

Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Christianity: The Importance of Social and Cultural Contexts

Fenggang Yang*

University of Houston

Why do immigrants abandon their traditional religion and convert to Protestant Christianity? Existing sociological theories of conversion are mostly based on studies of individuals who convert into cults. Factors of individual personality and interpersonal bonds in small networks, or assimilation motives, cannot adequately explain the growing phenomenon of conversion to evangelical Protestantism among new immigrant groups from Asia and Latin America. Based on interviews and ethnographic observations in Chinese churches in the Greater Washington, D.C., area, I argue that social and cultural changes in China in the process of coerced modernization are the most important factor for Chinese conversion to Christianity; identity reconstruction of immigrant Chinese in a pluralist modern society also contributes to Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity; institutional factors are of secondary importance. This study also has important theoretical implications to the ongoing debates concerning the reasons for and sources of growth among conservative Christian churches in the US.

Since the 1960s, the sociological study of conversion has focused largely on the conversion process of individuals to cults or new religions in North America (e.g., Lofland and Stark 1965; for reviews, see Greil and Rudy 1984; Snow and Machalek 1984; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989). Criticizing the narrow and distorting focus on joining or leaving "fringe" or "deviant" religions, recently a few scholars have instead studied "everyday conversion" to mainstream Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism (e.g., Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1991; Suchman 1992; Davidman and Greil 1993). However, the subjects in these studies are more accurately labeled, often by the researchers themselves, as either "returnees" to the religion of their roots or "switchers" across denominational

* Direct correspondence to Fenggang Yang, Department of Sociology, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204, e-mail: Fyang@uh.edu.

Research on this paper was supported in part by a dissertation fellowship from the New Ethnic and Immigrant Congregations Project (NEICP) directed by R. Stephen Warner, and a dissertation fellowship from the Louisville Institute. The Religion, Ethnicity, and New Immigrants Research (RENIR) project directed by Helen Rose Ebaugh provided me support as I was completing this paper. I am grateful to Helen Rose Ebaugh, Dean R. Hoge, R. Stephen Warner, Janet S. Chafetz, two anonymous reviewers, and several other scholars for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

boundaries within Christianity (see also Newport 1979; Roof and Hadaway 1979; Hoge 1981; Sullins 1993; Musick and Wilson 1995).

The growing phenomenon of conversion to Protestantism among peoples of Catholic Latin America and non-Christian Asia has received far less attention by sociologists of religion. In contrast, anthropologists and historians have done more studies of the "great transformation" of conversion to Christianity among peoples on all continents (see Hefner 1993), especially "the rapid spread of evangelical Protestantism in vast areas of the underdeveloped societies" (Martin 1990:vii; see also Horton 1971, 1975; Kammerer 1990). In American society, most post-1965 immigrants are from Asia, South and Central America, and many of the new immigrants have joined conservative churches, such as Pentecostals among Latin Americans and evangelicals among Korean and Chinese immigrants and Southeast Asian refugees (e.g., Smith-Hefner 1994). In this paper I argue that the conversion experiences of people from third world countries in political and social turmoil differ from those described in the existing literature. In particular, I focus on the conversion of Chinese immigrants to evangelical Christianity. I argue that their conversion involves factors beyond individual personality, personal crisis, and interpersonal bonds in small networks. To understand Chinese conversion it is necessary to examine social contextual issues and institutional factors, both in their immigrant experience in the US and in their pre-migration experience in their home country.

Debates concerning the growth of conservative churches have involved discussions of conversion in regard to the reasons for and the sources of growth (Kelley 1972; Hoge and Roozen 1979; Finke and Stark 1992; Roozen and Hadaway 1993; Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1973, 1983, 1994; Perrin and Mauss 1991; Perrin, Kennedy, and Miller 1997). However, these debates have ignored the increasing evangelical Protestantism of non-white (and non-black) people. Although the numerical significance of immigrant converts to conservative Protestantism is not yet clear, the theoretical importance of such conversions is beyond doubt. These are not "circulating saints" switching from one evangelical church to another, but converts from other religious traditions; institutional factors are important for their conversion, but there are more important contextual factors beyond American society. Chinese conversion to evangelical Protestantism is a case in point.

This study of Chinese converts to evangelical Protestantism in the United States is based on interviews and ethnographic observations in the Greater Washington, D.C. area. Following a brief description of the ethnographic site and methods, I analyze the significance of various factors of conversion among my sample of Chinese immigrants: assimilation motives, proselytization efforts of evangelical institutions, social and cultural changes in China, and Chinese responses to modernity in American society.

THE CHINESE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Between 1993 and 1994 I visited all Chinese churches in the Greater Washington, D.C. area (about 20 at that time), attended their Sunday services, and interviewed their pastors and lay leaders. Almost all the churches are conservative in theology and nearly half are nondenominational, a common pattern among Chinese churches in the United States (Pang 1995; Yang 1995). Following this I conducted an in-depth ethnography over a two year period of the Chinese Christian Church of Greater Washington, D.C. (CCC): participating in its various meetings and activities, thoroughly reading church documents and records, and interviewing church leaders and members from various backgrounds.

CCC is a typical Chinese church in several ways: it grew out of a fellowship group, and is conservative, nondenominational, and mid-sized. It was established in 1958 by a group of Chinese students and new immigrants with support from the International Students Inc., an evangelical student ministry organization. This was the second Chinese church in the Washington area. The first one was the Chinese Community Church, a mission church supported by mainline American churches with an emphasis on social services to Cantonese-speaking Chinatown residents. To distinguish themselves from the interdenominational Chinese Community Church, the founders of the new church named their church the "Chinese Mandarin Church," emphasized evangelism, especially to Chinese students and new immigrants, and insisted on independence from denominational affiliation. It changed to its current name in the early 1970s.

CCC is an average church in the recruitment of new members: not among the fastest growing Chinese churches, nor one of the smallest churches. In 1995 it had a registered membership of about 300, with average Sunday service attendance numbering about 270. Its membership composition reflects the general pattern of Chinese immigrant churches. Most members are well-educated professionals who immigrated from Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and other Southeast-Asian countries; more than half of them have college or graduate degrees; they live in racially-mixed, middle- and upper-middle-class suburbs. The church also has a sizable number of Chinese students attending universities in the region.

CCC is an evangelical church. Its collective rituals of Sunday worship service, Holy Communion and baptism, manifest strong influences of the Reformed tradition with a Baptist tone. The pastors who served this church for long periods all had theological training in conservative seminaries, such as Wheaton College, Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and Dallas Theological Seminary. Evangelism has been *the* mission of the church and it has almost no community service program except for the weekend Chinese language school. The church remains apolitical in reference to both American and Chinese politics.

The majority of CCC's immigrant members are adult converts from non-Christian family backgrounds. Membership records show that among immigrants who have ever joined this church, 72 percent were baptized at age 18 or older. Many received baptism at a much older age, in their fifties, sixties, or even seventies. Among its current members, 58 percent were baptized at this church. Many people who joined CCC through membership transfers were also adult converts who were baptized elsewhere in America or Asia. The high rate of adult converts is not unique to this church, but a common characteristic of many Chinese-American churches.

This high conversion rate is in remarkable contrast to previous Chinese resistance to Christianity. Between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth centuries, China was the "mission field" par excellence for Western Christianity. Thousands of Western missionaries made tremendous efforts to evangelize the Chinese (Brown 1986; Fairbank 1974). By the early 1950s, when Western missionaries were driven out of the mainland by the Chinese Communists, however, Christians remained a tiny minority in China, less than 1 percent of the population.¹ Christian missions to the Chinese in America fared little better. By 1952, after a hundred years of missionary efforts to Chinese immigrants, there were only 66 Chinese churches in the United States. Most were small congregations and had little influence in Chinatown communities (Cayton and Lively 1955). The increase of new Chinese immigrants since the 1960s sparked a period of rapid growth in the number of Chinese churches in America. By 1994 they had increased to 700 (AFC 1994). Some survey data suggest that as many as 32 percent of Chinese in the US today are Christians (Hurh and Kim 1990:20; Dart 1997). This high rate is unprecedented in the history of the Chinese in diasporas as well as in China. Moreover, large scale Chinese conversion to Christianity is continuing in the US.

The meaning of conversion varies widely among different religious groups and among different scholars (Snow and Machalek 1984:168-174; Rambo 1993:2-4). The common understanding of "conversion" at this evangelical church is that a person has had the experience of being "born-again and saved" (*chongsheng dejiu*), or has accepted Jesus Christ as the Savior and Lord into his/her heart. Anyone who wants to join the church fills out an application form, either for getting baptized at the church or for transferring membership from another church. This form provides some basic biographical information

¹ Statistics of Chinese Christians in China are hard to come by. G. Thompson Brown cites the numbers in 1949 of 936,000 baptized Protestants, 3,274,740 baptized Catholics, 600,000 Protestant catechumens, and 194,712 Catholic catechumens, totaling 5,005,452 (Brown 1986:78). Chinese Catholics and Protestants together composed about 1 percent of the total Chinese population of 450,000,000 at that time. Jonathan Chao estimates 834,909 Protestants in 1949 (Chao 1981:356), which is less than 0.2 percent of the total population. Overall, by 1949 it had "become evident that few of the Chinese people were likely to become Christians and that the missionaries' long-continued effort, if measured in numbers of converts, had failed" (Fairbank 1974:1).

and, more importantly, a testimonial of born-again and salvation experiences (*chongsheng dejiu jingli*). Church members expect every new convert to give public testimonies about how God has changed his or her life. Transferees are also expected to tell their conversion story or other Christian experiences before becoming fully accepted by other members.

During the time of my field work I heard many conversion stories at various gatherings and read many testimonials in the membership application forms, church magazines, and various newsletters. In total, I collected more than a hundred personal testimonials. These data were not based on scientific sampling, but subgroups of different social and cultural backgrounds in the church were represented, including people speaking different dialects and languages, and people from Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, Indochina, and other Southeast-Asian countries. I also conducted life-history interviews with dozens of church members, some informal and some semi-structured. I have also read many testimonials in nationally-circulated Chinese Christian magazines and heard many conversion stories in other Chinese churches and at various camp meetings.

Self-reported experiences are not always objective because converts can reorganize their biographical histories according to their newly achieved belief system (Beckford 1978; Snow and Machalek 1984). However, these materials are probably the best empirical data a researcher can expect in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of conversion. In this study, personal conversion accounts were cross-checked by participant observation in the church. Because I had an extended period of field work at the church, I observed some individuals going through the conversion process and interviewed them at various points in the process. These data corroborated retrospective reports.

LIMITS OF THE INDIVIDUALISTIC APPROACH TO CONVERSION

The individualistic approach to conversion has dominated existing studies and theoretical accounts. The most influential process model, that proposed by Lofland and Stark (1965), focuses exclusively on the process of individual-level religious change. Although it extends the scope of focus beyond individual psychology to interactive bonds and networks, these relationships are of an individual nature and the interactions with others are on an individual basis. This individualistic approach is partly determined by the research subjects, who are typically converts to cults or new religions in North America and Europe. Its focus centers on what kind of individuals convert and the process whereby individuals get recruited. Research of this kind pays little or no attention to the larger social and cultural contexts within which these individuals change their religion.

This individualistic approach is inadequate to understand the phenomenon of convert groups — collectivities with similar characteristics, such as ethnicity

or national origin, converting at a high rate in the same time period. When large numbers of Chinese are changing their religion now but not in a previous era, we must look for explanations beyond the individual's personality or personal bonds in small networks. Social, cultural, and institutional changes must be analyzed.

THE INADEQUACY OF ASSIMILATION EXPLANATIONS OF IMMIGRANT CONVERSION

Why do immigrants abandon their traditional religion and convert to an untraditional religion? This subject is not well-researched in the sociology of religion and immigrant studies. This is not surprising, as religious conversion among immigrant groups is a new phenomenon in the US. For earlier European immigrants, identifying with traditional religion was the norm, as Will Herberg (1960:27-28) points out.

Sooner or later the immigrant will give up virtually everything he had brought with him from the 'old country' — his language, his nationality, his manner of life — and will adopt the ways of his new home. Within broad limits, however, his becoming an American did not involve his abandoning the old religion in favor of some native American substitute. Quite the contrary, not only was he expected to retain his old religion, as he was not expected to retain his old language or nationality, but such was the shape of America that it was largely in and through his religion that he, or rather his children and grandchildren, found an identifiable place in American life.

In contrast, religious conversion has become noticeable among post-1965 immigrants, such as Pentecostals among Latin Americans and evangelical Protestants among Koreans and Chinese. Based on common-sense understandings, three assimilation explanations of immigrant conversions are posited. I will argue that all three are inadequate to explain the Christian conversion among new Chinese immigrants.

"Rice Christians"

One common-sense presumption is that some people join the church to gain material advantages without genuine conversion, as the well-known phrase "rice-bowl Christian" suggests. However, this is not a major motive for Chinese converts in the CCC for two reasons. First, like most Chinese-American churches, CCC has placed exclusive emphasis on evangelization. The church has had no consistent or systematic social service programs, such as job referrals or English-language classes for new immigrants. During my interviews, some Chinese pastors and lay leaders even objected to my referring to Chinese churches as ethnic or social organizations. They stressed that the church is a religious organization that exists for spiritual purposes only. Of course, as an ethnic church with an emphasis on fellowship groups, the Chinese church does

encourage members to care for each other, especially newcomers. However, the help is informal and often nonmaterial.

Second, most church members are well-educated, have professional jobs, and live in middle-class suburbs. They do not need the church for material support. The few immigrants who do need job referrals, English classes, or charity assistance are often family members of immigrant professionals. These people usually turn to their relatives for help, or to the many ethnic Chinese organizations and/or government programs that are available (Wang 1993). Therefore, Chinese churches focus on spiritual and psychological needs of the immigrants.

Assimilation to the Dominant Culture of the Host Society

Because about 86 percent of Americans claim a Christian faith of one kind or another (Kosmin and Lachman 1993), joining a Christian church would make the immigrant appear to be more American. However, this motive is not a major reason for the recent Christian conversion of new Chinese immigrants for several reasons. First, if assimilation was the goal, a good choice for these highly educated professionals would be to remain nonreligious. In contemporary American society it is no longer necessary to have a religion. Non-religious persons are accepted, especially in professional working environments, and religious expression is discouraged in the highly secularized, private, high-tech companies or government offices in which many Chinese work in the Washington, D.C. area. Nonetheless, professional Chinese immigrants, who work in highly secularized institutions, have converted in large numbers to conservative Christianity despite risking derision from others.

Second, if these new immigrants want to assimilate to American society through a church, a better choice would be to join a non-ethnic one. Many of these Chinese immigrants have reasonably high socioeconomic status, speak fluent English, and live in racially mixed suburbs. Many non-ethnic churches in the neighborhoods in which they live welcome and invite nonwhite people to join them. However, most Chinese converts have joined ethnic Chinese churches and often drive 20 to 40 minutes to attend them.

Third, if these new immigrants intend to make themselves more like mainstream Americans by becoming Christian, a better way of being Christian would be to join a mainline church. However, Chinese Christians have chosen evangelical or fundamentalist Christianity and subsequently have formed nondenominational ethnic churches. They see themselves as a minority, not so much in the ethnic but in the religious sense. They say that, although many Americans claim to be Christian, only a few are true Christians — those who are born-again. A young Chinese preacher clearly enunciated this sense of being a religious minority in a sermon in the fall of 1995. That sermon, entitled "Suffering and Peace," began with the reading of the biblical verse from John, 16:33 (NIV): "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace.

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."
The young man preached in Mandarin.

Christians will suffer the sufferings that Jesus once suffered. We suffer just because we are Christians. The disciples of Jesus were persecuted and hated by their contemporaries. . . . Christians have been suffering since the foundation of the church. It is not exceptional in the United States. Christians are often ridiculed by the media, by our colleagues, and even by our own family members. Not long ago a TV program showed an interview with a pastor. The pastor has been active in the anti-abortion movement. A woman, who once fought on the frontline for the right of abortion, suddenly converted and was subsequently baptized by this pastor. During the interview, the journalist asked the pastor: 'Are you going to use her for your purpose?' As the pastor barely said 'no,' without being able to complete his sentence, the newsman immediately said: '*suan le ba* [come on]!'

The phrase "*suan le ba*" plainly conveyed the unspoken words, "No doubt you will use her. How ridiculous you are for even trying to deny this." The preacher continued:

If a person never suffers for his belief in the Lord, this person does not truly belong to Christ.... I would like to challenge everyone: Have you ever experienced torment, derision, or bigotry because of your faith in the Lord? Are you willing to suffer for the Lord? Do you dare to face derision for your Christian beliefs? . . . Those who suffer for the Lord will be blessed by the Lord. We must be prepared to endure sufferings as Christians, even in the United States.

He pointed out that to be a faithful Christian incurs a cost in the world, including in American society. CCC members and other Chinese-American Christians share the concerns of American evangelicals, including views concerning school prayer, abortion, and the perceived moral decay and erosion of what they regard as the "Christian foundation of the United States of America."

Joining the Church to Meet Ethnic Needs

Some studies of immigrant churches argue that the motivation for joining an ethnic church comes from social needs for ethnic group belonging. This factor seems significant for many Korean immigrants (Kim 1987; Hurh and Kim 1990; Min 1992; Kwon, Ebaugh, and Hagan 1997). However, the religious motive was found predominant over social or psychological motives in attendance at Korean churches (Hurh *et al.* 1978; Hurh and Kim 1984). In reality, "among the majority of Korean immigrants, the religious need (meaning), the social need (belonging), and the psychological need (comfort) for attending the Korean church are inseparable from each other; they are functionally intertwined under the complex conditions of uprooting, existential marginality, and sociocultural adaptation for rerooting" (Hurh and Kim 1990:31). Similarly, joining the ethnic church for ethnic purposes is not the primary reason for Christian conversion among Chinese immigrants. Moreover, unlike the Korean immigrant community in which the Korean church has been the most well-established social,

cultural, and educational center, Chinese immigrants have had more numerous and diverse kinds of ethnic organizations and associations available to them. In the Greater Washington area, besides the old Chinatown organizations of *huiguan* (home-district and clan associations) and *tang* (triads or secret societies) (see Lyman 1974; Pan 1994; Wickberg 1994), there are at least eight active *tongxianghui* (home-province or regional associations), thirty *tongxuehui* (alumni associations of Chinese alma maters), thirty Chinese language schools, and about a dozen cultural clubs. There are also traditional Chinese religious groups, such as Buddhist temples and semi-religious *qigong* (meditation) associations. To find some ethnic group to join is not hard for new Chinese immigrants. They do not have to go to a church simply for the purpose of meeting their ethnic needs.

Of course, the Christian church has some unique structures and functions that other ethnic Chinese organizations and associations do not have. The structure of congregations and an emphasis on fellowship groups help new immigrants find social belonging; weekly meetings provide opportunities for frequent and intimate interactions with compatriots; the proclaimed teachings help to create a loving and harmonious community where new immigrants can find spiritual peace and psychological ease; church activities and youth programs help to foster a moral environment for nurturing the growing second generation. No other type of ethnic Chinese organization or association serve these functions in the way that ethnic Christian churches do. These features of the church are attractive to many new immigrants. Nevertheless, at this evangelical church, people can hardly gain integration without religious conversion.

In brief, desires for material benefits, for assimilation, or for ethnic belonging are not major factors for Christian conversion among new Chinese immigrants in the United States. They do not need the church for material support or to make themselves look more "American." However, the ethnic church does provide psychological and spiritual support that other ethnic Chinese associations do not.

THE SECONDARY IMPORTANCE OF INSTITUTIONAL FACTORS

Why are conservative churches growing while mainline churches are declining? These changes of American religion since the 1960s have been well-documented (see Hoge and Roozen 1979; Roozen and Hadaway 1993). In the debates about reasons for conservative growth, some scholars have emphasized the importance of institutional factors (e.g., Kelley 1972; Iannaccone 1994; Finke and Stark 1992). Finke and Stark (1992) contend that in a religious free market, the growing churches are those that have efficient polity and clergy, attractive theologies and services, and good recruitment strategies. In other words, institutional factors are the key to understanding why people join conservative churches while leaving liberal or mainline churches. Of more importance to this study of immigrant conversion, the phenomenon of conservative growth

and liberal decline is not limited within the religious free market of the US. In world missions, whereas mainline denominations have reduced their energy and resources, evangelical Christians have been persistent, expanding, and often triumphing, including in countries where Christian proselytization is restricted (see Stoll 1990, particularly chapter four).

Institutional factors appear to be important in Chinese conversion to Christianity, especially to conservative Protestantism. First, some CCC members attribute their conversion to the influence of Western missionary schools in China and Southeast Asia. Chinese parents send their children to missionary schools because of their better teaching quality compared with other schools. Although these parents often have no desire to see their children convert to Christianity, Christian education is a major purpose of these missionary schools. Anna Lee,² born in Hong Kong in 1961, told her story in her baptismal record.

I attended Christian schools in Hong Kong. At school I learned biblical stories and Christian teachings. But my parents were Buddhists and prohibited me from going to church. I came to the US four years ago. I was invited to the Carmel Fellowship of this church last Christmas and finally I found the home of the Lord.

Second, the most active converting agents for the Chinese have been evangelical missionaries in Asia, campus evangelical organizations in North America, and conservative Chinese churches and organizations in the US. After 1950, all Western missionaries were frightened away or expelled from mainland China. Most of the active missionaries who remained in Asia were conservative. They relocated to Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Southeast-Asian countries and have continued to work among the Chinese. For example, China Inland Mission, once the largest interdenominational missionary society in China, reorganized itself to become the Overseas Missionaries Fellowship (OMF). OMF made its headquarters in Hong Kong and has continued to work among Chinese and other peoples in Southeast Asia. Some InterVarsity Christian Fellowship staff members engaged in campus ministries in Taiwan and Hong Kong. They helped to stimulate revivals on university campuses in the 1960s and 1970s. In the United States, conservative Christian organizations, such as the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the International Student Inc., Campus Crusade for Christ, and the Navigators have worked on campuses among Chinese students and facilitated Chinese churches in their student ministry.

Patterned on these American Christian organizations, Chinese Christian leaders have established their own Christian organizations. Two of the most active ones are the "Chinese Christian Mission," founded in 1961 in Detroit, and the "Ambassadors for Christ," incorporated in 1963 in Washington, D.C. Both began as Chinese student ministry organizations. Over the decades they

2. Pseudonyms are used in this paper.

have become multi-functional Christian organizations: publishing magazines, books, and multi-media evangelistic materials in Chinese and English; ministering to Chinese Bible study groups on university campuses and other places; organizing workshops, training seminars, and evangelistic camp meetings, and sending Chinese missionaries overseas. These Chinese evangelical organizations have contributed greatly to the evangelization of Chinese students and new immigrants. Today, Chinese churches and Christian organizations have surpassed other American missionary and Christian organizations in evangelizing Chinese immigrants.

Although institutional factors are apparent for Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity, the importance of these factors is only secondary. Historically, there were tremendous efforts put forth by thousands of Western missionaries in China and the US, but "the missionaries' long-continued effort, if measured in numbers of converts, had failed" (Fairbank 1974:1). Those missionaries who chose to continue to work among the Chinese in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia after they left mainland China around 1950 found unprecedented openness toward Christian proselytization among people who had fled the wars and Chinese Communists. Had there been no such enthusiasm among these Chinese migrants, there would not have been so many Christian organizations working to proselytize among the Chinese. Similarly, in the United States, without the enthusiastic responsiveness of Chinese students, refugees, and new immigrants, there would not have been so many Christian organizations and churches working to evangelize them. In other words, the intensification of Christian institutional efforts is not only a cause for increasing Chinese conversion, but also a reaction to the increasing responsiveness to the Christian message among the Chinese. In a study of recent, rapid Christian conversion among the Akha people in Thailand and Burma, anthropologist Cornelia Ann Kammerer argues that the intensification of missionary proselytization among the Akha people "is as much a reaction to as a cause of the increasing responsiveness to the Christian message" (1990:279). I find that this is also true for the recent wave of Chinese conversion. More important than the institutional factors are contextual changes that are internal to China.³

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CHANGES IN THE CONVERSION EXPERIENCES

In modern history China has been in constant social and political turmoil. In the meantime, Chinese cultural traditions have received repeated attacks by Chinese intellectuals and political elites. This social and cultural context is

³. Robin Horton (1971, 1975) also argued that internal changes of African society and culture were more important in explaining African conversion to Christianity.

crucial for understanding the recent wave of Chinese conversions to Christianity.

Chinese society has undergone dramatic changes in quick succession. As a third world country, China's modernization process was not self-initiated but forced upon it by advanced Western countries that were also colonial and imperial powers. This coerced modernization is consequently a process of turbulence and suffering, full of wars, political turmoil, and cultural interruptions and destruction. Modern Chinese history began with humiliation by British and other Western powers in the nineteenth century. This was followed by frequent domestic troubles and foreign aggressions. Wei-ming Tu (1994:vii) succinctly recapitulated China's turbulent modern history and the troubled Chinese identity.

The untold suffering of the Chinese people — caused by Western imperialism, the Taiping Rebellion, the collapse of the Manchu dynasty, the internecine struggle of the warlords, Japanese aggression, the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists, and the misguided policies of the Peoples Republic of China — contextualized the meaning of Chineseness in a new symbolic structure. Marginality, rootlessness, amnesia, anger, frustration, alienation, and helplessness have gained much salience in characterizing the collective psyche of the modern Chinese.

During this arduous process, various imported or invented philosophies have been advocated and put into practice as social experiments, including Western liberalism, social Darwinism, Marxism-Leninism, and various forms of Chinese traditionalism. Yet each experiment ended with further and deeper frustration in the hearts of the Chinese.

Most scholars of conversion acknowledge that some form of personal crisis usually precedes religious conversion (Lofland and Stark 1965; Bainbridge 1992; Rambo 1993). Any one life-threatening event can lead some individuals to religious change. Yet many contemporary Chinese have experienced more than one trauma during their stormy history. Simon Kiu, born in 1921 in Hebei Province of Northern China, recounted his conversion experience during World War II.

The summer of 1943 was a heightened period of the Anti-Japanese War. I was working underground in a Japanese-occupied region. Then the enemy found me out and almost killed me. I had to escape all alone to the far away Great Rear. During the fugitive time I had many disastrous dangers, but with the protection of the Lord I overcame all the problems and safely arrived in Sichuan [in Southwestern China]. I had already learned about the Dao [Christian teaching] before and upon arriving in Chongqing [in Sichuan Province] I received baptism and committed myself to the Lord.

For Chinese refugees from Vietnam, many experienced "miracles" before leaving Vietnam, on the fragile sampan in the open sea, in the refugee camp, or after arriving in the United States. Winston Ching was born in 1956 in Vietnam. He spent several years in refugee camps in Southeast Asia before coming to the US.

After I arrived in the US in December 1979, I was introduced to this church, where I learned about Jesus Christ. Actually, after I left Vietnam and wandered in strange lands, I often felt deep in my heart that there must be a God who helped me in everything and opened doors for me. Especially during difficult times the Lord was always with me, although I was yet to know the Lord at that time.

Suffering in wars, social turmoil, political campaigns, and natural disasters, many Chinese were forced into unwilling migration, both physically and spiritually. Many fled from home to strange places, where they had to struggle for life. Paul Tang, born in 1941 in Hunan, recalled the difficulties his family endured in Hong Kong as refugees.

After the Chinese Communists swept the mainland, my father led our family to flee to Hong Kong. But we did not know the local dialect [Cantonese] and customs. After many difficult struggles and great efforts we started to hold on. However, although we settled down physically, my soul could not find anything to rest on. We were lost and did not know what could make life meaningful. Then I met a pastor who introduced the love of Christ to my heart. Only then I began to see that life was interesting and hopeful, thus I committed myself to the Lord and decided to be a pious believer forever.

In this process of unwilling migration, many experienced “chain migration” — running from one strange place to another: they first left home to flee from war, then left the mainland for Taiwan or Hong Kong to flee from the Communists, then came to the United States as refugees, students, or immigrants, and wandered for years before settling down. For some of these unwilling migrants, the experience in the United States further intensified their spiritual needs. Fred Yu was very articulate about the sense of unrootedness resulting from his complex experiences in mainland China, Taiwan, and the US. Born in 1929 in Shandong, Fred was a college student when he fled to Taiwan along with the Kuomintang in 1949. After completing a college education in Taiwan, he came to the US for graduate study. He was baptized in 1959 in Minnesota. During a phone interview he said to me:

Mainland China is our dear homeland, but going back to that home is impossible because of the horrible Communists. Taiwan is not really our home, because we are regarded as *waishengren* [a person from a ‘foreign province,’ or mainland-born people]. The Kuomintang was terrible. They took flight from the mainland with little resistance to the Communists. In Taiwan they treated us who were not in the military or government as second-class citizens, whereas native Taiwanese were treated even worse. You see, we dare not go back to the mainland and we are unwilling to go back to Taiwan. We have to seek to plant our roots in the American soil [*luodi shenggen*]. However, here we have to fight hard battles for civil rights as a racial minority. It is not all that easy.

Because of the hardship of settling down anywhere in the world, some sojourners have a deep sense of homelessness, and consequently seek permanence or eternity in the heavenly world promised by Christianity. On the membership application form there is an item “permanent address.” Many members left it blank

and quite a number of them wrote down *Tianjia* (the heavenly home). This answer is not frivolous because many of these people truly have no permanent residence anywhere in this world. "The only permanent home," as one man said, "is in the Kingdom of God."

For many people from the People's Republic of China, their conversion was not the result of one specific experience, but often resulted from cumulative events over many years. Mr. Turan Lai, born in 1917 in Zhejiang, was a retired teacher when he immigrated to the US. He was baptized in 1988 at age seventy-one. His testimony in the baptismal record is very brief, but poignant.

The love of the Lord healed the wounds in my heart. Those wounds resulted from many years of persecutions in the mainland. The love of the Lord made me see the real home and feel warmth. In front of the Lord, I am a sinner, imperfect, should repeatedly make self-reflection and self-examination [these are the exact terms used by the Chinese Communists!]. . . . I believe in the Lord. I need the Lord. Only with the Lord can my heart have peace and joy.

The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, when the Chinese government crushed the pro-democracy student movement in Beijing, was the turning point for many mainland Chinese students and scholars studying abroad. Throughout the 1980s, few mainland Chinese in the US became Christians. In the 1990s, however, their openness toward the Christian gospel has amazed many people and stimulated the formation of evangelization organizations or ministries especially targeting this group of people. Pastors at CCC have baptized more than 80 mainland Chinese since 1989. Some prominent exiled Chinese political dissidents have also become Christians. They explicitly say that Christianity is the only hope for the Chinese nation (e.g., Yuan 1992).

Facing the difficulties of dramatic social change, some people cling to their traditional religions to find the meaning of life and the strength to live. However, during the turbulent process of modernization in China, Chinese cultural traditions have been mercilessly attacked, destroyed, and smashed to fragmentary pieces. The Confucian tradition has often been characterized as synonymous with Chinese culture. Confucianism as the Chinese orthodoxy (Weber [1922] 1968) began to collapse during the May Fourth Movement in 1919, amidst the national crisis resulting from Japanese and Western imperialism. Chinese nationalism was expressed in iconoclastic or radical anti-tradition sentiments — saving the Chinese nation through radically rejecting Chinese traditional culture (Lin 1979; Tu 1987). Attacks on Confucianism have continued since then and climaxed in the complete destruction of anything traditional during the "Great Cultural Revolution" (1966 to 1976) in the People's Republic of China. Today, the cultural identity of the Chinese is largely discontinuous. As one anthropologist observed, "Those who today identify themselves as Chinese do so without the cultural support provided by tradition" (Cohen 1994:88).

Without cultural traditions as barriers, the Chinese are now both free and bound to seek alternate meaning systems. Christianity is one of the available alternatives. It sufficiently answers the spiritual quest for many Chinese who have experienced life-threatening traumas, such as those described previously.

Why did the Chinese not accept Christianity until recently? In the past the Chinese regarded Christian evangelism by Western missionaries as an integral part of Western imperialism. Christianity was seen as a *yangjiao* (foreign religion) and Chinese converts were treated as traitors to the nation. "One more Christian, one less Chinese" was the common sarcasm. Today this political stigma has been largely removed for several reasons. First, Christian evangelists and preachers have made painstaking efforts to deconstruct modern Chinese history and uncouple Christian evangelism from Western imperialism.⁴ These efforts have been effective to a great extent. Second, Western imperialism in China has been gone for many years. The Japanese invasion and Chinese alliance with the United States during World War II further superseded the historical memory of Western imperialism. Third, Christianity has increasingly taken on a "Chinese look" with the increase in the numbers of Chinese evangelists, Chinese pastors, and Chinese Christian believers. Fourth, for many Chinese, after decades of "modern education" or indoctrination in Marxist universalism, "foreignness" is no longer a problem in choosing a religious faith or moral authority. Last, today the most advanced societies are "Christian countries" with Christian traditions. Chinese intellectuals, especially those under the influence of Chinese Communists, were once fascinated by the achievements of the Soviet Union and other Communist countries. However, the cruel reality of socialist experiments in mainland China and other countries has smashed their communist idealism. Many have subsequently begun to look to Western democracies as models of modernization. Some Chinese converts express the conviction that there is a causal connection between Christianity, on the one hand, and modern market economies and political democracy, on the other.

In brief, many testimonials of Chinese converts clearly attribute their religious change to their experiences of dramatic social and cultural changes in China. Modern Chinese history has witnessed many dramatic changes in quick succession, including wars, social turmoil, and political storms. In this process of coerced modernization, Chinese cultural traditions have been fundamentally interrupted, even collapsed. Moreover, the stigma of Christian evangelism and Western imperialism has been largely removed. Christianity has thus become one of the available alternate meaning systems that can sufficiently answer the religious quests of some Chinese. These internal changes are crucial factors for

4. For example, OMF published a booklet entitled "Christian Missionaries and the Anti-Opium Movement in China" (publishing year unknown). A catalogue introduction reads: "A brief history of how opium entered China, how China's anti-opium movement started, and how missionaries reacted to the opium trade to China."

the recent wave of Christian conversions among new Chinese immigrants in the United States.

RECONSTRUCTING CHINESE IDENTITY IN A PLURALIST MODERN SOCIETY

Why is evangelical Christianity more attractive to new immigrants? Besides contextual factors specific to the Chinese, there is also the American context or universal challenges of modernity and modernization. On the one hand, modernity tends to relativize and trivialize conventional religious beliefs (Berger 1969). On the other hand, however, conservative religions combat modernity by asserting absolute beliefs and strict moral standards (Ammerman 1987). The challenge of modernity is universal to all people in the contemporary world, but it has particular weight for immigrants. Nancy Ammerman finds that American "Fundamentalism is most likely to be found at the points where tradition is meeting modernity" and suburbs are often such meeting points where conservative churches are thriving (1987:8; see also Ammerman 1990). Many new immigrants from third world countries moved first from the village to the city before immigration, and then plunged into a highly-developed modern or post-modern American metropolis. Living in this fast-changing, pluralistic, relativistic, and chaotic world, conservative Christians are assertive in proclaiming that the absolute truth can be found only in the inerrant Bible. Evangelicals assure believers of absolute love and peace in this world and eternal life after death. For new Chinese immigrants, both pre-migration traumas and post-migration uncertainties in modern American society fortify their desire for absoluteness and certainty. Moreover, as well-educated professionals living in middle-class suburbs, what concerns these new Chinese immigrants most are not social justice issues, the main agenda of liberal Christians, but social group belonging and moral education for their children. For many Chinese immigrants, neither traditional Chinese religion, nor modern science, nor philosophy, *nor liberal Christian denominations* can meet this need as well as conservative Christianity.

The attraction of evangelical Christianity to Chinese immigrants also comes from its perceived compatibility with Confucian moral values. When Chinese immigrants construct their distinctive identity in the pluralistic American society, they naturally draw resources from traditional Chinese values. Although Confucianism as Chinese orthodoxy has broken down, many Chinese continue to cherish certain Confucian values, such as family and ascetic ethics, as defining their Chineseness. They want to pass on selected Confucian values to their American-born children. However, they have to confront the challenges of modernity. The authority of Confucianism in the past came from the dynastic state, the clan or the extended family, and traditionalism. These authority structures do not exist any longer for these immigrants in a modern society.

Appealing to tradition alone is not sufficient to make their American-born children accept and carry on Confucian moral values. Instead, the absolute notion of God in evangelical Christianity can be a powerful source of authority. Christian beliefs provide an absolute foundation for moral principles in the modern world, a foundation that has survived various modern and postmodern crises. It is common to see Chinese churches emphasizing the compatibility of Confucianism and Protestantism (Yang 1996). Chinese Christians often proclaim that both Confucianism and evangelical Protestantism emphasize familism and this-worldly asceticism (the Protestant ethic). Of course, as evangelical Christians they also criticize and reject Confucian agnosticism concerning supernatural beings. Because most Chinese regard Confucianism not as a religion but as a traditional philosophy of life, evangelical Chinese Christians can retain Confucian moral values without falling into a stigmatized syncretism. Absolute evangelical beliefs provide a foundation upon which Chinese church members can justify the strict moral and behavioral values which they impose upon themselves and their children.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

There has been a new wave of Christian conversion among new Chinese immigrants in the United States. While Christians remain a small minority in Chinese societies, some survey data suggest that the proportion of Christians in the Chinese-American population is as high as 32 percent, higher than any other religious preference. My ethnographic research finds that a majority of Chinese church members are adult converts from non-Christian family backgrounds. Most of them converted to evangelical Protestantism after coming to the United States.

Large-scale conversion among immigrant groups is a new phenomenon in the United States. Existing conversion theories, resulting from studies of conversion to cults or new religions, are limited by their individualistic approach. Assimilation approaches are also inadequate to account for Christian conversion among Chinese immigrants. I find little support for assimilation explanations, which suggest that immigrants change religion in order to gain material advantages, to adapt to the dominant religious institution of the host society, or to meet ethnic needs.

My extensive ethnographic data and interviews show that the most crucial factors for the recent wave of Chinese conversions to Christianity are social and cultural changes in China. China began its process of modernization passively, having had it forced upon the nation by Western powers. Modern Chinese history is full of wars with imperialist powers, civil wars, political storms, and social turmoil. Chinese cultural traditions have been seriously interrupted or lost. Coming from such a society, Chinese immigrants are both free and bound to seek alternate meaning systems.

Institutional factors are also important for understanding why most Chinese converts have converted to evangelical Christianity. Since the 1950s, conservative Christian organizations have worked hard to evangelize the Chinese in Asia and North America. However, these institutional factors are of secondary importance compared with contextual factors. The intensified Christian proselytization is as much a response to, as a cause of, the increasing Chinese responsiveness to Christianity.

Besides the contextual and institutional factors, there is another general factor contributing to conversion of Chinese immigrants to evangelical Protestantism. The universal challenge of modernity has more impact on new immigrants who migrated from the village to the city first, then plunged into the modern or postmodern American society. In response to challenges of pluralism and relativism, evangelical Christianity provides the needed certainty and absoluteness. The evangelical ethnic church also helps these Chinese immigrants to selectively preserve traditional moral values that are perceived as compatible with Christian beliefs, and thus helps to reconstruct their distinctive Chinese identity.

Most of the forces influencing these Chinese immigrants in America — dramatic social and cultural changes in the process of coerced modernization, challenges of modernity, and institutional efforts of evangelical Christian proselytization — have impacts also on other immigrant groups from third world countries and on peoples in other parts of the world. Further studies are needed to see to what extent the conclusions in this study can be generalized beyond the Chinese-American church.

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