment has been widely cited and tested in the sociology of religion (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Philips 1980; Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Cornwall 1987; Jacobs 1987; Roof and McKinney 1987; Stark 1996; Mears and Ellison 2000; Nepstad and Smith 2001; Becker and Dhingra 2001). In the study of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement, Snow and Philips (1980) not only support but accentuate the essential importance of interpersonal bonds and intensive interaction to conversion. In the study of three quite different radical religious groups, Stark and Bainbridge (1980) find that social networks play a crucial role in the formation and growth of not only cults and sects, but also conventional faith groups. They also notice the significance of direct rewards in recruiting potential new members. Direct rewards include both affection and material inducement; they help to link the deprivation and network factors of recruitment more closely. In his book Reason to Believe, Smilde (2007) indicates that deprivation interacts with social networks in producing conversions to Evangelicalism. He also shows exactly “how networks matter,” not only that they have an influence.

Though Lofland and Stark’s model is remarkable, it extends the analytic scope beyond individual psychology and deprivation to personal bonds and social networks. Most of the
following studies of religious conversion only focus on the religious conversion of individuals; they pay very little or no attention to the larger social and cultural contexts within which the individuals change their religion (Yang 2005).

**Institutionalist Model**

Lofland and Stark’s process model, which is based on individual experience, is named an individualist approach by Yang (2005). Another influential model in the field of conversion is related to the institutional features of religious organizations; it is concluded as institutionalist approach.

The institutionalist approach explains religious change by focusing on the resources and marketing techniques of “religious firms” who seek new converts or “consumers” (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). Its main argument is that, in the religious free market, the growing churches are those that have efficient polity and clergy, attractive theologies and services, and good recruitment strategies (Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Fine 2000). In this model, religious change is driven by institutional goals of survival and growth, and religious conversion is regarded as an outcome of institutional strategies (Chen 2008). By focusing on variations among religious institutions, this model better explain why people are drawn to one religious community than another. However, unlike other “products” in the free market, religions are systems of shared meanings and symbols, and they only gain coherence and relevance in particular contexts and realities. In her study of Taiwanese immigrants’ conversion to Christianity in the United States, Chen (2008) argues that, given the familial obligations and pressures that Taiwanese immigrants experience in Taiwan, these Taiwanese immigrants were less likely to convert to Christianity in Taiwan even if the churches launched more aggressive outreach campaigns. This
is because, “with more settled lives in Taiwan, people might have less incentive to seek new sources of community and meaning.” (Chen 2008: 41)

**Contextual Model**

In his important study of Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity among Chinese immigrants in the United States, Yang (1999a) realizes that a theory focusing on the process of individual-level religious change is obviously no longer suitable for explaining why large numbers of Chinese are changing their religion now, and the importance of institutional factors is probably only secondary. So, only using individualist and institutionalist approaches to explain the large-scale conversion phenomenon isn’t appropriate and accurate enough. He points out a third approach: the contextual approach. In his empirical research, Yang (1999a) finds that the most important factors for the Christian conversion of Chinese immigrants are dramatic social and cultural changes in the process of coerced modernization—wars, social turmoil, political storms, and the collapse of Chinese traditional cultural systems. Facing this dramatic social change and the deep sense of homelessness, some Chinese seek permanence or eternity in the heavenly world promised by Christianity. In short, Yang (2005) argues that the contextual factors are more important than the institutional factors and personal bonds to explain the large-scale conversion to Christianity among Chinese immigrants in the United States. Individual and institutional factors make sense only when they are situated in the broader contexts.

Besides Chinese immigrants in the United States, Yang’s contextual approach has also been applied to the studies of different groups of people’s conversions to Christianity. In his own research of the phenomenon of large-scale conversion to Christianity in China today, Yang (2005) points out that the crucial contextual factor to understand this phenomenon is that with the increasingly globalized market economy under political repression, Christianity provides peace
and certainty in facing wild market forces. Hall (2006) develops a preliminary model to help understand the social and cultural contexts behind the conversion to Christianity among Chinese American college students in the United States. In his research of the Christian entrepreneurs in Wenzhou, China, Cao (2007) discusses Wenzhou Christianity in the context of an emerging post-socialist Chinese modernity that is embedded in the state developmentalist project.

The following two models are the adaptation model and the symbolic-meaning model. Rather than looking at conversion at the three different levels (individual, institutional, and contextual), the following two models see that people choose to convert with different purposes and needs.

**Adaption Model**

The first is the adaptation model. Adaptation theory emphasizes that conversion is a response to the stresses that converts encounter in the social environment (Lofland and Stark 1965; Glock 1964). Immigrants may encounter a lot of challenges in the process of adapting to a new country; becoming religious helps them deal with the challenges in different ways. The first and foremost challenge immigrants may face when they enter a new country is the loss of their former families, friends, and social networks. Religion can help them establish a social network in a new country and provide a space for belonging and community (e.g., Smith 1978; Kim 1981; Warner and Wittner 1998; Yang 1999a). In this religious community, immigrants adapt to a new society materially, socially, and psychologically by providing a wide array of formal and informal social services (Kwon, Ebaugh, and Hagan 1997; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000). Religious institutions provide social and physical space and social networks that help the immigrants and their offspring reproduce and maintain their values, traditions, and customs in the midst of an
often alienating and strange new society (Kurien 1998; Yang 1999a, 1999b; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Warner 2000; Park 2001).

One of the strength of adaption model is that it provides contexts and realities to understand religious change, and the context is dealing the challenges immigrants encounter in the process of adapting to a new country, this strength of adaption model is what institutionalist model lacks. Another strength of adaption model is that it grounds religious experience in the practical, everyday needs of immigrants, primarily the need for community. However, the emphasis on the communal and adaptive functions of religion may treat religion as just another community organization, it neglects the symbols and meanings that make the community a “religious” community.

**Symbolic-Meaning Model**

The second model is the symbolic-meaning model. The symbolic-meaning model emphasizes the explanatory power of the religions. According to some sociological definitions of religion, religion is a comprehensive meaning system that locates all experiences of the individual and social group in a single general explanatory arrangement. People change religions because one religion has a greater explanatory capacity than the other (Bellah 1970, 1976; Berger 1967; Geertz 1973; McGuire 2008). The meaning of conversion in the symbolic-meaning model also corresponds with John Lofland and Rodney Stark’s (1965) definition of conversion: “all men and all human groups have ultimate values, a worldview, or a perspective furnishing them a more or less orderly and comprehensive picture of the world… When a person gives up one such perspective or ordered view of the world for another we refer to this process as conversion.”
Religion draws new converts because their cosmologies and ethics better resonate with changed realities and provide more powerful and rationalized explanations to life problems (Chen 2008). Voluntary large-scale conversions often occur under certain contexts (Yang 1999a). In some cases, people’s comprehensive meaning systems or worldviews (Berger and Luckmann 1966) are challenged by structural transformations such as democratization (McLoughlin 1978), modernization (Horton 1971; Gellner 1981; Martin 1990; Yang 2005), or post-modernization (Tipton 1982; Roof 1993; Miller 1997).

Summary

Above are the six models we often see in the sociological studies of conversion. As we can see, they are not mutually exclusive; actually, they can rely on each other and are easily integrated. For example, we can see the deprivation factor, network factor, and institutional factor in the adaptation model, and we can see the deprivation factor, network factor, and symbolic-meaning factor in the process model. The real difference between them is that each model has its own angle and focus. Next, I am going to discuss how these models fit into my research, and finally, what kind of theoretical framework I am going to use in this research.

In this thesis, I argue that institutional factors are important in explaining Chinese students’ conversion to Christianity, especially the social network they are embedded in by joining the religious community. The local denominations use their social networks to attract and recruit new Chinese students. The social networks provide various types of social services to help Chinese students adapt to a new country materially, socially, and psychologically. What’s more, by providing a social and learning space, the social networks also help new converts with their spiritual growth. Individual factors like experiencing challenges and feeling tensions in life also work well here. However, both individual factors and institutional factors have to be situated
in the broader contexts. This broader context is in the life stage of emerging adulthood, studying and living as international students in a foreign country. Being an emerging adult and studying in a foreign country is not easy; it is characterized by considerable challenge and instability, which prompts many Chinese students to seek a comprehensive meaning system, or worldview, to put the seemingly chaotic universe into order (Weber [1922] 1963).
CHAPTER 3. METHOD

This study used in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis to examine the experiences of Chinese Christian students at Iowa State University (ISU) in Ames in the United States. The experiences of these Chinese students provided opportunities to understand the meaning of Christianity in their lives.

There are two major approaches to sociological research: quantitative approach and qualitative approach. Quantitative approach holds the idea that reality is “out there” and waiting to be discovered. In the eyes of quantitative researchers, human perception and intellect may be flawed, and reality may be hard to describe, but it exists, is patterned, and has a natural order. Some other quantitative approach assumptions are that social reality is stable and our knowledge about reality is additive. The stability of social reality is that the core regularity in social reality does not change over time, which means laws we discover today will hold in the future. The additive feature of knowledge means we can study many separate parts of reality one at a time, then add the fragments together to get a picture of the whole. Quantitative approached is an “organized method for combining deductive logic with precise empirical observations of individual behavior in order to discover and confirm a set of probabilistic casual laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human activity.” (Neuman 2011: 95) It often uses experiments, surveys, and statistics. Qualitative approach sees human social life as an accomplishment. People intentionally create social reality with their purposeful actions of interacting as social beings. For the qualitative researchers, social reality is largely what people perceive it to be; it exists as people experience it and assign meaning to it. Social reality is fluid and transient, and people construct it as they interact with others in ongoing processes of communication and negotiation. In general, qualitative approach is “the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through
the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds.” (Neuman 2011: 102) Most qualitative researchers uses ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth open-ended interview.

This study mostly focuses on the meaning of becoming Christian for Chinese students in the United States. Since “becoming” is a processual state rather than stable state, and “meaning” is an internal and subjective product, this will be a qualitative study, and the most appropriate methods will be ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth open-ended interview.

**Participant Observation**

Ames is a city located in the central part of the U.S. state of Iowa. It has a population of about 61,800 as of 2013, and it’s the home of Iowa State University. In fall 2011, ISU had an enrollment of about 30,000, and the number of enrolled Chinese students was 1,849, accounting for 54 percent of all international students.

There are many religious and faith-based organizations in Ames, and only one Chinese church: Chinese Evangelical Free Church of Ames. A majority of this congregation are Chinese students, faculty, staff members, and their families from ISU. Besides this church, Chinese students would also join international ministries under certain American churches. These international ministries aim at reaching out to international students studying at ISU.

The site for participant observation was a Chinese fellowship under an American evangelical church in Ames. The majority of members of this fellowship are Chinese students from ISU. They are undergraduate and graduate students from different majors. The minority of members are graduates working and living in the Ames vicinity. In 2007, a Chinese Christian family founded this fellowship. The host of this family is an artist, but he has been spending
most of his time serving this fellowship since it was founded. The hostess is a faculty member of the university. Every week there is a gathering in this Chinese family’s house. Normally, the number of people attending this weekly gathering is around 15. Most of the attendees are Christians, and a few of them are non-Christians. People who attend the gathering are quite different each time. Some Christian members are stable; they come to the gathering regularly. Some Christian members come to the gathering occasionally due to a variety of reasons. There are new people coming to the gathering every week, most of them are non-believers who are brought by their roommates, classmates, or friends. Sometimes, the fellowship invites guest speakers to talk about specific topics in the gathering; sometimes, fellowship members go to the Chinese church in town to listen to a guest pastor’s sermon. The gathering begins with a simple meal provided by the house host; then after that are hymns, Bible studies, and group discussion on the study content. Every Friday night, the gathering begins at 6:30 p.m. and ends at 10 p.m. Sometimes, when the Chinese family is out of town, then the gathering just moves into another member’s house.

Besides Friday Bible study gatherings, the fellowship members also meet in the host’s house every Thursday evening for the prayer meeting and at the American evangelical church every Sunday for worship service. This study didn’t include these two meetings into the participant observation because throughout the whole participant observation process, I had always been a non-believer and the Friday Bible study welcomes both believers and non-believers. However, the Thursday and Sunday meetings are more likely designed for believers only.

The fellowship members are also introduced and encouraged to attend different retreats and training camps. Christian Witness Center (CWC) in Missouri was the one mentioned and
attended by the fellowship members most often. CWC was founded as a mission organization targeting the overseas Chinese living in the Midwest. Currently, CWC is serving more than forty campuses from more than ten Midwestern states, and the population of Chinese students in this region is over ten thousand. Each year, there are about nine training camps conducted in CWC. Through the gospel camps, many people had come to believe in Christianity; the discipleship training camp is a means to equip the leaders of Bible study groups and churches; and the Bible camps motivated people to study the Scripture. Training camps have been playing a very important role in the growth of fellowship members’ faith. Some members’ questions about Christianity were answered in the training; some members were moved by the pastor’s sermon in the conference and decided to believe in God. However, in this study, due to the unfortunate schedule, I didn’t have a chance to take part in any form of camp training.

In 2015, from April to July, I spent every Friday night with this Chinese fellowship. At the beginning, I was invited by one of my interviewees to the fellowship. After I came back from the gathering the first time, I decided to choose this fellowship as my participant observation site. Before this Chinese fellowship, I had also joined several international fellowships organized by Americans. The reasons I chose Chinese fellowship instead of international fellowship as my participant observation site were: first, international fellowship had only a few Chinese students in the group and the subjects to be observed were limited; and second, people in Chinese fellowship communicated in Chinese. As a native Chinese speaker myself, I could understand what was going on in the Chinese fellowship better than the international fellowship where people spoke English.

As a participant observer, I observed the interaction among the members of the fellowship and kept detailed accounts of what I saw and heard.
Interview

In total, I interviewed 23 people. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling. After each interview, I would ask participants to introduce the next participant to me. The email for contacting and recruiting participants is available in Appendix D. The target participant of the interview was a Chinese student who converted in the United States, and 16 out of the 23 participants fit this requirement. Three participants were non-believers, three participants converted in China, and the final participant was the host of the Chinese fellowship. The reason I included non-believers and people who converted in China in the interview was that this research intended to do some comparative studies among these groups of participants. See Appendix A for further demographic information on study participants.

For this study, data were collected using an open-ended interview guide. Interviewees consented to participate and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. The documents of informed consent are available in Appendix C. Interviews were conducted between the Fall 2013 and Summer 2015 semesters. The interviews took place in a public or private place chosen by the participant; interview locations included the university library, café, quiet study area, participant’s apartment or house, etc. The interviews were all recorded with participant consent and each interview was about one and one and half hours in length. All interviews were conducted in Chinese. Staying consistent with the semi-structured interviewing techniques, during the interviews, I listened for clues and probed into the participants’ experiences and did not probe topics that individuals were uncomfortable discussing (Weiss 1994). Pseudonyms were employed for analysis. If the results are published, their identities will remain confidential.
My interview questions were about participants’ backgrounds, the process of becoming a Christian or not becoming a Christian, their understanding and perception of Christianity before and after conversion, and their church life. Interview guidelines are available in Appendix B.

Content Analysis

Content analysis provided supplementary data to help understand the experiences of overseas Chinese Christian students. The contents were testimonies or stories from an online magazine named Overseas Campus. Overseas Campus is a magazine under Overseas Campus Ministries (OCM) which was founded in 1992. On their website, they claim that “we committed to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ among Mainland Chinese intellectuals through developing/delivering high-quality literature and educational resources and training, from overseas to Mainland China.” The writers of the analyzed testimonies and stories were overseas Chinese Christian students, and what they wrote about was their journeys of converting to Christianity in the United States. Both writers’ identities and their writings fit the subject of this study.

Analysis

I used a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Grounded theory is a strategy researchers use in order to extract theoretical explanations from social phenomena such as process, interactions, and actions (Charmaz 2006; Creswell 2003). This approach allows for analysis of data grounded in the experiences of participants rather than data based on deductive hypotheses derived from existing theories (Charmaz 2006).

In grounded theory, the analysis begins as soon as the first bit of data is collected. The first stage of analysis is open coding. Open coding is about identifying, naming, categorizing, and
describing phenomena in data by reading textual databases, which in my case, were interviews, observation notes, and an online magazine. The second stage is axial coding. Axial coding is the process of relating codes (categories and properties) to each other. This process needs both inductive and deductive thinking. The third stage is selective coding. It is a stage choosing one category to be the core category, and relating all other categories to that category. As I proceeded through the analysis of data, I wrote down memos. There are three types of memos: the field note, the code note, and the theoretical note. In writing the theoretical notes, I was sorting all the memos I have and trying to find the best way to organize them. This thesis is an integration of several theoretical memos.

During the process of analysis, I brought my data and memos to Dr. Schweingruber’s grounded theory seminar for open coding and advice several times. The seminar members’ efforts and help should be recognized here.
CHAPTER 4. KNOWLEDGE AND IMPRESSION OF CHRISTIANITY

Over the past several decades, China has been undergoing radical changes in almost every aspect. Between 1966 and 1979, religion was completely banned in public. Since 1979, some churches, temples, and mosques have been allowed to operate under strict restrictions, and the authorities have grown more tolerant of religious activity. The earlier Chinese students and scholars who studied in the United States grew up in the non-religion years; they were indoctrinated with atheism from kindergarten through college, and they were influenced by the propaganda system the authorities used to discredit religious belief, religious leaders, and religious organizations (Wang and Yang 2006). As a result, most of these earlier Chinese students tended to despise religious believers and hold critical or indifferent sentiments toward religion (Wang and Yang 2006). All Chinese students in this study were born after 1979, and most of them were born in the 1990s. With the more tolerant religious environment they have been living in, what did they know and how did they feel about Christianity before they were first exposed to it?

Knowledge of Christianity

When Chinese students in this study were asked about their experiences with Christianity before they were involved in it, some of them stated that they had no contact with Christians or Christianity at all before. Basically, they knew nothing about Christianity. Some of them had very little experience with it. Only one participant, who was born in an intellectual family, knew a little more about Christianity than any other participant.

The following examples exemplify what Chinese students knew about Christianity:
Chun had already worked at a company in Ames for over two years when he was interviewed and he held a Ph.D. in mathematics from ISU. He had two small incidents related to Christianity when he was still a college student back in China:

One day, I was walking on campus and a stranger came and talked to me surreptitiously: “Hey buddy, do you have free time on Sunday evening?” I asked what the matter was. He responded: “We will have an activity about Jesus Christ.” “Oh, I am not interested in that,” I said. I didn’t know what Jesus Christ was about at that time. After that, I told my friend what had just happened to me and my friend told me that he was just asking me to participate in a fellowship. He was doing it surreptitiously because preaching publicly was prohibited in China. The second incident was about an American teacher at my college. He would have English conversations with Chinese students in a café. I was preparing for my TOEFL\textsuperscript{3} exam and I thought this might be a good opportunity for me to practice my English. One time, he asked me: “Who do you think is the greatest man in this world?” “Einstein, he is so great,” I told him. He thought Jesus Christ was the greatest. I listened to his words, but my brain was in a fuddle because I didn’t know who Jesus Christ was. These were my two small incidents regarding Christianity when I was back in China. However, I didn’t even notice these were all about Christianity then.

Guo was a Ph.D. student majoring in industrial engineering. She used to be a student in the northern part of China. According to her knowledge, even when universities in the southern provinces, like Jiangsu and Zhejiang, had ministries and churches around campuses, a student like her in northern universities still had little access to all these religious organizations. Therefore, she had no idea what Christianity was about when she was in China.

Qi was an undergraduate student at ISU. When she was in China she also knew nothing about Christianity. When she arrived at ISU, Qi and her friend were invited to a church for a field trip. Her friend was also a non-Christian; not only did she barely know anything about Christianity, she also held a view slightly against Christianity. Her friend didn’t know it was an activity organized by the church, or she would not have gone. The following is a part of her recollection of that trip:

\textsuperscript{3}Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is a standardized test to measure the English language ability of non-native speakers wishing to enroll in English-Speaking universities.
When I saw the Cross, I didn’t even know it was a church. My friend realized it and told me: “Shit, it’s a church.” Then we went into the church and saw people singing hymns which I couldn’t understand at all. After that, I was assigned to a family group without actually knowing what was really going on. The family group was a church ministry serving international students. We met every Wednesday and they would give me a ride to the meeting place. I will never forget my first time in that family group. Everyone was holding a Bible and reading it. I didn’t understand what I was reading even though I knew every word and every sentence of that book. I didn’t know what the “holy spirit” was and now, I know this concept is very important.

When these Chinese students were still non-believers, their knowledge and experience of Christianity seemed simple and austere. However, their impressions and understandings of Christianity are now quite rich and diverse.

**Impressions of Christianity**

Though these Chinese students had very little prior knowledge or experience of Christianity, they were still able to create their own impressions and understandings of it. The following section will discuss their impressions and understandings. Based on how critical they are, these impressions and understandings are categorized into three groups: strange and unfamiliar, skeptical and cautious, favorable and encouraging.

**Strange and Unfamiliar**

Christianity, both its belief and practice, had an impression of strangeness and unfamiliarity to most of these Chinese students.

My first encounter with Christianity mentioned in the introduction is an example to support this point of view. With limited knowledge of Christianity, my first experience with Christianity made me feel strange and unfamiliar. This strangeness and unfamiliarity caused
discomfort deep in my heart. Surprisingly, I am not the only person who had this feeling when Christianity was introduced.

Zhong recently graduated with a Ph.D. in industrial engineering when she was interviewed. Her experience with her high school Christian classmate had her shocked and angry:

When I was in primary and middle school, I thought Christianity was just something people joked around about. The first ideological and political class in high school was about the origin of human beings. When the teacher told us that someone thought God had made us, everyone in the class laughed except for one classmate; he responded with a “yes” very seriously. I was shocked at that time. Afterward, I realized he was a Christian, and this was my first encounter with Christianity. I had the same feeling as you had: strange. This Christian classmate lived in the school dorm which had no breakfast included, so I brought him breakfast every day. Before eating breakfast, he would pray and thank God for the food, but not me, and this made me angry. Even so, I didn’t stop bringing him breakfast. When we graduated, he gave me a Bible. I didn’t even turn a page and I didn’t know what it was.

Wang was a graduate student majoring in civil engineering at ISU. When he was in China, his father was a communist member and his mother was Buddhist. Basically, his life and Christianity were like two parallel lines. He came to the U.S. to study civil engineering for a good and bright future. He had never thought that he would look for something like Christianity in the United States. He didn’t believe in God, so his devout Christian classmate’s belief and behavior made no sense to him:

I used to have a classmate who believed in Christianity. He would go to church and express his remorse. I didn’t understand why he would do this, and what kind of bad things he actually did. On the other hand, since I came from this educational system, I knew that there was no God, so what’s the point of crying in front of him? I was very puzzled.

Tang was a Ph.D. student from rural China. When he was in high school he had an aunt who was Christian. At that time, there were very few people in his village who believed in Christianity, and his aunt was the first one. Everyone in the village, including him, felt she was strange and different. For example, when she was ill she didn’t go to the hospital; instead, she
prayed. Instead of farming in the field, she prayed. Tang thought his aunt was very strange and he didn’t know why she did such things.

**Skeptical and Cautious**

Impressions like strangeness and unfamiliarity are more neutral feelings compared to some impressions which will be discussed below.

Because of the ideology and propaganda of communist China, in the past, religions, especially Western religions like Christianity, were often labeled as imperialist conspiracy or feudal superstition. The CCP regarded Christian missionaries as agents or covert spies of Western imperialism and drove them out of the PRC. What’s more, in a country where Darwin’s evolutionary theory is so deeply rooted in its education system, the belief that God created everything is not so easy for people to accept and digest. The state-controlled educational curriculum emphasizes patriotism and socialism, promoting a purely materialistic and scientific worldview (Zhang 2016). Under this influence, some Chinese students’ views of Christianity were not just strange or unfamiliar, but skeptical and cautious.

Zhang was a Ph.D. student majoring in computer science at ISU. As a product of the Chinese educational system, the impact of the educational system on him was evident:

Zhang: I remember when I was an undergraduate student in China, someone gave me a copy of the Bible and asked me if I believed in Jesus or not. I was very dismissive of his question and thought it must be superstition which we shouldn’t believe. Especially since the Falun Gong incident had just happened. I was very against it.

Qiao: So, was your attitude towards different religions the same at that time?

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4 Falun Gong is a Chinese spiritual practice founded by Li Hongzhi in 1992. Chinese government viewed it as a cult and charged that the group was a threat to social stability and was seeking to overthrow the government. The Falun Gong incident refers to the campaign initiated in 1999 by Chinese government to eliminate the spiritual practice of Falun Gong in China.
Zhang: I came from rural China. It’s normal to pray to gods for help in rural China. The education in school was all about science, and religions were considered as superstition in the educational system. I think I was a good student at the school. I relied on rationality and believed in science very much. I didn’t believe in any superstitions. Actually, at that time, I wasn’t interested in any religions. I thought only science was the truth, anything else was just superstition.

In fact, participants who had a more skeptical and cautious view of Christianity before they converted were far fewer than I expected. Some of these Chinese students had to deal with the conflict between science and religion in the process of converting, which implies that the atheistic educational system was still effective and powerful in China. However, only very few of these students had a very skeptical view and a critical attitude like Zhang did when they were asked about their first impression of Christianity. Most of them had an unfamiliar impression and an open attitude. In fact, compared with these Chinese students, this skeptical and cautious view of Christianity was revealed more evidently from the earlier generation: the parents of these Chinese students.

Tao was an undergraduate student majoring in electrical engineering at ISU. He once knew very little about Christianity himself. However, his father instilled a lot of his views on Christianity in Tao. His father thought Christianity was a political tool Western countries used to influence China by changing Chinese people’s view of their own country. Tao didn’t know why his father had such a view of Christianity. Even though this happened at the time when he didn’t know too much about Christianity, he still thought his father’s view was very dull. In Tao’s opinion, we are in a new era where information is still developing and moving so freely, religion is unlikely to have a dominant influence on a country as has been seen in the past.

As their children were far away from them and lived alone in a foreign country, many Chinese parents were very concerned about their children’s safety. Things like Christianity, which they were unfamiliar with and had a prejudiced opinion of, were what they wanted their
children to stay away from. The following three cases show why these Chinese parents were so concerned about their child’s choice to believe in Christianity.

When Hao was interviewed he had already been working at a Des Moines company for over two years. Before Hao came to study in the U.S., his family told him not to go to any churches. His family thought the church was just like an underground gang or MLM (Multi-Level Marketing) organization; they would brainwash you and it’s best to stay away from them and be safe. Until he was interviewed, Hao still hadn’t told his family that he had converted. Since his parents were living in China, where people still had a twisted understanding of Christianity, he was afraid that his parents were not prepared to accept his new belief system. He hoped that one day he could bring his parents to his church in the U.S., and this would help them better understand what Christianity is.

Cai was 18 years old when she left China to enroll at a university in the United States. Four years after coming to the United States, Cai was baptized under an American church. Cai’s parents were concerned when she first became interested in Christianity during her freshman year:

We had only heard about Christianity but had never really come into contact with it or gotten to know much about it. When Cai began frequenting the church and then soon joined a church in her freshman year, we really didn’t understand and feared that it was like Falun Gong. Maybe she would be misled or possessed.

Just like Hao’s and Cai’s parents, Tong’s grandparents were worried about their granddaughter’s choice to become a Christian. They worried their granddaughter would be brainwashed and engaged in espionage.

In the beginning, many Chinese students’ parents were in opposition to their children’s conversion. They were afraid that their children were involved in organizations like a cult, underground gang, or MLM, and they were concerned that their children might be used and
exploited by Western hostile forces or espionage organizations. Most of these parents were born in the 1950s or 1960s, and they experienced the Cultural Revolution. The ideological image of religion in their minds still influenced how they perceived their children’s conversion to Christianity. These Chinese students were born after China started its reform and opening policy in 1978. With a more open and tolerant social and religious atmosphere to grow up in, they tended to have a friendlier and less ideological view of Christianity when compared with their parents.

**Favorable and Encouraging**

In addition to neutral impressions (strange and unfamiliar) and negative impressions (suspicious and cautious), few Chinese students had very positive impressions of Christianity before they became involved with the religion. These students had very favorable views of Christianity, and they felt encouraged to know and follow this faith.

Jie was an undergraduate student majoring in biology when she was interviewed. Jie and her mother had a very positive impression of Christianity. Jie and her mother came from a divorced family, and in their eyes, their Christian friend’s family was full of happiness:

One of my mother’s best friends came from a Christian family. I feel they live a very happy life. In fact, my family isn’t a very happy family. My parents have been divorced for a long time. On my mother’s side, three of my mother’s five siblings are divorced; on my father’s side, one of my father’s two siblings are divorced. I always feel that there is something wrong with my family. My mother and I have always looked for changes. We feel our Christian friend’s family is living a very happy life. Before I left China, my mother told me to go to church and see what’s really going on there.
Sun was an undergraduate student at ISU. Her parents were college professors in China. The first church Sun went to was a Three-Self church. The church was full of middle-aged and elderly people from rural China. People were singing hymns there, but Sun didn’t understand the lyrics. She also felt the way people were singing the hymns was rustic and countrified; she didn’t enjoy it very much and she felt a little bit out of tune there. All of a sudden, a middle-aged woman near her caught her attention:

She was a short, plum, bustling woman. She had very dark skin and hands with dark fingernails, I knew she must be a peasant with very little education. She had her husband with her. Her husband was wearing a green army jacket and a green army hat. While they were singing hymns, the husband was looking at his wife with an expression in his eyes that I had never seen before; the expression in his eyes was full of love. I was deeply moved by this scene. In my eyes, the wife was so beautiful at that moment.

In some Chinese students’ impressions, Christians were nice people; they were close and willing to offer any help. They were positive, happy, and full of love like the peasant couple Sun met. Their families were harmonious and supportive, like the Christian family Jie and her mother envied. These positive impressions were conveyed by the emotional performances of individual Christians, and it attracted a lot of Chinese students to set these Christians as their life models and to follow this faith.

**Conclusion**

This chapter discussed Chinese students’ knowledge and impression of Christianity before they were in touch with the religion. Since the Communist Party took over China in 1949, the Chinese government has been officially atheist, and its attitude to religions has always been

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5 Three-Self church is the church in China that belong to the Chinese Communist Party-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). The three “Selfs” are Self-governance, Self-support, Self-propagation, and respectively reject foreigners’ influence on the church leadership, foreign financing and foreign missionaries, while “Patriotic” indicates the church’s loyalty to China.
skeptical and non-promotional. Almost all Chinese students in this study had no or very little knowledge of Christianity beforehand. Compared with this same low level of knowledge, Chinese students had quite different impressions of Christianity. Most Chinese students felt unfamiliar and strange when they first encountered it. This reaction reflects the knowledge level of Christianity most Chinese students had. Few Chinese students had a skeptical and cautious view of Christianity; this number was smaller than the number of Chinese students’ parents who were concerned or against their children’s decision to convert to Christianity, and this was probably due to a religious atmosphere that has been evolving into a more open and tolerant one since the end of the religious vacuum occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Finally, Christianity also had a good impression in the eyes of some Chinese students, and through the emotional displays of happiness, niceness, and positivity, many Chinese students found Christianity appealing.

Though Chinese students barely knew anything about Christianity before, most of them had either a neutral or a positive impression of Christianity. This neutral or positive impression was very important as it made the Chinese students’ curiosities and interests in Christianity possible. This is the foundation, or the starting point, of the following faith-seeking journey. The curious people are here; then who connects them to Christianity? The following chapter will discuss how Chinese students were connected to Christianity via the work of a social network, as well as how they received the material, emotional, and spiritual support from the same social network.
CHAPTER 5. THE POWER OF A SOCIAL NETWORK

As discussed in the previous chapter, because of the religious atmosphere in China, many Chinese students had very little knowledge of Christianity before coming to the United States. On the contrary, the United States has a totally different religious atmosphere. It is characterized by the diversity of religious beliefs and practices, and various religious faiths have flourished in the United States. It was in the United States where Chinese students were first exposed to different kinds of religious beliefs and practices. So, how did this first exposure happen? Who introduced Chinese students to Christianity? And what kinds of roles did social networks play in Chinese students’ conversion to Christianity?

Social Network as a Recruiting Tool

In the studies of conversion, social networks are very important in explaining how people are recruited into not only new religious movements and organizations (Lofland and Stark 1965) but also conventional faith groups (Snow and Philips 1980). For example, among non-communal groups, such as Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists, studies have found that the vast majority of members—ranging from 59% to 82%—were recruited through social networks. Even among communal groups, such as the Unification Church and Hare Krishna, research has indicated that a significant proportion of devotees were recruited similarly (Snow & Machalek 1984).

In this study, the social network as a recruiting tool works in this way: it is the interpersonal bond between religious group members and potential recruits that plays an initial but crucial role in recruitment. These interpersonal bonds don’t have to be strong bonds; in fact,
the bonds in this study are weak ones. When such bonds exist, people often join. When such bonds do not exist, people fail to join.

Whenever a Chinese student comes to the United State to study, he or she would have many chances to be introduced to Christianity. At the beginning of every semester, campus ministries, local churches’ international fellowships, and Bible study fellowships send out flyers and hold different kinds of activities to attract newcomers. These activities include farm festivals, sightseeing trips, holiday celebrations, and potluck dinners. Among all these, dinner, especially Chinese dinner, is always the best way to reach Chinese students.

The participants in this study mainly come from two places: one location is a Chinese church, and the other is a Chinese fellowship under an American church. Both were evangelical churches and both were very active in evangelism. At both locations, every Friday night was open to both non-believers and believers, and church members were encouraged to bring newcomers with them. Normally, Friday night began with free dinner provided by the church. After dinner, people would be divided into different groups to study the Bible. Sometimes, there would also be preaching between dinner and Bible study. On some special occasions, for example, on Chinese New Year or Mid-Autumn Festival, the whole event would be much bigger, with more food, more people, and more activities. Many Chinese students in this study were brought into the church by their friends under such circumstances. The following are some Chinese students’ experiences on this subject:

When I arrived here as a new student, surprisingly, I was assigned a student mentor by my department. My mentor was a Christian and he was a deacon at the Chinese church. One day, he asked me if I’d like to attend their welcome party at the church. Since I was a very open guy and willing to try some new stuff, I said yes to him. (Tang)

When I was a freshman, I met an American friend at the orientation. He was a member of the Salt Company, which is a part of the Cornerstone Church in Ames.
After we exchanged our contact information, he invited me to a picnic. He told me that there’s a family group under the Cornerstone Church where we would hang out every Friday night and he asked me if I’d like to come or not. I thought as a freshman who didn’t know anyone, it would be a good chance for me to meet some new people. (Tao)

Just the day after I arrived in the United States, I went to the church. I was brought there by my Chinese neighbor. (Tang)

When I arrived here, my first roommate went to the church very often. I asked him why he went to the church so often and he told me that the reason was because the church had free food. I thought eating free food was not a big deal, so I started going to the church with him. This decision had nothing to do with God. (Wang)

Just like most Chinese students here, I was introduced by my friend (to the church). There were a lot of evangelistic students there; Christians are all keen to preach the gospel. (Ge)

My own experience as an interviewer can also be counted. After each interview was finished, the interviewees would always ask me if I’d like to take part in their church activities.

A successful recruitment consists of three elements: the first one is effective recruiting strategies from religious organizations; the second one is newcomers with open minds, and the last factor are the interpersonal bonds between religious group members and potential recruits. One of the strategies religious organizations often use is food. Rather than sitting in their own apartment and eating fast food alone, many Chinese students find that having authentic Chinese food at church while making some new friends seems more attractive. In the next section, I will discuss more strategies religious organizations use in recruitment.

The last chapter has already discussed Chinese students’ impressions of Christianity before they converted to it. Most Chinese students found Christianity was unfamiliar and strange, while others found it was favorable and encouraging. Regardless of their different impressions, they all had open minds and were curious about Christianity. In his seminal paper “The Strength of Weak Ties” (1973), Granovetter defines a bond (and its strength) as “a combination of the amount of
time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie.’ Based on this definition, the interpersonal bonds between religious group members and newcomers were weak ones. Though they were called classmates, roommates, mentors, neighbors, and friends by these Chinese students, in fact, they had just met and were just acquaintances. The interpersonal bonds in this study are a little different from the ones in previous studies (Lofland and Stark 1965). In previous studies, the interpersonal bonds were long-standing and strong ones; only when the religious organizations found ways to connect with newcomers and develop serious relationships with them did recruitment happen.

Indeed, the success of recruitment only meant the recruitment was successful. It did not mean Chinese students were Christians already, nor did it mean Chinese students had accepted Christianity as their faith. Many Chinese students just went to church for food, friends, or just for fun. The total number of Chinese students who stayed and eventually became Christian is much smaller than the number of Chinese students who initially got recruited.

The interpersonal bond of a social network was a key element in recruiting Chinese students. However, recruiting was not the only thing social networks can provide in this case. Social networks can also provide different types of support to Chinese students during the process of conversion.

**Social Network as Material, Psychological, and Spiritual Support**

For most Chinese students, the United States is an alien environment. They have no family, no friends, and no social connections here. Chinese students may encounter all kinds of difficulties due to the loss of a social network. In their study, Shanley and Johnson (2008) identify creating and maintaining new social networks as challenges for all first-year university
students. However, this challenge may be magnified by other factors for international students as they navigate new social and cultural contexts.

Compared with the new Chinese students, churches have already been operating in this country for a while. That means a well-established social network with the ability to help Chinese students was already built. Going to church may be the fastest and easiest way for Chinese students to build his or her own social network. In fact, many Chinese students go to church with such a purpose. They want to make friends and build their own social networks.

Immigrants’ churches help with adaptation to American society by providing much of the information and services required in the course of settlement in a new country (Ebaugh 2003). Similarly, Chinese students’ churches support Chinese students, especially Chinese student converts, in three different ways.

**Material Support**

If the church family can be of help to you, please feel free to contact us. We would be available to help you with things like finding furniture, getting a driver’s license and/or buying a car, dealing with health issues, improving your conversational English, moving things, or whatever your needs might be. We are here to serve.

The above are some words from the introduction web page of an international student ministry. This international student ministry is affiliated with an American non-denominational evangelical church in Ames. This section will discuss material support Chinese students get from the social networks of church members. In this case, material support isn’t meant literally; it refers to mundane help and assistance provided through the networks.

The most important prerequisite for people to move around freely in the United States is a car and a driver’s license. Even though the public transportation in Ames is great, it is still unable to cover every corner on the map. When Chinese students arrive at the airport, some
churches would arrange people to pick them up. People from church would also give free rides to Chinese students when they need to go to the grocery store or go to church. When some Chinese students decide to buy a car, they can get buying and driving tips from church members.

Lan was a Ph.D. student in animal science. During the time I was doing research in the Chinese fellowship, she was still a religious seeker. One day, she told the Chinese fellowship host that she wanted to buy a car and asked him to help her choose one. The host helped her test drive the car and make a deal with the dealership. After she purchased the car, people in the fellowship continued to help her with her driving test until she finally got her driver’s license.

Some churches also provide temporary housing and used furniture and appliances to newcomers. When I was leaving Ames last summer, I left some old furniture and appliances to a Christian friend. My friend was collecting used stuff for her church. When a new semester started, the church would give collected items to the new Chinese students who would need it.

The Chinese church is also a nice place for free and delicious Chinese food. If you ask a Chinese student, “Do you miss China?” He or she would probably respond like this: “Well, I miss my family, but I miss Chinese food the most.” The Chinese church and the Chinese fellowship provide simple meals to attendees every Friday night. On some special occasions, they would have potluck dinners where every guest contributes a dish. Churches attract the most Chinese students this way.

Some American churches have programs that aim at helping Chinese students or international students learn English and adjust to American culture. These programs give international students opportunities to improve their English through conversation, games, and topics of interest.
Those church members who have been working for a while also offer help to Chinese students who are seeking jobs in the United States. For example, while Hao was hunting for jobs, every time he met with the elder members of the church, they would help him prepare for his job interviews instead of discussing the Bible. A couple in Hao’s church also recommended him to their company. Another example was observed in the Chinese fellowship: Chong had been a member of the fellowship for a very long time. He had just finished his Ph.D. and started looking for jobs. One Friday night, after the routine Bible study and discussion, he didn’t leave immediately as usual. Instead, he asked another fellowship member to take a look at his resume and cover letter and help him polish them a bit. It is through the social networks of church members that working members help job seekers with their job-seeking processes and offer them job opportunities.

Above are several types of material support Chinese students get from the religious communities. However, what the religious communities can provide to Chinese students is not limited to what has been mentioned above. As the international student ministry introduces themselves, they would be available to help Chinese students with whatever their needs might be. The next section will discuss how religious communities can support Chinese students psychologically.

**Psychological Support**

Humans, finally, are social creatures. One of the deepest primordial human needs is simply to belong, to have a place among others, to feel secure in some tribe, village, or people (Smith 2007). Studying in a foreign country with no friends and no family around is lonely; a lot of Chinese students are eager to find a place to put themselves or a place to belong. Christianity provides a community where its believers could find social belonging. For many Chinese
students, churches and fellowships provide a lot of activities they can engage in, they feel connected, secure, and that they belong when they are engaged in the communities.

Chong met a group of missionaries at the English Corner where he practiced English with them. Those missionaries invited him and his wife to their annual family dinner. Chong also traveled with them to Chicago. At the time Chong was interviewed, they were still in contact with each other. Chong felt they were connected and thought they were like a family.

As an international student studying here, your life is relatively monotonous. You feel some kind of homeless and you lack affectionate bonds like family. At some point, the church is a supplement for this kind of life.

In the Chinese fellowship, there’s a prayer meeting every Wednesday evening. In the meeting, believers would pray for one another’s needs. When Chong was seeking work, the theme of the meeting became prayers for Chong. Praying for specific people or events occurred frequently in the fellowship.

Another example that shows how Chinese students find social belonging in religious communities comes from Tong. When Tong came to the United States, due to several reasons the pressure on her shoulders was huge. She described her life as being a mess at that time. One time she had stayed at her apartment and hadn’t seen a person for the whole month of August. A Christian friend saw her living conditions and brought her to the Chinese fellowship. The Chinese fellowship was celebrating Mid-Autumn Festival and many Chinese people were there. It was a fun and happy time, and Tong felt warm and connected there. After the Mid-Autumn Festival, Tong kept going to the Chinese fellowship. She found the fellowship members were very nice, kind, and caring. She had very few friends then, however, the connections she made with the fellowship members made her feel secure.
However, religious communities are not the only place where Chinese students can find an interpersonal connection, a sense of security, and social belonging. At the time, Wan just graduated from college and was living alone. For her, Christian fellowship was a place where she can make friends and receive comfort. The change occurred when she met her boyfriend. She left the fellowship, and one of the reasons why she chose not to go to fellowship anymore was that she built a small social network with her boyfriend. Actually, Wan wasn’t the only person who abandoned religious community after finding a partner. In Jie’s interview, she mentioned that two of her friends had stopped coming to the Chinese fellowship after they had boyfriends. These ‘boyfriend’ examples show how religious communities support Chinese students psychologically even though the support provider can sometimes be easily replaced by their boyfriend or girlfriend.

Through engaging in the religious communities, the isolated and lonely Chinese students feel connected, secure, and that they belong. The isolated person is—as we well know—normally less healthy and happy than the one who belongs to a group (Smith 2007). So, religious communities as social networks not only support Chinese students psychologically but also emotionally. One thing that needs to be clear is that it’s the social network, not belief, that affects emotions here. The belief factor will be discussed in chapter 6.

**Spiritual Support**

One of the phrases mentioned repeatedly in the interviews was “spiritual growth.” As already discussed in chapter 4, almost all the Chinese students had little to no knowledge of Christianity before they came into contact with it in the United States. For most Chinese student converts, there’s still a long way to go before they become mature Christians. In his “Becoming a Marijuana User,” Becker argues that marijuana users need to learn how to use the drug properly
in order to experience the “high” of the drug. Like Becker’s marijuana users, Chinese students need to learn how to build and maintain a personal relationship with God.

Every Friday night, the Chinese fellowship members would get together and study the Bible. Most of the time, the study was led by the host who worked full-time in the ministry. Most of the fellowship members were very new Christians, so the pace of studying the Bible was very slow because there were so many questions to ask: Who is Jesus Christ? How could he rise from the dead? What is the Trinity? How do I know God is working on me? How should I behave myself? How should I keep a relationship with my partner? How should I live my life?

For me, the most impressive question discussed in the meeting was about how to pray. This was also the question many believers struggled with in the interviews. When to pray? How to pray? What to pray for? What not to pray for? What is the response? The host spent eighteen years learning how to pray, and he shared his way of praying with the members at a meeting:

First, you should strengthen your belief in God. You should trust that he is the almighty God, and he will give the best to you. Second, confess your sins. Confess to God that you have limited ability and you need God’s work on you. Third, you start asking something practical from God. For example: “I want a good grade,” “I want a job,” or “I want a girlfriend.”

Besides how to pray, the host also told fellowship members what to do if they felt no peace in their mind and felt disconnected from God:

First of all, quiet yourself and recall the first time you chose to love God. Second, try to find the most valuable thing in your life. Third, think about how small a human being is and realize how much we need grace from God. Fourth, try to praise God with a true heart. Fifth, participate in the fellowship with sincerity. Sixth, follow the elder Christians’ advice regarding how to do things. Finally, serve and pray for others.

Questions like these raised during the process of becoming a mature Christian are countless. Some of the questions can be answered immediately, but some of them are not easy to answer. It may cost as much time as it took the host to find a single and satisfactory answer. Here,
the process of finding the answer is also the process of interacting with each other. Or, to put it another way: spiritual growth needs social interactions.

Besides the Bible study every Friday night, there were also a lot of other group activities where the Chinese fellowship believers could support their spiritual growth. For example, on every Wednesday night, there’s the prayer meeting where believers practiced prayer and prayed for one another’s needs. On Sunday, there’s Sunday service in the church. Occasionally, guest speakers came and spoke on certain themes. During holidays and breaks, the church and the fellowship organized member participation in different training camps; the one mentioned the most in interviews was the Christian Witness Center (CWC)\(^6\) in Kansas City, Missouri. There are about nine training camps conducted each year on the CWC campus where different camps are for different levels of believers. Through the Gospel Camps, many had come to believe in the Lord and God, and for some others, their spirit had been revived. Through the Discipleship Training Camps, the believers had given themselves to become true disciples of Jesus Christ (CWC 2013). To some believers, it was the training campuses like the CWC where intensive interaction took place and the spirit grew significantly:

The church organized us to go to a conference in Washington, D.C. At the conference, an American pastor talked about the concept of the Lamb in Christianity. It’s about why God was crucified and its relationship to the concept of sacrifice. After his talking, I found more understanding of the cross. My overall feeling about the conference was that I had more understanding and sensation of the Bible. I think it’s because of the conference environment; it’s full of Christians. Also, the content was much deeper compared with what we usually discussed in the Bible study group. (Tong)

\(^6\) CWC was founded as a mission organization targeting toward the Overseas Chinese living in the Midwest. It is currently serving forty some campuses from more than ten Midwestern states. The Chinese student population is over ten thousand within this region. They are mostly from mainland China (CWC 2013).
Chun also got a chance to attend a conference in Chicago. Before he went, he had a lot of questions and doubts about Christianity. He thought this was a very good chance for him to understand this belief thoroughly. He learned a lot about Christianity through listening to different sermons at the conference, and at the end of the conference, he finally made the decision to believe in God.

**Conclusion**

Above are all three functions the social network performs in the process of conversion. The differences among the three types of supports were not as obvious as they seem to be. In fact, they were overlapping with one another and not mutually exclusive. For example, when people received material support from the community, they also got a sense of psychological support from the material support. They felt loved and blessed when they were provided with the material support. In addition, when people sought spiritual growth by interacting with other members of the community, they felt a sense of belonging.

The first part of this chapter discussed how social network, especially the interpersonal bond between religious group members and potential recruits, plays an initial but crucial role in recruitment. In the second part of this chapter, it discussed how religious community helps Chinese students adapt to a new social environment materially, psychologically, and socially by providing different kinds of social services for them. Though these formal and informal social services attracted a lot of Chinese students to churches to get to know Christianity, it still could not be the main reason why they converted in the end for the following arguments:

First of all, the church was not the only place where Chinese students could access services that would help them adapt to a new environment. On campus, from school to department, at each level, there were different programs helping Chinese students adapt to the new learning and
living environment. For example, at the school level, the International Students and Scholars Office (ISSO) at ISU has a program called “Cultural Ambassador Program.” In this program, the ISSO pairs international and American students to help the international students adapt to the new environment at ISU. The American students help international students in many ways: having conversations in English with international students, answering questions about U.S. culture, academic experience, and rules and regulations of the school. At the department level, some departments also have programs similar to ISSO’s “Cultural Ambassador Program.” As mentioned in a previous chapter, one of the interviewees was introduced by his mentor—which was assigned by his department—to the Chinese church.

Second, the subjects of adaptation theory are immigrants. However, Chinese students are not immigrants because of their sojourner status (Gullekson and Vancouver 2009). According to U.S. immigration law, foreign students are not considered immigrants. They hold U.S. entry visas in non-immigrant categories for a temporary stay. They are expected to return to their home country upon completion of their study. Since sojourner and immigrant are different statuses and the purposes of their stay in the United States are not the same, the importance of adapting to a new environment may weigh differently on the minds of sojourners and immigrants.

Third, in comparison with the Chinese church, the American church is supposed to be a better choice for Chinese students to adapt to American life in terms of language and culture. However, the reality was that many Chinese students chose the Chinese church over the American church after experiencing both.

At the very beginning, I was in an American church, but I was not good at English. I had never seen some of the words in Bible before. Reading the Bible was like reading Greek to me. So, I felt I got very little in spirit when I went to American church and American family group. I could make some American friends there, but I felt it was not the reason why God put me there. God wanted me to know more about him and
know more about the Bible. In the end, I made a choice and switched to the Chinese church.

Wang’s story of choosing between the American church and the Chinese church is the story shared by many other Chinese students. From the view of adapting to American society, the American church is a better choice compared with the Chinese church in terms of authentic language and culture. However, the advantages of the Chinese church are also language and culture. Speaking the same language and living the same culture, it is easier for Chinese students to understand and have a connection with God. So, apparently, for these Chinese students, instead of acclimatization, their faith in God is their mission and priority.

Last but not least, conversion is not a prerequisite for Chinese students to get social services from churches. As some interviewees mentioned in the interviews, unlike some churches in China, churches in America don’t push people to believe. In general, the atmospheres of the churches involved in this research were relaxed and friendly; even if you were a non-believer, you can still eat, make friends, and ask for help there.

So, if adapting was not the reason Chinese students converted to Christianity, then what was it? The next chapter will discuss the actual conversion. It is discussed by attempting to answer the following questions: What is conversion? How do we define it? When and how did these students convert? And under what social and cultural context did they convert?
CHAPTER 6. THE CONVERSION

In Yang’s (1998, 2005) works about Chinese immigrants’ conversion to Christianity in the United States and well-educated young Chinese’s conversion to Christianity in urban China, he argues that to explain these phenomena, the micro-level factors of individual crisis, individual choices, and personal bonds, and the meso-level of institutional factors of organizational strengths and competitiveness are important but inadequate. The macro-level contextual factors are more important than the institutional factors and interpersonal bonds to explain these phenomena. The micro-level and meso-level factors need to be situated in the broader contexts.

For the Chinese immigrants in the United States and the well-educated Chinese youth in urban China, they shared the experiences of dramatic social and cultural changes at the different stages of China’s modernization. The dramatic social and cultural changes the Chinese immigrants experienced were wars, social turmoil, political storms, and the collapse of Chinese traditional cultural systems (Yang 1998). For the well-educated Chinese youth, it was the increasingly globalized market economy under political repression (Yang 2005). In this study of the overseas Chinese students, one of the broader contexts behind the phenomenon of religious conversion is the huge social and cultural differences between China and the United States. In addition to the social and cultural differences, another broader context is the life stage that overseas Chinese students were at, which emphasizes change and exploration.

The Contexts

For a young person, leaving home and going to a totally new environment to pursue higher education is never easy. First-year college students have to deal with new surroundings, people, and lifestyles while developing independence and self-reliance. For international students, going
to college is a more challenging experience. Besides dealing with what their native counterparts normally deal with, they also need to adapt to a foreign studying and living environment. Stanley and Johnston (2008) identify concerns for first-year American college students that include self-efficacy, creating new social networks, homesickness, safety, and financial struggles. In addition to these concerns, international students also experience challenges such as language barriers, legal status problems, cultural adjustment issues, and additional distance from their social support networks of family and friends (Rahman & Rollock 2004; Swagler & Elli, 2003; Tavakoli et al. 2009; Ying 2005).

The Chinese students in this study were either undergraduate or graduate students, or graduates who had been working for a little while. They were in their late teens and twenties. According to Jeffrey Arnett (2000), they were at the stage of life called “emerging adulthood.” Emerging adulthood is neither adolescence nor young adulthood; it is distinguished from both of them by relative independence from social roles and normative expectations. One of the characteristics of this period is that little in life has been decided for certain, and many directions remain possible. Usually, emerging adults explore various possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews (Arnett 2000).

As an emerging adult, there are many uncertainties and challenges in the process of studying and living in a foreign country. The data collected in this study shows that the uncertainties and challenges the Chinese students encountered mainly come from three categories: study, work, and love.

Study

For the Chinese students, study was the main purpose for coming so far to the United States. However, studying professional knowledge is not a simple and easy thing to do,
especially for people studying a new language. The language barrier could be a challenge for international students who aim to achieve academic success (Lin 2012). Some Chinese students in this study found that English was a big challenge for them.

Tong came to ISU as an exchange student. In order to enroll in her program successfully, she needed to pass the English test first. However, passing the test was a long and stressful process for her:

My English wasn’t good. I was preparing for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). I had tried a couple of times already but still wasn’t able to pass it. I tried once in July and the test score was 69, two points shy of a pass. I wasn’t happy with the result, so I tried a second time in August. It was another 69. I felt very bad, especially for my family back in China. Since my English was poor, it seemed that I was not going to be able to take care of myself. With such poor English, my parents started worrying about whether or not I could stay in the United States all by myself anymore.

The English test was only the minimum language requirement for school enrollment. If Chinese students want to understand what their professors and classmates were talking about and succeed in their classes, they must attain a higher-level proficiency in English. In this case, Ye had passed the English test. However, understanding class content was still quite a challenge for her:

I couldn’t understand the first class I had in the United States, so I borrowed the class notes from an American student who sat next to me. I asked her, “Can I borrow your class notes every time after the class? I can’t catch up and understand the class.” She was very nice and gave me her notes every time ever since then. In the end, it turned out that we were living in the same dorm, so she started helping me with my studies in the dorm every week.

In addition to the language barrier, how to learn and live independently in a foreign country was another challenge Chinese students had to face. For most Chinese students, especially undergraduate students, studying abroad was the first time they left home and were so far away. It was also the first time they started living independently. Back in China, before they
went to college, these Chinese students lived dependently with their parents and school teachers. When they came to the U.S., without parents’ and teachers’ care and supervision, some of them seemed to be lost.

When Wang just arrived at ISU, he found it hard for him to get used to the way people teach and learn here. He also became addicted to electronic games and pornography. Those two situations deeply affected his academic performance. The worse thing for him was when he fell into a vicious cycle: the worse his grades became, the less he wanted to learn. Under such circumstances, he felt very anxious and didn’t see any hope of getting out of this vicious cycle.

Chinese fellowship member Geng shared a similar experience with Wang. Just like Wang, Geng also became addicted to video games while studying at ISU. He didn’t go to class and kept playing video games day and night. His academic performance was affected so badly that he was warned once by the school. However, he wasn’t able to make a change, and later, was suspended from the school. He left America and went back to China. Back home, he felt huge pressure from his family and neighbors when asked why he was back and why he was suspended from school.

Work

Some Chinese students who study in the United States want to stay here after graduation. However, the reality is that the job market is rather competitive, and even if you already have a job offer, obtaining a valid working visa is another difficult task you need to deal with. Take the working visa H-1B as an example. The H-1B is a visa category which allows qualified professionals to enter and work in the United States. However, only a limited number may be granted each fiscal year. Under current immigration law, only 65,000 new H-1B petitions may be granted each fiscal year with an additional 20,000 available for those individuals with advanced degrees from a U.S. academic institution, which must be a public or other nonprofit institution.
and be properly accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting agency or association. The selection process is a computer-generated random selection process, it is popularly referred to as the “H1B lottery.” In the fiscal year 2016, the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) received over 230,000 H-1B petitions, which means only a third of the applicants for the working visa will be able to stay in the United States.

Hao encountered a lot of difficulties while looking for jobs in the United States. The company where he was doing an internship didn’t have a full-time job available for him at that time. So, he switched to another company which turned out had never sponsored a working visa before. Due to lack of experience, it was not until the due date that they submitted Hao’s working visa application successfully. After the difficulty and chaos, Hao got lucky and his application was finally approved. Since the number of working visas issued every year is limited and the selection process is random, there are many uncertainties in the whole process and the life direction of the person applying for a working visa becomes correspondingly unpredictable.

In addition to the restrictions on legal work status, the pressure and stress in the workplace was another topic mentioned in the interviews and the fellowship. The following is an excerpt from the interview with Zhong. It’s about her tough and stressful working experience at Foxconn:

It was my junior year and I had an internship at Foxconn in Shenzhen. I was living alone in that unfamiliar environment, but I was the kind of person who was accustomed to companionship and dependence. You know, working at Foxconn was stressful. My way of relieving pressure was to call my parents. However, unluckily, my parents didn’t charge their phones that day, so I was not able to get them on the phone immediately. I felt so anxious and unsettled. I started crying in my dormitory and wondered if there was anyone who could help me.

Love

As emerging adults, these Chinese students were also looking for intimate relationships with others. In emerging adulthood, explorations in love become intimate and serious (Arnett
However, the explorations are not always experienced as enjoyable; sometimes they could result in disappointment, disillusionment, or rejection (Arnett 2000). No one can guarantee that the relationship will work smoothly and perfectly forever. Such uncertainty of love once drove Tao crazy:

I met a girl and wanted her to be my girlfriend. When I asked her to hang out with me, she agreed. After we went to a concert and a dinner together, I thought she might be interested in me, and this was a good sign for me to continue to chase her. However, later, I realized that she had already had a boyfriend. I was confused and didn’t understand what had happened. My emotion during this whole process was just like running a roller coaster, and I felt so bad about that.

To Tao, his exploration of love brought him confusion and disillusionment. However, to the protagonists in the next story, love is no longer a sweet word, but a horrible and tragic one. In 2014, a Chinese undergraduate student from ISU was found murdered. Later in 2015, the murderer, who was claimed to be the victim’s boyfriend and was also a Chinese undergraduate student from UI, surrendered to police. In the court, the murderer called his act irrational and impulsive and said he was deeply in love with the victim but was unable to deal with her having affairs with other men (Lu and Hunt 2016). One of my interviewees was also involved in this case. Bai was an undergraduate student at ISU. He was the victim’s ex-boyfriend. When he heard the news and was asked to assist in the investigation, he felt sad, anxious, and worried. He said his mind was in turmoil.

It is worth noting that, for these Chinese students, uncertainties and challenges not only came from these three aspects of life but every aspect of life. However, for this specific group of people, and during this specific period of time, difficult life experiences mainly fell in these three areas. This is why the discussion in this section only focuses on these three scenarios.
Seeking Meaning

The first one of the basic tenets of symbolic interactionism is that individuals act based on the meanings objects have to them (Blumer 1969). Each individual has a meaning system to help them understand and respond to the world. Normally, the meaning system of the individual is able to integrate most life experiences into an understandable pattern, a meaningful whole. However, some events and experiences are not easily interpreted by the current meaning system. Usually, these uninterpretable experiences are out of people’s routine; they are often described as tensions, challenges, uncertainties, and crises (McGuire 2008).

The challenges and uncertainties in academics, work, and love brings in the questioning of the current meaning system or worldview. In addition to academics, work, and love, emerging adults also explore possibilities in worldview. According to Arnett (2006), few young people enter their twenties with clear ideas about their values, beliefs, and worldviews. At this life stage, while participating in life-changing events such as going to a college, applying for jobs, and having a life partner, emerging adults are striving to make sense out of the experiences, a process known as meaning-making (McLean & Breen 2009).

For the Chinese students in this study, the uncertainties and challenges they met drove them to search for meaning and to seek certainties amid puzzling uncertainties. The following are several examples from the interviews.

Zhong used to believe that a human’s subjective initiative can create everything. She always believed that the success or failure of the matter depended on her own determination. In 2008, the 7.9-magnitude Sichuan earthquake occurred in central China where over 69,000 people lost their lives in the quake. When the earthquake happened, Zhong was confused. She thought that nobody wanted this tragedy to happen, so whose subjective initiative was behind this
massive earthquake? It was impossible to prevent this tragedy from happening with people’s willpower. She felt that God is indeed there, and she didn’t need anyone to prove whether God exists or not.

When Tang was a college student he felt very mixed-up about life. He felt he was a self-abased person, but at the same time, he felt he was very conceited. He felt that he had a lot of problems and didn’t know the meaning of living in this world. Tang suffered a lot of setbacks in college, one of them being a serious illness. That illness had a big influence on him which made him start thinking about why people have to suffer so much, where the suffering comes from, and how people face it. He would be stuck in these thoughts and couldn’t help himself get out of it. All these sufferings had an invisible pressure on him; he felt life was meaningless and hopeless. Once, he even talked with his parents about how he wanted to commit suicide. While Tang was looking for the answer to his suffering, he found that the philosophy of existentialism seemed to be the answer to it. Existentialism is about finding the self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. Deeply influenced by this philosophy, Tang realized that he could either choose to surrender to the suffering and the pain that comes from it, or he could awaken his free will from the bottom of his heart to control, restrain, even defeat the suffering and the pain.

The next story comes from Chun. When Chun was working on his Ph.D., he had a lot of questions to ask about his life: What am I going to do with my Ph.D. study? Who will be my advisor? Which area of research do I focus? What kind of job am I going to have after graduation? What kind of life am I going to live in the future? How should I deal with my interpersonal relationships? What should I pursue in my life? What’s the most important thing in life? What’s the meaning of life? He had been thinking about these questions, and really wanted to find the
solutions to them. Chun made an effort to find the solutions. He looked into Buddhism, Chinese traditional literature like *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and Western Classics like Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions* and *The Social Contract*.

The last example comes from Chong. For a period of time, Chong felt empty. He felt everything was meaningless. The reason why he had such an empty feeling was that he realized what he learned from the textbooks and heard from the elders was fake. The patriotism and communism education he received was a failure in front of today’s society. By explaining where his emptiness came from, he mentioned a novel called *Ruined City*, which is written by the Chinese novelist Jia Pingwa. In a narrative that ranges from political allegory to parody, *Ruined City* incisively and vividly depicts politics and culture in a rapidly changing China (University of Oklahoma Press 2016). “In this novel,” Chong explained, “during the daytime, people pretend to be moral and impressive (GuanMianTangHuang, 冠冕堂皇). However, when it’s night, men behave like thieves and women behave like prostitutes (NanDaoNvChang, 男盗女娼). For me, just one word: ‘fake’. This had a huge impact on young people in their twenties, like me.”

As we can see from the examples above, when certain challenges and crises came into these Chinese students’ life, their current meaning systems were unable to interpret these experiences. When they didn’t have a comprehensive meaning system to help them make sense out of it, they tended to develop a feeling of meaningless towards this world and their lives. Under such circumstances, these Chinese students were all looking for a new meaning system to fill the emptiness regarding the meaning of life. The meaning systems they had looked into were diverse, but at the same time, messy. They included, but were not limited to, Chinese traditional culture (Confucianism, Daoism), Chinese literature classics (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), Western philosophies (existentialism), and Western classics (*Confessions, The Social Contract*).
In fact, whether these philosophies and classics could be considered as comprehensive meaning systems or not is still a question. Some of them are more like a social or political theory than a meaning system, and some of them are more like an idea or a value:

When I was in middle school, I had the view that life was meaningless. I didn’t have any goals or interests in doing anything; I just went with the flow. I was like a robot, instead of doing what I liked to do, I had been repeating the things I didn’t like to do. As I grew up, I started to understand the meaning of life slowly. It was doing what you like to do and having goals and something to depend on in your heart. (Tong)

I was looking for meaning. I used to believe that, while you are alive, you should travel around the world and see what the world looks like. You should help people around you and express your love for them, do what you want to do, and achieve your dreams. That’s the meaning of life. (Sun)

If most of these so-called meaning systems were not comprehensive enough to explain every aspect of an individual’s life, then why are the meaning systems Chinese students use to make sense of this world and their life so different and so insufficient? The answer is that in today’s China, there are not many resources from which people can cultivate and develop their meaning system. Even if there are several choices, people are more likely to be forced to accept an option instead of being allowed to figure it out on their own. As has already been discussed, the Chinese government’s attitude towards religions has always been skeptical and non-promotional. Many Chinese students in this study had never been exposed to any religion before, so religion as a meaning resource is unavailable in this case. Spence (1999: 226) once said, “a vast amount of China’s cultural heritage was destroyed… by war and Communist government policies.” Confucianism started to collapse during the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Attacks on Confucianism have continued since then and reached a climax in the complete destruction of anything traditional during the Cultural Revolution (Yang 1998). “Those who today identify themselves as Chinese do so without the cultural support provided by tradition,” (Cohen
1994: 88). As Chinese traditional culture is largely discontinuous, constructing a meaning system from Chinese traditional values seems to be extremely challenging in the current situation. After the destruction of Chinese traditional culture, the CCP replaced it with socialism, materialism, and patriotism. Most Chinese students are educated by these doctrines without any critical thinking from within themselves. The result is that the huge discrepancy between the doctrines and the social reality causes the empty and meaningless feeling of life many Chinese students experienced in this study.

While the Chinese students were exploring possibilities in worldview, the resources for them to do the exploration were limited in China. It was in the United States, after they encountered Christianity, that their inner emptiness was filled.

**Saved in Christianity**

With so many uncertainties and challenges waiting for them to make sense of and solve, the Chinese students were finally saved in Christianity. But the questions remain: How did they get saved? Why Christianity?

As has already been discussed in the previous section, for many Chinese students, the meaning systems that helped them understand this world were not comprehensive. In contrast, Christianity as a historical religion is a comprehensive meaning system that locates all the experiences of the individual and social group in a single general explanatory arrangement (McGuire 2008). A comprehensive meaning system such as this is called a worldview (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

The Chinese Christian students in this study are converted ones. The meaning of religious conversion varies widely for different people and in different disciplines (See Snow and Machalek 1984; Malony and Southard 1992). Among all these definitions, Lofland and Stark’s
(1965: 862) definition of conversion fits this study the most: “all men and all human groups have ultimate values, a worldview, or a perspective furnishing them a more or less orderly and comprehensive picture of the world… When a person gives up one such perspective or ordered view of the world for another we refer to this process as conversion.”

For the converted Chinese Christian students, the conversion indeed changed their worldviews completely. Back to the previous examples of Zhong and Tang; Zhong believed in a human’s subjective initiative and Tang believed in existentialism. Both doctrines have one thing in common and that is that they both have faith in individual will. After conversion, both Zhong and Tang gave up their previous worldviews: that people should give up themselves and their individual will. Instead, they should believe in God and invite Jesus into their hearts. For them, Christianity and the worldviews they used to believe in are completely opposite. The converted Chinese students who held this similar view are not limited to Zhong and Tang:

So, I think it is reconstructing my thinking system. I feel this belief is overturning the worldview I used to have. (Zhong)

Since I started believing in Jesus, I feel like I have been keeping up-to-date with my thoughts. It’s like “brainwashing.” I used to be “brainwashed” by communism, but now, it’s the Bible. No matter whether it’s my behavior or my point of view, they are completely different from the previous ones. (Wang)

Christianity has changed me into a totally different person. As for my worldview, I made a U-turn. My previous worldview was to work hard in order to live a stable and peaceful life, and I didn’t have much thought about what will happen after my death. After I began to believe in God, I now know my death is not the ultimate end. It’s just the end of my flesh and body; my life in spirit will continue. This is a huge change. (Chun)

The drastic transformation of worldviews not only changed the way Chinese students interpret their experiences, but also how they filled their emptiness and brought certainty and guidance to their lives. The certainty and security Christianity brought to the Chinese students
comes from two places: Christianity as a remedy for the absence of a comprehensive meaning system, and the belief of the content of Christianity. For the first one, as has already been discussed, the absence of a comprehensive meaning system to help interpret and guide the Chinese students’ lives was the cause of the empty and meaningless feeling they felt. After the Chinese students came into contact with Christianity, they found Christianity to be a stable meaning system which they can always rely on in this uncertain and ever-changing world. This meaning system also provides an interpretive scheme where they can find the purpose and meaning in their lives. When Chong discovered the untruths in Chinese society, he began to feel the emptiness and meaninglessness of life. This made him anxious and irritated. However, after he converted to Christianity, he regarded Christianity as his Polaris, where all meaning comes from. He gained something unchangeable and unbreakable inside him that he had never had before. Tong’s inside emptiness made her feel insecure about her life. She hoped that there would be someone or something that she could rely on and that she could find the goal and meaning of life to let her continue living her life. Through Christianity, she found security, spiritual support, and obviously, meaning. Tang was puzzled by the numerous meanings people had created for different life events; for example, marriage. Tang found someone’s marriage was happy, but another’s was not; someone didn’t believe in marriage and stayed single, or someone was married but decided not to have a baby. With so many choices from which he could choose, Tang really hoped that he could find an eternal and secure meaning system that he could stick with. In the end, Christianity was what he found.

The second place where certainty and security come from is the belief itself. Many converts in this study stated that Christianity had brought them joy and peace. This is a result of the hope God gives to them. Tang, who used to question why people have to suffer so much,
found the biggest change that happened to him after he converted to Christianity was that he had more hope than before:

I used to feel that the burden of life was pretty intense. Since I was a kid, my parents have been educating me to study hard because a good scholar can become an official (XueErYouZeShi, 学而优则仕). This means you need to work really hard to get ahead. This is also where my name comes from. The purpose behind working hard and being on your own is to make sure you live better than others, to make your parents live better, and to make your family proud of you. This is probably what China’s education is all about; it values personal efforts and achievements. To be honest, people would feel a lot of pressure and burden during this process because they have to always try to meet the expectations society has for them. I feel a lot more relaxed after believing in God. Of course, it doesn’t mean you become a person who has no ambition, it’s just that what you are pursuing has completely changed. There is a verse in the Bible that can express my idea very well. It says: “So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ … But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” If you pursue external things like what you eat, drink, and wear, the burden on you is intense, and you are living life miserably. However, if you pursue God’s kingdom and his righteousness, of course, what is God’s kingdom and his righteousness? This might be abstract to you. God’s kingdom and his righteousness are actually his life. God loves the world and in order to save the world, he gave up his life. His life is completely righteous and holy. It’s full of truth, kindness, and love. If you pursue such things and use your life to highlight the glory of God, God will give his grace to you greatly. Of course, the causality cannot be completely reversed. You don’t follow God only because of his grace. You find the meaning of life. If you can live the grace, truth, and life God gives to you, and highlight the beautiful life of God, you will find meaning and hope in every day. There is also a much bigger treasure in the future. Two thousand years ago, Jesus came to the world. He brought the gospel to people and he hoped that after listening to the gospel, everyone would accept it. After the gospel became widespread, the Lord will come to the world again. He will take his followers to heaven and build a beautiful new world there.

One of the changes in worldview after conversion is how the Chinese students view their lives. The Chinese students used to view their lives as their own; they were not only responsible for what they did to their lives but also the consequence of it. The meaning of believing in Christianity is actually believing there is a Jesus living inside you, and being a Christian means trying to live Jesus’ life fully. The life of Jesus is perfect. All you need to do is learn how to live
this perfect life fully. This new view of life changed the way Zhong saw the challenges and difficulties emerge in the course of doing her research project. She was no longer afraid of the challenges and difficulties as she used to be because her faith (that there was a perfect Jesus living inside her) instilled her with the confidence that she had the wisdom Jesus had to overcome the challenges and difficulties she would face.

Since the Chinese Christian students are supposed to live Jesus’ life instead of their own, then what they enact in their lives is God’s will and not their own. Speaking of God’s will or plan, the Chinese Christian students believed that God loves everyone, and he has a wonderful plan for everyone. So, when challenges and difficulties come up in the lives of the Chinese Christian students, their beliefs instructed them to not worry, just follow God and obey his words because these challenges and difficulties were God’s plan and God had planned the best for them. This concept in Christianity was the most popular both in the interviews and at the observation site.

As has already been discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the Chinese students in this study were at the life stage of emerging adulthood when they came into contact with Christianity. Uncertain was one of the main characteristics of their lives at that time. Like Tang and many other people, Qi used to always want the best and have a goal for herself no matter whether that was in school or at home. However, gradually, she realized one goal after another, that there seemed to be no end on this road. Faced with the uncertainties of her future, she felt extremely anxious:

When am I going to get married? When am I going to get a job? What kind of job do I have to look for? How much money do I have to earn in a month? You have to calculate how much money you can earn in the future with the profession you are studying in. You should know where you can find yourself a job and what the job
market looks like now. Everything makes you anxious; the examples I listed above are only some very small examples.

After Qi became a Christian, she realized that God had already planned for her life and that there’s really no need for her to worry about everything. When she was interviewed, she responded that, at least, she was able to not worry about big things in her life (e.g. study, work, marriage and etc.). For Qi, Christianity brought her peace.

The worry and anxiety about the uncertain future was a frequent topic in the Chinese Bible study group. The host always used it as an example to explain the content of the Bible. When the host illustrated what the uncertainties were, he always broke them down into the following five situations: graduation, work, green card, wife, and child. During my participant observation at the Chinese fellowship, a guest was once invited to give a talk at the Bible study group. The topic was about mental health, especially focusing on the anxiety people are feeling in today’s society, and how Christians could use their faith to deal with it. The guest speaker’s suggestion was the following: anxiety and depression result from focusing on the self, and the solution is to not focus on the old self and reconstruct the new self by learning God’s words and enacting Jesus’s life. One should use the inner power to control the outside situation; in this case, the inner power is the belief that God has planned everything and to leave the anxiety to God. Like the different situations the host mentioned, the stories the guests shared would demonstrate how inner power as a technique could be used to cope with the anxiety Chinese students encountered in their overseas life: one was about how to handle the stress and desperation that would occur in job hunting; the other one was about life after losing the H-1B lottery. These situations and stories just confirm the existence of the challenges and uncertainties the overseas Chinese students were facing and the negative emotions they were feeling from another angle.
The above section discussed how the insecure Chinese students with an uncertain future found meaning, peace, and certainty in Christianity. For these Chinese students, what they found most attractive in Christianity was how it was regarded as a comprehensive meaning system. On the one hand, this comprehensive meaning system made up for the lack of meaning in the lives of the Chinese students which caused their feelings of emptiness and nothingness toward life. On the other hand, Christianity was a comprehensive meaning system that changed how the Chinese students felt toward the challenges and uncertainties they met in their lives, and it was accomplished by applying this new meaning system to the interpretations of different difficult situations. For example, the belief of “a perfect Jesus living inside you” empowered the Chinese Christian students with confidence to overcome difficulties and challenges, while the belief of “God has a plan for everyone” eased the anxieties about future uncertainties. Both Christianity as a comprehensive meaning system and an interpretive framework brought meaning and certainties to the lives of the Chinese students, and it is in these two senses the Chinese students were saved in Christianity.

Conclusion

As international students studying in the United States, and at the same time as emerging adults, the Chinese students in this study encountered many challenges and uncertainties. These challenges and uncertainties, which mostly came from the aspects of study, work, love, and worldview, brought them to deeply question the meaning of their lives and looking for meaning to fill the emptiness. Christianity, as a comprehensive meaning system, not only fills the void caused by a lack of meaning in life but also provides an interpretive scheme to help interpret the difficult situations, easing anxiety and bringing in peace. In general, Christianity as a salvation to the Chinese students worked well in both spiritual and emotional ways.
Nevertheless, Christianity is obviously not the only comprehensive meaning system that exists in this world. So, in this case, why Christianity (Evangelical Christianity in particular)? Why not Catholicism? Or Jehovah’s witness? Some non-believers in this study rejected Christianity by saying that they had their own belief system or philosophy; some questioned why only Christianity is the way to salvation. These are the questions that this study was not able to answer but are definitely worthy of consideration for future research.
CHAPTER 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When I started researching the topic of this thesis, I was intrigued and motivated by the questions I had regarding the phenomena of overseas Chinese students converting to Christianity. Why did these overseas Chinese students choose to convert to Christianity? How did they become Christian? Is the atheist background a barrier in the process of becoming a Christian? What do these students think about Christianity before and after the conversion? After examining the experiences of Chinese Christian students in a public university in the United States, this thesis provides some answers to those questions. The following section discusses the key findings of this study, the limitation of the research, and future research that could be derived from this study.

Key Findings

In this study, almost all Chinese students had little to no knowledge of Christianity beforehand. Despite their limited knowledge, their impressions of Christianity were quite different. As a reflection of their knowledge of Christianity, most Chinese students felt unfamiliar and strange when they first encountered it. In the eyes of some Chinese students, the impression of Christianity was appealing and good. Few Chinese students had a skeptical and cautious view of Christianity. The result of this investigation of Chinese students’ knowledge and their impression of Christianity shows that, though the officially atheistic Chinese government’s attitude towards religions has always been skeptical and non-promotional, the religious atmosphere has evolved into a relatively open and tolerant climate since the end of the religious vacuum that occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Under such a religious atmosphere, the generally limited knowledge and the neutral impression made the Chinese
students’ curiosities and interests in Christianity possible. For most Chinese students in this study, this finding regarding Chinese student’s knowledge and their impression of Christianity can also explain why their atheist background wasn’t really a barrier on their journey to becoming a Christian.

In the previous research, the importance of the social network has been widely cited and tested in the sociology of religion (Lofland and Stark 1965; Snow and Philips 1980; Stark and Bainbridge 1980; Cornwall 1987; Roof and McKinney 1987; Jacobs 1987; Stark 1996; Stark and Iannaccone 1997; Mears and Ellison 2000; Nepstad and Smith 2001; Becker and Dhingra 2001). Also, in the studies of the conversion of immigrants, the social network that religious communities can provide helps immigrants adapt to a new country; they then respond to the challenge and stress they encounter in the process of adaption with converting to new religions (Lofland and Stark 1965; Smith 1978; Kim 1981; Warner and Wittner 1998; Yang 1999a; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Park 2001). The finding in this study is consistent with previous research of how the social network plays a crucial role in religious conversion. On the one hand, a social network, especially the interpersonal bond between religious group members and potential recruits, plays an initial but crucial role in recruitment; on the other hand, the religious community helps Chinese students adapt to a new social environment materially, psychologically, and socially by providing different kinds of social services.

The distinctiveness of this study is that—legally and mentally speaking—Chinese students as a group of international students are different from immigrants. First of all, they do not have to adapt and integrate into the new country as much as other immigrants must. Second, in addition to the church, the school is more likely a place where Chinese students can find the most comprehensive services they need to adapt to the new learning and living environment. Third,
theoretically speaking, the American church is a better choice for Chinese students to adapt to American culture in terms of language and culture, but the actual situation is that Chinese students choose the Chinese church instead of the American church based on the idea that they are able to get closer to God with less focus on integration and acclimating. Finally, conversion is not a prerequisite for Chinese students to get social services from churches; churches are willing to help anyone regardless of their religious beliefs. All the arguments above contribute to the conclusion that, despite the important role the social network plays during the course of Chinese students’ conversion to Christianity, it still cannot be regarded as the main reason why Chinese students become Christian.

In his studies of Chinese immigrants’ conversion to Christianity in the United States (Yang 1998) and the well-educated Chinese youth’s conversion to Christianity in urban China (Yang 2005), Yang points out that in order to understand the phenomenon of large-scale religious conversion, the micro-level factors of individual crisis, individual choices, and personal bonds, and the meso-level of institutional factors of organizational strengths and competitiveness have to be situated in the macro-level contextual factors. The dramatic social and cultural changes the Chinese immigrants experienced are wars, social turmoil, political storms, and the destruction of traditional Chinese cultural systems. For the well-educated Chinese youth, it is the increasingly globalized market economy under political repression. In this study of overseas Chinese students converting to Christianity, the contextual factors are different from those mentioned above. One of the contextual factors is the huge social and cultural difference between China and the United States; the other is the life stage of “emerging adulthood”, which emphasizes change and exploration. Both factors bring uncertainties and challenges into different aspects of the lives of Chinese students. When Chinese students realize their current meaning system is not
comprehensive enough for them to interpret these challenges and uncertainties, they start searching for meaning and seeking certainties amid the puzzling ambiguities. In the end, it is Christianity, both as a comprehensive meaning system and an interpretive framework, that brings meaning and certainties to the lives of the Chinese students and saves them in both spiritual and emotional ways. This finding is consistent with the symbolic meaning model, which emphasizes the explanatory power of religions. However, the uniqueness of this finding is that conversion as a transformation of the meaning system not only changes how people interpret their lives, but also this change in interpretive framework influences how people feel toward certain life experiences.

Limitations

I was a non-believer who was interested in Christianity and wanted to figure out why there were so many overseas Chinese students choosing to believe in God. I was also a Chinese student studying at an American university. These two identities allowed me to have easier access to Chinese Christian students, and I was also able to have an insider’s understanding of their feelings and experiences of converting from a non-believer to a Christian. However, as a non-believer, at the very beginning, it was hard for me to understand Christian terminology and Christian theology. This could be the obstacle on the road to my understanding the meaning of being a Chinese Christian student. As research progressed, my understanding of Christianity became deeper and broader; this was almost no longer a problem. Still, I consider my similar background to the Chinese students in this study to be a limitation to these findings and analysis. It is possible that the similar background may have made me adjust my own perspective to favor certain responses from participants over others.
It is important to note that participants’ experiences in this study do not represent all Chinese Christian students in the United States; this public university, where most participants come from, is situated in a small rural area. Therefore, their experiences are likely to be different from those who attend public universities in a large metropolitan area, private universities, and religiously affiliated universities, among other different types of institutions. This sample is neither completely representative of Chinese Christian students in the United States, nor completely representative of overseas Chinese Christian students, as it is a sample of convenience.

Future Research

For the Chinese students who converted to Christianity, the conversion is not only a change of worldview but also a formation of identity. The conversion, or the change of worldview, is in synchronization with the formation of the Christian identity.

Meaning and identity are intertwined (McGuire 2008). People locate themselves and their actions in their meaning systems. Meaning systems provide the interpretive scheme with which individuals interpret their life experiences. According to Stryker and Burke (2000: 284), identity refers to “parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies.” Identity is only a part of the meaning system. In other words, the meaning system not only informs the individual of what kind of role one is playing, but also “the purpose of the events in which one participates, and the significance of being who one is” (McGuire 2008: 31). So, as a Chinese Christian student, Christianity as a meaning system and their Christian identity are intertwined.

Many Chinese student converts described the process of conversion as a rebirth, a process in which “the old self fell apart, and the new self rose up.” According to their description, there
are many differences between the old self and the new self. Among all these differences, the key change is that the old self belongs to the human being and the secular world, and the new self belongs to God and the divine world. Human beings and their secular world are imperfect. Human beings have a lot of limitations and defects: they are selfish, arrogant, and jealous. Human beings are also short-sighted; they only care about wealth, fame, and status. All of these ideas are what they can get in this secular world. On the contrary, God is perfect. The new self comes from the new life God gives to us; it’s the life of Jesus we are trying to live out from the bottom of our heart. The new life God gives to us is perfect. It is full of perfect wisdom and holiness, and it is where all goodness comes from. Besides, our life is not only confined to life in the present world; God has a long-term vision and plan. There is an eternal hope in heaven. “The old self has already died; that’s a new self. A new self grows up from Christianity. Though we are still living in the flesh body, a lot of things have changed. Our behaviors and our thoughts are things that are not immediately changed, they are changing slowly.”

For these Chinese students, their conversion to Christianity is more of a transformation of self than a formation of Christian identity. That being said, the Chinese Christian student’s self-structure is something future research could attempt to look into. What’s the organization of the Chinese Christian student’s self? Where is the Christian identity located in the self-structure? What’s the relationship between Christian identity and other identities? Is Christian identity a “master identity” (Armato 2012) for Chinese students?

When this research was conducted, most participants had been Christian only for one or two years. The future research could do a long-term follow-up study on this exact group of participants, examining the meaning of Christianity to them after they have been committed to it for a relatively long time, or after the whole social environment has changed. For example, most
Chinese students will move back to China when they finish their study in the United States. How these Chinese Christian students will live with their new religious beliefs in a totally different country is worthy of future research.
REFERENCES


### APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

#### Participant Demographics

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*Qi was interviewed twice in this study.*
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW GUIDELINES

Interview Guidelines

**Background:**

Birth date & place, where grew up, parents’ jobs, high school and college (with dates)

Party membership

Occupational history (if appropriate)

Family history (if appropriate): how met spouse? spouse’s occupation? children?

Beliefs about religion growing up? (What did family believe about religion?)

**Can you tell me about becoming a Christian?**

When and where?

What people were most influential in your decision? How so?

What was appealing to you about Christianity? (Beliefs, benefits, relationships etc.)

What were the biggest obstacles to you becoming a Christian? (Intellectual, social, etc.)

Did you have other identities that conflicted with becoming a Christian?

How did you anticipate life would be different after you converted?

What difficulties did you anticipate when you were in the process of converting?

What have been the major differences in your life since you’ve converted?

What relationships have been most changed? Have you lost of gained important relationships?

What people in your life have been most supportive of your conversion? What people have been most hostile to it?

Ask specifically about closest relatives, e.g., parents, siblings, spouse.

What has been the most surprising part about converting to Christianity?

Who have you told about your conversation and what did you tell them?
Are there people you have avoided telling about your conversation?

Church Life
What religious practices do you engage in now that you’re a Christian?
Church attendance, prayer, Bible reading, etc.
What church do you attend and how did you choose it?
How is your relationship with your pastor? With other parishioners?
How do you think God is at work in your life?
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Informed Consent Document

Chinese Converts to Christianity
Investigator: Hongming Qiao

This study will examine the experience of Chinese converts to Christianity, including their reasons for conversion and the process of converting.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a Chinese Christian. You should not participate if you are not a Chinese Christian.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to converse with the investigator about your experience regarding this topic. Your participation will last approximately 2 hours. This conversation will be recorded.

There should be no risks or discomforts expected as a result of your participation apart from any you might normally experience conversing about the study’s topics. There will also be no compensation or direct benefits to you. However, it is hoped that the results of the study will be of interest to you and other Chinese Christian.

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: Following the interview, the audio recording will be transcribed; only the investigator will have access to this transcription. Your identity will remain confidential in any publication in any publications resulting from this study.

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study, contact the principal investigator Hongming Qiao, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University. (515-817-3997; hongming@iastate.edu). Or contact the supervising faculty member David Schweingruber, Department of Sociology, Iowa State University. (515-294-4079; dschwein@iastate.edu).
- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.
Participant’s Signature

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed)  

______________________________

Participant’s Signature  Date
Recruiting Email

Email for contacting and recruiting study subjects

Dear XX,

My name is Hongming Qiao. I am a Master student major in Sociology from Iowa State University. Right now, I am doing a study to examine the experience of Chinese converts to Christianity, which includes the reasons for conversion and the process of converting.

You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a converted Chinese Christian. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to converse with me about your experience regarding this topic. Your participation will last approximately 2 hours, and this conversation will be recorded.

There should be no risks or discomforts expected as a result of your participation apart from any you might normally experience conversing about the study’s topics. There will also be no compensation or direct benefits to you. However, it is hoped that the results of the study will be of interest to you and other Chinese Christian.

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Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: following the interview, the audio recording will be transcribed; only I will have access to this transcription. Your identity will remain confidential in any publications resulting from this study.

So, above is the introduction to myself and my study. If you are a converted Chinese Christian, and willing to participate in my study, please reply to me, I need your participation. Or if you still have question about this study, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Hongming

Master Student
Department of Sociology
Iowa State University
IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2374
515-294-4566
FAX 515-294-4187

Date: 5/16/2014
To: Hongming Qiao
403 East Hall
CC: Dr. David Schweinruber
404 East Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Chinese Converts to Christianity

IRB ID: 14-213

Approval Date: 5/16/2014 Date for Continuing Review: 5/16/2016
Submission Type: New Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.
- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.
- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.