

Lost in the Market, Saved at McDonald's: Conversion to Christianity in Urban China

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Protestant Christianity has been growing very fast in China under communist rule. This article shows that the converts are not all marginalized individuals deprived of material and social resources. An increasing proportion of the converts are well-educated young people in urban China. To explain this conversion to a nontraditional religion, the micro-level factors of individual crisis, individual choices, and personal bonds are inadequate. The meso-level institutional factors of organizational strengths and competitiveness are important, but religious organizations are severely constrained by restrictive regulations in China. I argue that the macro-level contextual factors are very important to understand the phenomenon of large-scale conversion to Christianity in China today. The crucial contextual factors are the increasingly globalized market economy under political repression. Christianity provides peace and certainty in facing wild market forces. The Christian faith is liberating amid a stifling political atmosphere. McDonald's is a prominent symbol of the globalized market, which, like Christianity, is perceived as modern and cosmopolitan within the Chinese context.

The “Golden Arches” of the McDonald’s restaurants have become common scenes in major Chinese cities, often conspicuously dotting the rapidly changing skylines. Walking through the arches are many young people seeking a sense of modernity and a new meaning of life in the globalizing market. It might appear incongruous to associate the icon of American capitalist culture (Ritzer 2000:5) with religious salvation. However, I have observed a close connection between the two in China that is fascinating and intriguing.

In summer 2000, when I was conducting field work research in Nanfang (pseudonym), a city in southern China, I interviewed about three dozen young professionals and businesspeople who had become Christian. When I asked my interviewees to pick a place to meet for an interview, McDonald’s was the most frequent choice. Moreover, several of my interviewees separately and fondly told me this story. Not long ago a McDonald’s on the top floor of a skyscraper in downtown Nanfang became a clandestine gathering place for the “Timothy Training Course,” an effective tool of Christian evangelism and discipleship. At the gathering inside the spacious restaurant, they would find a corner and spread out at nine nearby tables. Each table was for one of the progressive lessons of the course, with one or two leaders and up to 10 prospective or new converts. Several of the lesson leaders or evangelists were Americans. The weekly gathering of up to 100 people finally caught the attention of the police, who then raided the McDonald’s one night and took all the participants to the police station. The offense was illegal religious gathering. Government regulations require that all religious activities take place only within designated religious premises approved by the Religious Affairs Bureau. Fortunately, or by divine providence as my interviewees said, on that particular night the foreigners for one reason or other were not able to make it or arrived late, and thus avoided the trouble. At the police station, the leaders were sifted out through interrogations and ordered to plea guilty, or face extended detention and additional penalties. Passing midnight, the resistant leaders finally signed the pledge form to get out on bail by writing on the form, “we promise not to meet for Bible study again at this McDonald’s.” It satisfied the police, and my interviewees maintained that they had kept the pledge without having to stop gathering for Bible study. “We stopped gathering at *this* McDonald’s,” a young man said to me, “but there are dozens of them in this city.” A big grin glowed on his face.

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Why Christianity? Why McDonald's? Why do urban young people convert to Christianity in China today? The conventional wisdom tends to explain religious conversion by pointing to the marginalized social status of the converts, which is called the deprivation explanation (Bainbridge 1992). Following this line of thinking, some scholars like to point out that Christian growth in China mostly happens in the underdeveloped rural areas (Hunter and Chan 1993; Leung 1999). Given the fact that most of the Chinese population is still rural, it is not surprising that a majority of Christians in China reside in the rural areas. However, Chinese Christians are not necessarily more rural than the general population. In other words, the proportion of rural Christians among all Christians may not be higher than the proportion of rural residents in the general population.¹

Following the same line of deprivation explanation, some people like to say that most Christians in both urban and rural areas are old, female, and illiterate or semi-illiterate (Dunch 2001: 203; Hunter and Chan 1993:73). However, I have observed that an increasing proportion of urban converts are young and well-educated professionals. This is evident in the church statistics I present in this article, and it is also confirmed by other researchers. These urban young people have fared quite well in the growing market economy. What factors account for their conversion to Christianity? What does it have to do with McDonald's?

CONVERSION THEORIES

In the sociological study of religious conversion, the process model first proposed by Lofland and Stark (1965; see also Stark and Finke 2000:ch. 4) has been most influential. It extends the analytic scope beyond individual psychology or deprivation to social bonds and networks. Since the 1960s, most studies of religious conversion have been on the conversion process of individuals to cults or new religions (e.g., Lofland and Stark 1965; Barker 1984; for reviews, see Greil and Rudy 1984; Snow and Machalek 1984; Kilbourne and Richardson 1989), or on individual "returnees" or "switchers" within mainstream Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism (e.g., Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1991; Suchman 1992; Davidman and Greil 1993; see also Newport 1979; Roof and Hadaway 1979; Hoge 1981; Sullins 1993; Musick and Wilson 1995). Research of this kind pays little or no attention to the larger social and cultural contexts within which the individuals change their religion. This individualistic approach is inadequate to explain the phenomenon of large-scale conversions, such as the "great transformation" of a tribe or nation to Christianity (Hefner 1993), or "the rapid spread of evangelical Protestantism in vast areas of the underdeveloped societies" (Martin 1990:vii).

In the study of growth and decline of religious denominations, religious economy supply-side theory emphasizes the competitive strength of growing religious groups, from efficient polity and clergy, to attractive theology and services, and to effective recruitment strategies (Finke and Stark 1992; Stark and Finke 2000). The factors emphasized here are related to institutional features of the religious organizations themselves.

This institutionalist approach has been applied to explain the varied levels of religious revivals in post-Soviet societies as well (Froese 2001, 2004; Froese and Pfaff 2001). In those societies, the common pattern of religious change is the return or revival of the traditional religion that had been dominant before communist rule, although other old and new religions may have increased as well. In contrast, a nontraditional religion—Protestant Christianity—has been growing fastest in today's China, which continues to be under communist rule (Bays 2003; Hunter and Chan 1993). Religious organizations are severely constrained by the dominant atheist ideology, anti-religious policies, and restrictive regulations, which I will describe later in this article. Despite institutional constraints, however, Protestant Christianity has been exploding throughout China (Aikman 2003; Dunch 2001; Lambert 1999; Yang 2004a).

To explain the large-scale Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity among Chinese immigrants in the United States, elsewhere I have analyzed the importance of social and cultural contexts (Yang 1998). Before World War II, in spite of intensive proselytizing efforts by American

Christian churches and individuals, only a tiny minority of Chinese immigrants in the United States converted to Christianity. However, post-1965 Chinese immigrants have established hundreds of Protestant churches by and for themselves, and the majority of church members are adult converts from non-Christian backgrounds (Ng 2002; Yang 1999). Christianity has probably become the most practiced institutional religion among the Chinese in America (Yang 2002). I find 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. The immigrant experience as a racial minority in the United States further intensifies their existential needs for spiritual certainty. “Coming from such a society, Chinese immigrants are both free and bound to seek alternate meaning systems” (Yang 1998:253). The intensified Christian evangelism among the Chinese immigrants in the United States was as much a response to their increasing responsiveness to Christianity as a cause of Christian growth among them.

In short, 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. Are these arguments applicable to Christian conversion in China today? While China and the United States are very different societies, since 1979 China has been moving toward a market economy. More importantly, the dramatic social and cultural changes in the process of coerced modernization are shared experiences of both Chinese emigrants and nonemigrants.

In this article, I argue that the rapid growth of Christianity in China today certainly has important institutional factors: Christian organizations have been proselytizing. Individual psychology and interpersonal bonds are at work as well. However, the micro- and meso-level factors have to be situated in the macro-level, broader contexts. Reform-era China has been moving toward a market economy that is increasingly integrated in a rapidly globalizing world, yet the authorities maintain political repression. The emerging market is exciting and perilous, accompanied by widespread moral corruption, which prompts many individuals to seek a theodicy, or a religious worldview, to put the seemingly chaotic universe into order (Weber [1922] 1963). Facing the modernizing challenges, some people search internally in their cultural roots and find faith in a traditional religion such as Buddhism or Confucianism (Tamney and Chiang 2002), whereas many others search externally in other cultures, especially Western culture, and find faith in Christianity.

For the Western-oriented Chinese, Christianity is not something traditional, conservative, or restrictive. Rather, it is perceived as progressive, liberating, modern, and universal. For Chinese converts, Christianity is a faith that provides peace, certainty, and liberation amid bewildering market forces and a stifling political atmosphere. To the young and educated Chinese who are consciously seeking modernity and integration with the rest of the world, McDonald's appears to share similar characteristics of modernity and cosmopolitanism (Ritzer 2000; Watson 1997). What is more, in McDonald's is a beloved American flavor. Not the flavor of the food, but of American culture.

RESEARCH METHODS

This article is based on data gathered through participant observations and interviews at Protestant churches in several cities throughout China between 2000 and 2003. The baptismal statistics and interview data come mostly from Nanfang City in a southern coastal province, which in the reform era since 1979 has often set trends of change for the rest of the country to follow. Some data are from other cities.

Gathering religious data in China today is a challenging task. The government considers religion politically sensitive and tries hard to control religious affairs in order to maintain social and political stability. On the other hand, however, the government has allowed, even supported, the establishment of institutes for religious research at universities and social sciences academies (Yang 2004a). While leftist dogmatists in the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continue

to exalt Marxist-Leninist atheism, the more pragmatic officials have become more open toward religion. In the 1990s, the CCP top leader Jiang Zemin expressed the idea that religion could make some positive contribution to the moral order as China develops a market economy, although he also asked government agencies to remain vigilant in preventing religious organizations from becoming subversive. Since then the authorities have encouraged scholarly research to examine the social and moral functions of religion in China. Religious research scholars have become active, dancing with new ideas, carrying out creatively designed projects, and producing valuable publications (e.g., Chen and Huang 2004).

In cooperation with scholars at a research institute in Beijing, I organized a project to study Christian ethics and market transition. The project was approved by the relevant government authorities. Seven scholars or graduate students recruited from several universities worked with me. Together we carried out ethnographic research in eight cities, four on the coast and four in the inland. In each city we spent five to eight weeks doing interviews and participant observations at Protestant churches. Given the diversity of local political climates and cultural environments, the fieldwork research in the eight cities varies significantly. For example, in the inland cities, interviewees tended to be more reserved, whereas coastal city Christians were more open and responsive to our questions. Church leaders were generally cooperative, but some were less so than others. Most of the churches we observed were government-approved ones. We find that the boundaries between the aboveground and underground churches have become blurred. Some underground church members attend aboveground church services, while some aboveground church members are active in underground gatherings.

The first research site was Nanfang City, where we formally interviewed 35 Christians and informally talked with many more people, including inquirers at churches and students at a seminary. The formal interviews were semi-structured, including questions about conversion and religious participation experiences, job and business experiences, and marriage and family life. We used a tape recorder during most of the interviews and transcribed them with added notes. We also interviewed leaders of the provincial and municipal Three Self Patriotic Movement Committees, which are the organizational hierarchies sanctioned by the government to administer church affairs. From them we gained access to the summary sheets of baptismal records. These are the most comprehensive records of a city we could get throughout the whole project. Most of the churches in other cities either showed us very sporadic and inconsistent records, or told us that they did not keep baptismal records at all, which might be true in most cases. Because of the more complete baptismal records and the more forthcoming interviews we collected in Nanfang City, this article focuses on Christian converts there, supplemented by data gathered from other cities and published reports.

THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA IN THE 1980S AND 1990S

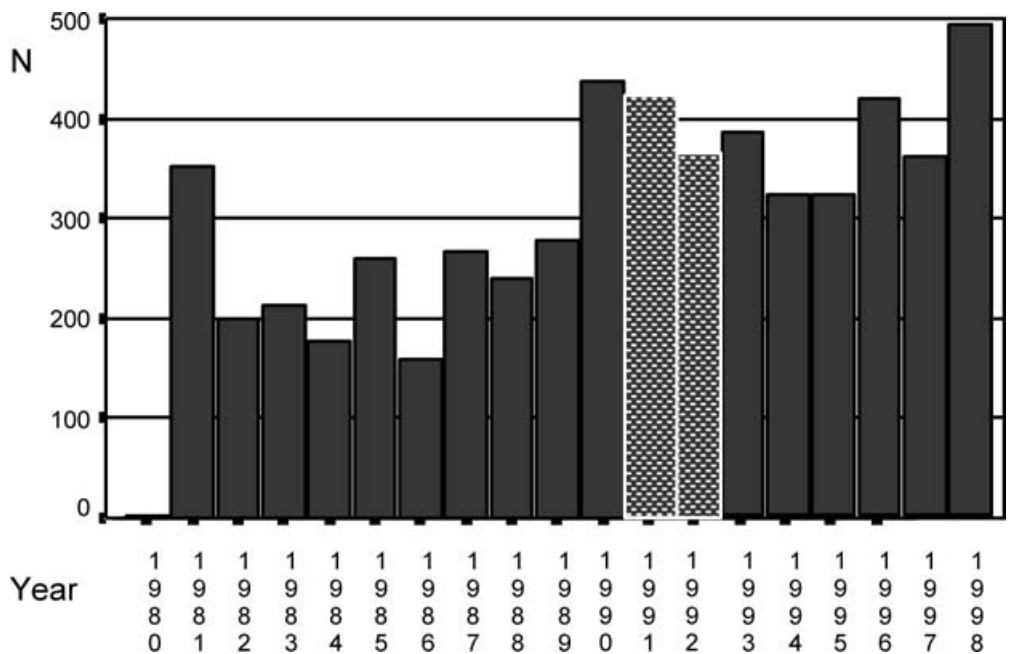
Christians suffered harsh suppressions in the first 30 years (1949–1979) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). When the PRC was founded in 1949, baptized and unbaptized Protestant adherents were between 700,000 to 1 million (Brown 1986; Chao 1981), which was about 0.2 percent of the total population at that time. The CCP regarded Christian missionaries as agents or covert spies of Western imperialism and drove them out of the PRC. Meanwhile, a "Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee" (TSPM) was set up for "self-rule, self-support and self-propagation," which in fact has functioned as part of the state control apparatus over Christians. Noncompliant Christian leaders were condemned as running dogs of Western imperialism and banished to labor camps or executed. By 1958, all Christian denominations and sects were disbanded. All Christians were forced to attend union services under the TSPM. Non-TSPM Christian gatherings were banned. When the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" broke out in 1966, all Christian churches, along with all venues of other religions, were closed down. Religious believers were forced to denounce their faith and Christian

ministers, along with all clergy of other religions, were forced to take secular jobs, sent to jails or labor camps, or executed. Yet Chinese Christians persevered by going underground (Aikman 2003; Chao and Chong 1997; Hunter and Chan 1993).

Since 1979, when the CCP adopted the pragmatic “economic reforms and open-door” policies, five religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestant Christianity) have been allowed to operate under the auspices of the “patriotic” associations. Some temples, mosques, and churches have been reopened for religious services. All of these religions have revived, whereas Protestantism has been growing fastest (Dunch 2001; Hunter and Chan 1993; see also Overmyer 2003). In the mid 1990s, the TSPM publicly reported that China had about 14 million Protestants (ANS 1997). This means a growth of 14 to 20 times since 1949 in spite of 13 years of eradication measures between 1966 and 1979. If underground “house church” Christians were included, the number of Protestants could be as many as 80 million (Chao and Chong 1997). Even if we take the prudent estimate of around 50 million (Bays 2003; Lambert 1999), it is still 50 to 70 times more than the number in 1949.

In Nanfang City, the baptismal records kept by the municipal TSPM indicate that Protestant growth accelerated in the 1990s. Eight churches had been reopened in the urban districts of Nanfang when we conducted the research in summer 2000. The total number of baptisms in all these churches between 1980 and 1998 is shown in Figure 1. The average number of baptisms (mean) per year in all eight churches was 215 in the 1980s and 389 in the 1990s. This does not include baptisms at the underground house churches in Nanfang, which might be as many or even more.

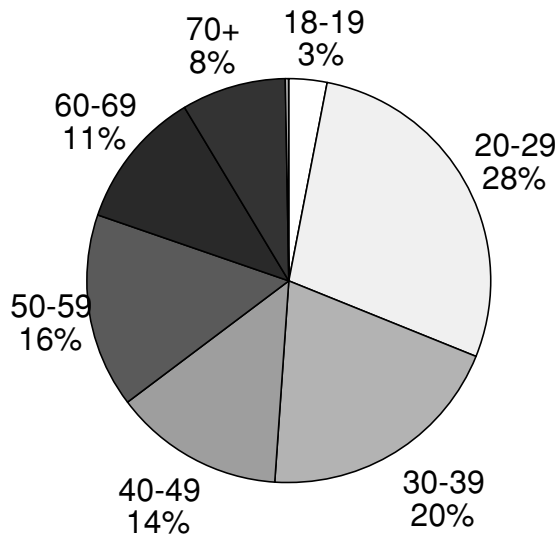
FIGURE 1
CONVERTS IN THE CITY OF NANFANG CITY, 1980–1998



Note: Only adults 18 years old or older were allowed to be baptized. Summary data of 1991 and 1992 from the Nanfang Municipal TSPM Committee were missing and the estimates are based on one large church’s baptismal records and the overall proportion of this church over the whole city in other years. These estimates are probably lower than the actual numbers.

Source: Baptismal records of the Nangfang Municipal Three Self Patriotic Movement Committee and baptismal records of individual churches.

FIGURE 2
AGE OF CONVERTS IN NANFANG CITY, 1993–1998



Note: Age information of the converts in other years was not available.

Source: Baptismal records of the Nanfang Municipal Three Self Patriotic Movement Committee.

The rapid and accelerated growth is apparent in other parts of the country as well. For example, in Feidong County, Anhui Province in Central China, the first TSPM church was formed in 1986. By the end of 2003, the TSPM Committee had established 70 churches and gathering points throughout the county, with over 22,000 baptized Christians (interviews with the TSPM leader). In Cangzhou, a small city in Hebei Province in Northern China, there was no Protestant church until 1993. By the year 2000, several hundred people had been baptized (interviews and observations). In Harbin, the capital of Helongjiang Province in the northeast, a study conducted in the mid 1990s (see Li 1999:320) reported that 72 percent of church goers at that time first began to attend church in the 1990s, 21 percent in the 1980s, and only 7 percent started before 1982. Similar patterns have been found in other cities.

More importantly, an increasing proportion of the new converts are well-educated young people. Figure 2 shows that in the 1990s, a great majority of the converts in Nanfang were young and middle-aged people. Over 50 percent of the converts were between ages of 18 and 39 years. Only 19 percent were 60 years old or older.

A study of Shanghai Christians shows a steady increase of younger converts as well. In 1980, 15 percent of converts were under 40 years, 30 percent between the ages of 40 and 60 years, and 55 percent above the age of 60 years. In 1990, 27 percent were under 40 years, 26 percent between the ages 40 and 60 years, and 47 percent over the age of 60 years (see Li 1999:321).

Given the increase of young and well-educated Christians, beginning in the late 1980s, TSPM churches in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Dalian, and many other cities started special worship services for young people (*qing nian ju hui*). The attendance at the young people's service was commonly in the hundreds, sometimes over a thousand. Many young people have also flocked into "house churches." Underground Bible study and fellowship groups have been present on many university campuses (Lin-Liu 2005). My observations and interviews in over a dozen cities throughout China provide much anecdotal evidence to affirm this.

No educational information about the converts in Nanfang was available, but the occupation information is indicative: only 30 percent were workers or suburban farmers. White-collar clerks

or professionals (medical, educational, technical) were 25 percent of the total, college students 7 percent, government cadres 5 percent, and business owners 4 percent. There were also 12 percent of unknown occupation and 16 percent retirees, who could have been in any of the occupation categories.

The above data contradict the commonly held impression that most Christians in China are old, less educated, and peasants. Even if that was a somewhat accurate description in the 1980s, we can say with confidence that an increasing proportion of the new converts in urban China are young, well-educated, middle-class people. Such young urban Christians also play increasingly important roles in the rapidly urbanizing China (Chen and Huang 2004).

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND EAGER SEEKERS

Institutional factors are certainly important for the growth of Christianity in China. First, Christian churches have been allowed to operate openly since 1979. By 1995, about 37,000 Protestant churches had been reopened for collective gatherings (Li 1999). Many of the urban churches began gatherings specifically serving young people, as mentioned above. These churches with buildings provide an institutional base for people to contact and practice Christianity. Second, in 1982, about 5,900 Protestant ministers were called back from prisons, labor camps, and secular jobs to perform religious services at government-approved churches. By 1995, about 18,000 Protestant ministers were active in TSPM churches (Li 1999).

However, the TSPM churches have been severely constrained by the government's anti-religious policies and restrictive regulations. First, almost all urban churches lack physical spaces. The government has strictly controlled the number of reopened churches. In Beijing, for instance, there were 66 Protestant churches in 1949, but only four are open now. In Shanghai, the 204 Protestant churches in 1949 were reduced to the eight that exist today. Document No. 19 of 1982, which set the foundation for the religious policies ever since, stipulates: "We should also direct the voluntary contributions of the mass of religious believers for construction work [of temples, churches and mosques], so as to build as little as possible" (see MacInnis 1989:17). Consequently, local government officials have been reluctant to grant building permits. In my fieldwork visits to about a dozen cities, all of the Christian churches had difficulties in getting permission to open more church buildings in spite of chronic overcrowding. During regular Sunday services, many worshippers could not get into the fully packed sanctuary, thus had to stand or sit outside the building, even if it was in the hot and humid summer in Guangzhou in the south or in the cold and windy winter in Dalian in the northeast. Such physical limitations are not inviting to nonbelievers.

Some creative pastors have successfully gained government approval for holding multiple worship services each week. However, almost all of such services were quickly filled to physical capacity as well. Besides, increased worship services put greater demand on ministers for preaching and preparation. Moreover, on Sundays when multiple services are held in a row, worshippers have to vacate the sanctuary quickly for the next service immediately following it, consequently having little time and space for fellowship interaction. This is not inviting to nonbelievers either. Even some long-time believers had become discouraged from attending church due to such spatial limitations and lack of fellowship interactions.

Second, in the government-sanctioned churches, the clergy/laity ratio was 1:508 in 1982 and 1:556 in 1995. Clergy shortage has been a chronic problem throughout China. The government insists that, among other things, only seminary-trained people can become ministers. The government prohibits "self-designated evangelists" (*zi feng chuan dao ren*) who do not hold an official certificate sanctioned by the Religious Affairs Bureau. The police often hunt down and punish such illegal evangelists. However, few people graduated from seminaries between 1949 and 1966, and none between 1966 and 1979. Moreover, most of the pre-1949 trained veteran ministers are aged, suffered psychological and physical tortures during the brutal Cultural Revolution, and became feeble. With such a low ratio of clergy to laity, even the newly trained young ministers

are barely able to meet the routine religious needs of existing church members. Most of the TSPM ministers I talked with expressed feelings of exhaustion in carrying out the routine tasks of preaching, counseling, and rituals, as well as in dealing with the usual harassments of the state control apparatus. These activities leave the ministers little energy to reach out to nonbelievers.

Third, the officially approved churches and ministers are not even allowed to proselytize beyond their religious premises. Document No. 19 clearly states:

No religious organization or believer should propagate or preach religion outside places designated for religious services, nor propagate theism, nor hand out religious tracts or other religious reading matter which has not been approved for publication by the responsible government department. (see MacInnis 1989:18)

Violators may face administrative penalty and criminal prosecution.

Of course, underground churches, evangelists, and foreign missionaries have been active in many parts of the country (Aikman 2003). However, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they were more active and effective in rural areas than in cities. This was because state control was usually less rigorous in rural areas. In the city, under the more vigilant watch and resolute measures of multiple government agencies (Religious Affairs Bureau, Public Security Bureau, Residential Neighborhood Committee, etc.), clandestine evangelization is much more difficult to carry out and sustain. Most efforts of urban underground evangelism is by individual Christians—fired-up domestic evangelists and “tent-making” foreign missionaries.² Because of the high risks of illegal activities, such individual actions tend to be random, informal, and inconsistent. It is difficult for such evangelists to maintain a long-time relationship with prospective converts, or continue networking and nurturing any new converts.

Underground house churches do exist in the city. But I find that most of them try hard to keep a low profile—limiting the gathering size, avoiding strangers, and singing and speaking in reduced voices during gathering. I visited a house church in a northern metropolis. By phone contact I was directed to meet a person in front of a McDonald’s (again!), then was led through high-rise buildings in a residential neighborhood, and climbed to a top-floor apartment. The small one-bedroom apartment was packed with about 30 young people—engineers, lawyers, managers, and graduate students. A keyboard accompanied the hymn singing, and the worship leader reminded the attendants to lower their voice and walk quietly to avoid disturbing the neighbors. A disturbed neighbor might inform the police about the illegal gathering. The pastor told me that when the attendance reached about this size they usually split into two gatherings in order to avoid attention by neighbors or the police. He also told me that they were aware of the existence of some other house churches in this city, but they did not network with each other. This was intended to avoid being caught in one dragnet. In case one house church is found out by the police, it would cause little harm to other house churches. Even if some participants are forced to confess, they would honestly have little to report about other groups. Occasionally, a house church grows very fast and through intentional splits becomes a system of numerous small house churches. This kind of group is on the high priority list of police crackdowns.

In short, evangelization by both the aboveground and underground churches is significantly curtailed by restrictive and repressive policies and regulations. However, institutional limitations have not stopped seekers for Christianity. Inquirers continue flocking to churches without invitation. “In south China, soon after the events in Beijing [the student-led democracy movement and the Tiananmen massacre in June 1989], over 200 students came literally knocking on the door of the local TSPM church seeking answers to their anguished questions” (Lambert 1999:156).

In Nanfang, a Christian leader told me this story. Some time ago an informal book club of young intellectuals in the city picked up some Western philosophical and theological books to read and discuss. Finally, they decided to read the Bible, which was considered one of the most important books of the West. However, discussions turned directionless and frustrating.

Eventually, they agreed to find “a true and educated Christian” to explain the true meaning of the Bible and Christian beliefs. A group of people became ready to be evangelized.

I observed with my own eyes something equally extraordinary. In summer 2000, as I was passing through a southern coastal city on my way to Beijing, I stopped by to visit a TSPM church's weekly gathering of young people. It was a humid and hot Friday. Rain began pouring in late afternoon. A friend and I took a taxi to the church, which was on the third floor of an abandoned factory building. Walking through the stairs and hallways ornamented with broken doors and ragged ceilings, I was expecting a small gathering on this rainy evening. Upon stepping into the large hall with bare brick walls, I was immediately overwhelmed by the scene of over 200 young people. I was guided to a small office in a corner of the hall, where a woman pastor in her 30s was chatting with a few first-time visitors while directing some co-workers to get things ready for the evening. Within 15 minutes before the start of the night's gathering, as I was hanging around at the crowded small office, the pastor received three phone calls. All were from strangers asking for the direction to the church and meeting information. And later they all came. After the gathering was over, some of the newcomers came to the office to ask questions. But the pastor was too busy to carry out a focused conversation with any individual. Without getting a chance to ask a question, most of the visitors bought some books and left. Before leaving, some told the pastor that they would return with questions.

During the service, I was offered a chance to speak to the congregation. I asked whether anyone would be interested in being interviewed for my research. Dozens came up and wrote their names and cell phone numbers on my notebook. Some wrote down their contact information on a piece of paper and tucked it in my hands. But I was scheduled to fly out to Beijing the next morning. Upon learning about this, several people followed me to the hotel, and two others called me later and insisted on talking to me the next morning before my flight. Interestingly, while they were very open in telling me about their experiences, they were no less eager to get answers to their questions about Christian beliefs, in spite of my repeated disclaimer that I am a sociologist rather than a preacher.

With so many active and enthusiastic seekers, it is not surprising to see the increase of discreet evangelistic ministries in spite of the risks. My observations suggest that evangelistic missions in China are more of a response to the growing interests in Christianity than a cause of the Christian growth. In fact, institutional resources are barely keeping up with the increasing demand. Demand is greater than supply, which is perhaps one of the factors for the flourishing of Christian-inspired new religious movements (Bays 2003; Yang 2004b). There are too many people eager to learn and accept Christianity, but too few qualified evangelists who have a good knowledge of Christian doctrines. The presence of so many seekers for Christianity signifies the importance of the larger social and cultural context.

THE CONTEXT: THE “SOCIALIST MARKET ECONOMY” IN THE GLOBALIZING WORLD

China has been undergoing dramatic changes. After more than a century of coerced modernization full of imperialistic invasions, civil wars, and political turmoil, in 1979 the ruling Chinese Communist Party launched “economic reforms and open-door” policies. By 1992, the CCP set as the official goal to develop a “socialist market economy.” Although it has been recited routinely in official documents and public speeches, the exact meaning of “socialist” in the “socialist market economy” is not clear to most people. In practical terms, it simply means the absolute leadership or the iron control of the Chinese Communist Party. The “socialist” market economy signifies political repression alongside economic liberation.

The transition from a planned economy toward a market economy has greatly liberated long suppressed economic productivity and creativity of the Chinese people, resulting in rapid economic growth that has continued for over 25 years. During this time, many processes of societal changes have happened rapidly and simultaneously, which have been documented or

summarized by social scientists (see, e.g., Dutton 1998; Davis 2000; Tang and Parish 2000). Without going into detail on these changes, suffice it to say here that industrialization is mixed with the information revolution, urbanization is accompanied by suburbanization, market transition coincides with globalization, and rapid modernization concurs with postmodernization. Amid these rapid, dramatic, and profound changes, social norms and bonds are broken down, conflicting moral values are chaotically entangled, and corruptions have become rampant. These social currents are disturbing and bewildering for many people, which may prompt individuals to seek a theodicy, or a religious worldview, to bring sense and order to their lives (Weber [1922] 1963). Struggling in the wild market with existential anxieties, many people begin to seek peace, security, and meaning in religion. Some people find salvation in Christianity.

Below, I use interview materials to illustrate the impacts of the market, globalization, and political repression upon the converts in urban China. Before doing that, a few words about the sample of interviewees may be necessary. In summer 2000, my research assistant and I interviewed 35 Christians in Nanfang City. We rarely explicitly asked about their age. Relying on some life-history events such as schooling and our subjective judgment, we believe that their ages varied from early 20s to early 50s, with the majority around 30 years old. Two-thirds of the interviewees were male. This gender bias in the sample was due to the constraints on me—a male researcher. It was less difficult for me to develop rapport with male subjects. My research assistant was a female graduate student. We interviewed most of our subjects together. I interviewed a number of male Christians on my own and my research assistant independently conducted some interviews with women. The interviewees include 10 owners or managers at private businesses or joint ventures, 15 professionals or white-collar clerks at companies, three working in the government, two college students, and some others who had no stable jobs in a particular occupation. Among the latter were at least two discreet evangelists whose living mostly relied on their own savings and/or donations from fellow Christians. They do not comprise a sample representative of all converts in this city. However, they reflect the growing trend of well-educated young converts in urban China.

LOST IN THE MARKET

The emerging market economy has allowed greater freedom for adventurous individuals. Before the economic reforms, jobs were assigned by the authorities and people's lives were bound by the assigned work unit (*danwei*), which was omnipotent in distributing every consumer product through a comprehensive ration system. Along with the increase of private-owned businesses, transnational companies, and joint venture enterprises, people have had more choices of jobs and lifestyles. On the other hand, a sense of security has been lost. In the planned economy, every urban resident enjoyed cradle-to-grave social welfare and every urban adult was guaranteed a job. For many, the emerging market was like the unpredictable and unfathomable ocean. Once you jump into it, you have to swim or sink, all on your own. Indeed, the emerging market in China has been wild. It lacks clear rules and regulations, and it lacks moral, political, or legal authorities to enforce rules and regulations. The market is primitive, chaotic, and perilous to individuals. All of the three dozen interviewees shared the sense of once being lost in the market, then finding salvation in Christianity.

After an evening gathering at the church, my research assistant interviewed Jennifer³ at a nearby tea house, which had a spacious and neat setting comparable to a McDonald's. Jennifer is 30 years old. Her long hair is fashionably permed and dyed brunette, loosely spread on her shoulders. Wearing a stylish black short skirt and sitting in a well-lit restaurant, she looks cool and pretty. But her story was heartbreaking. After graduating from a teacher's college, she became a kindergarten teacher in 1990. She loved the job and devoted herself to caring for every child. Before long, however, her boyfriend, a high school sweetheart whom she had dated for six years, broke up with her. He wanted big money, fame, and status, and a kindergarten teacher-wife would

not help. Bitterness filled her heart. In a pique, she quit the kindergarten job and tried various jobs in the hope of making more money. Wishing for good fortune, she burned incense sticks in front of Buddhas and practiced *qigong* for health. She also tried drugs, sex, and other diversions, but nothing gave her lasting satisfaction. By 1998, she felt exhausted, bored, and desperate. She once visited a church in 1992 and received a copy of the Bible. Not until 1998 did she begin reading the Bible seriously and participating in a young people's fellowship actively. She said:

At a prayer meeting, the Holy Spirit came upon me. I confessed my sins of communicating with devils [practicing *qigong*], premarital sex, drugs, bad relations with people, etc. After repeated confessions of all my sins, I was released, and completely changed. I realize that everyone has original sin. But Jesus' blood washes me clean. I found the Bible was full of light, so I finished reading the New Testament without pausing. Then I ordered that "all illnesses leave me." Miraculously, since then I have rarely become sick. My work attitudes have completely changed. In the past my relationships with colleagues were not good. I often felt hateful and jealous. Now when someone treats me badly, I don't get angry, but pray all the time. When you are filled with the love of Christ, anything can be changed. My current boss was very suspicious of me at the beginning, but I prayed for her, and now our relationship is very good. She even came to me to tell me about her family problems.

Like Jennifer, 29-year-old Monica is similarly pretty and fashionable. She loved literature and dreamed to become a novelist or poet. But her mother pressed her to get into business and sent her to a vocation school to learn fashion designing. Upon graduation her mother opened a wedding-gown factory for her. But that was not her interest. Failing to resist, Monica became extremely depressed. Only after a failed attempt of suicide by cutting her wrist did her mother give in and close the factory. After that, Monica attended an English-language school and tried various jobs, including working as a saleswoman and as a real estate agent. But she could not keep those jobs for long because she did not feel it was right to lie to the customers as was required by the boss. During this time her younger sister had problems with drugs and sex, and she herself also slept with various men. Her father also had extramarital affairs. Fortuitously, she met some college students from Hong Kong who introduced the gospel to her. In 1996, she and her sister were baptized at an underground house church. Under Monica's influence and persuasion, her mother finally accepted Christ and was baptized three weeks before our interview. Her father has also changed, and now refrains from even visiting questionable entertainment places. Monica now works at her parents' photo studio, which has 10 other employees.

Larry is a Nanfang native. After college he tried different jobs. For a while he was a salesman for a beer company. The job required him to work in the night, mostly trying to sell beer to nightclubs. He felt tired from working in the night and sleeping in the day, and felt bad about spending too much time at nightclubs. He had a girlfriend for six years. But after she worked at a joint venture company for six months, she married her boss from Hong Kong, then emigrated to Singapore. Larry was confused. How could it be that six months were more important than six years? Actually, they still loved each other, Larry said. When they broke off, both of them cried and cried. In Singapore his ex-girlfriend became a Christian, then urged him to go to church through phone calls and visits in person. Finally he agreed to try.

On the first day of 1999 I went to the church. It was Friday. I went again on the next day and again on Sunday. I stayed through the Mandarin service and the local dialect service in the morning and then attended the young people's worship service in the afternoon. During the "praise and worship" singing time, I suddenly felt that all of the nameless depressions and bitterness in my heart were taken out and away.

Larry had continued attending the church since then, and was to be baptized a few weeks from when I interviewed him. He had quit the sales job and began working at his father's garden construction company.

Jennifer, Monica, and Larry all had some hard experiences in the market, but they could be considered lucky in comparison with Cindy, who faced life-threatening challenges before conversion to Christianity. She was born in Hubei in 1964.

My parents' family origins (*cheng fen*) were not good. Father was a Guomindang (KMT) member and mother was the single child of a big capitalist. I'm the fifth of six children. When I was small, all our possessions were taken away. I felt very poor and always depressed. In elementary school, no matter how hard I tried I was not admitted to the Youth Pioneers. In 1980 I graduated from middle school, but could not go on to high school. My father was to retire, so he arranged for me to take a replacement position at the factory. I was only 16 years old at that time.

She had to work to support the family. While working as a lathe operator, she self-taught and finished high school courses on her own. In 1984 she took a special exam and was admitted to the Television College (*dian shi da xue*), a distant adult education program. Studying while working for three years, finally she earned a junior college diploma in law. Then she asked for absence without pay from the factory. That had become possible as the economic reforms deepened by that time. She found a temporary job at a law firm, worked very hard and did very well. But she could not become a formal employee because the law firm employees had to be cadres (*gan bu*) and her status was a worker (*gong ren*). She should have had an opportunity to take an exam in order to change her work status, but a government official in charge of legal affairs took the opportunity away and gave the position to his nephew. Such corrupt practices by governmental officials were not rare.

That was the year 1989. Some political factors were involved as well. We were defending some of the prosecuted activists of the democracy movement. But our law firm director told us to look out for ourselves, don't try too hard. There was also some stuff in dealing with the judges, which is hard to explain in one or two sentences. In short, my conscience could not bear it. So I quit, and came to Nanfang at the end of 1989.

Knowing nobody, she wandered to a small coastal city. Alone but determined, she ventured into a privately owned hardware factory. Luckily, she was taken in and became a warehouse keeper. At this factory of about 2,000 workers, through hard work, Cindy quickly moved up and became the office director. Soon the owner offered her a new position—the general manager of a liquid crystal manufacturing factory that had 600 employees. That was an exciting challenge for a young woman.

After two years, however, I felt tired of it because the factory had all kinds of people. Some were fugitive murderers who came here to hide. Some were gangsters and bandits. When I fired some men, they threatened to set arson on the building or kill me. So I quit, and then found a sales position at an appliance company. I first did exporting to other countries, then selling appliances in other parts of the country. As usual, I did very well. Shortly after I was assigned as the sales manager at my hometown in Hubei. While working for the appliance company, in 1992 I also opened a store selling auto parts. I worked from six o'clock in the morning till midnight all the time. I made some money, appeared to be a strong woman. And I began to despise men, and thought I could control my fate, control everything. I smoked and drank. And my psychology became somewhat abnormal. My male employees would tremble when they saw me. I often made fun of them, did some bad things. Then, suddenly, one day I found blood in my urine. The diagnosis turned out to be bladder cancer, stage IV. I needed surgery immediately. That forced me stop to think. I thought, what are all these for? What is the meaning of life? Nothing! None! I was not really afraid of death. I already had a rich and colorful life. Actually I sometimes envied those who had rested in graves. The night before the surgery, I took a notebook and wrote down: "life, ideal, career, whatever, everything is in the hands of God (*shang di*). No person can change it." At that time I did not know God, but after I wrote that, my heart strangely felt peace. The next day, before the surgery, the intern doctor took me to take another lab test. A miracle had happened. The cancer cells disappeared! My sister wondered whether it was a false diagnosis. Even the doctors could not explain it.

Coming out of the hospital, Cindy sold the auto-parts store and moved back to the southern city in which she used to work. From 1994 to 1999, she tried different jobs, made some business trips to Hong Kong, Singapore, and Vietnam, but all her business efforts ended up with failure.

In the past I could succeed no matter what I did. But now I failed no matter what I tried. I found nothing to hold up my life. I was like a walking zombie. I considered suicide. But I thought, life shouldn't be like that. I thought, there must be something that I should do and would never regret. But I did not know what it was. In 1999 I got a phone

call from a friend in Singapore, who suggested I read the Bible. I bought one and tried to read. Later I came to Nanfang to attend a psychology workshop. Another participant in the workshop was a Christian, who introduced me to the Timothy Training Course taught by an American named Tom. I took the course seriously, and read the Bible eagerly. During that period, all the past things passed through my head like on a screen. I realized that God protected me all along. I confessed all my sins, cried a lot to God. God is so good and loving. I experienced speaking in tongues. My heart had never felt so happy.

Since then, not only has Cindy become happy and peaceful, she has also begun sharing the Christian “good news” with others. She began leading the Timothy Training Course in her city. Her testimony helped many people convert. That made her think that what she had experienced was not meaningless, but was God’s preparation for her to do evangelism. In light of the new faith, all past experiences of successes and failures have become meaningful, useful, and helpful to others. When I interviewed her, she was preparing to become a full-time evangelist in Nanfang.

Within this social and cultural context, even good fortune may lead people to Christian conversion. John, a salesman for a pharmaceutical company, asked me to meet him at a McDonald’s. After graduating from a medical school he was assigned a job, but soon he quit and became a salesman. He told me that he could not understand why he had been successful in the perilous market while his former classmates or friends often failed. He did not think it was simply because of his wisdom or personal effort. “By chance or probability I would have been failed as well.” His conversion to Christianity was uneventful and had little intellectual or emotional struggle. He first visited a church on Christmas of 1995. He told me about it.

The hymns were beautiful. They sang and sang and sang, without stop. Very interesting. I thought, wouldn’t it be fun to come on Sundays to practice singing? The sermon was very good too. I understood it, although it was in the local dialect. It was very moving, touching my heart. So I began attending church regularly. As a matter of fact, I loved going to church. For a while, I went to church at least two times a week, by riding a bicycle for 40 minutes each way, sometimes in rain.

John pointed out that the Christian activities were interesting and apparently compatible with his lifestyle. He also emphasized that Christians were elected and blessed by God. For him, this was a powerful explanation for his good fortune. He also experienced personal changes in the new faith. For example, he used to smoke, tried several times to quit, but each time he ended up smoking even more. After being told by a Christian brother that Christians should not smoke, he quit. This time, he said, it was actually without much struggle. The cigarette simply became nauseating, another sign of God’s blessing to him.

POLITICAL REPRESSION

Besides the emerging and chaotic market, repressive politics is another important contextual factor for some young people converting to Christianity. In fact, the economic and political factors are intertwined. The road toward a “socialist market economy” under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party has been very bumpy. Along the way, several political campaigns threatened to derail or reverse the reforms. These include the “anti-capitalist spiritual pollution” campaign in 1983, the “anti-capitalist liberalism” campaign in 1986, and the violent suppression of the pro-democracy movement in 1989. On June 4, 1989, the government sent tanks to the Tiananmen Square to crush the student-led movement. Idealistic dreams were shattered by the tanks and bloodshed. Disillusioned with communism, many young intellectuals began seeking alternatives. Among my interviewees, several people recalled the impact of the Tiananmen Square incident on their spiritual pursuit. Adam from Jiangxi Province is a good example. He was in college in 1989, majored in engineering.

Since elementary school I had been a class leader (*ban gan bu*) and a “three-good” [athletic, scholastic, and virtuous] student. During the 1989 student movement, I took to the streets. Afterwards, because I was a student

leader, I was punished by delayed graduation, and then was assigned a job of physical labor at a power plant in a remote town. At the plant, because of my bad personnel file (*dang'an*), I was often given "small tight shoes to wear" [i.e., people intentionally made his life miserable]. My heart was bitter. I felt that everything was upside down and the whole world was messed up. I did not know where my goal of life lay. Why strive? What for? But if you are not vigilant and fighting back, you'll be like meat on the chopping board waiting to be cut up by other people. I read Daoist philosophy, but was not sure I understood it. It seemed meaningful, but my heart found no rest or peace. A college friend once told me about the gospel, but our classmates all said he was crazy. When I was very depressed, one day I went to his house. He received me warmly. But he was a new believer himself. I asked him dozens of questions, and he could not even utter a word. Finally he threw me a Bible and said, "Go back and read it for a year, then we'll talk." I went home, flipped a few pages, but could not understand a thing, and threw it aside.

My job was physical labor at the power plant. The coal under my feet was over 80 degrees Celsius. After a couple of hours, the shoe bottom would be scorched. Working underneath the air cylinder power generator to make repairs, you would lose hearing for ten minutes. In that environment I worked with all my strength, because my heart was empty and the after-work hours were even more stifling. In that small town, I did not understand the local dialect, and it was impossible for me to find a person to chat with. So I wanted to find a difficult book to read in order to kill time. I picked up the Bible again. Then, I was grabbed by these words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." I cried for a whole night. This was what the *Dao De Jing* couldn't give me. I read the Bible day and night, and the Christian Radio in Hong Kong helped me to understand. Later, that college friend took me to a house church, where I got baptized in 1993.

Adam was 25 years old at that time. Like many young intellectuals who participated in the pro-democracy movement and then suffered formal prosecution or disciplinary punishment, Adam's political aspirations became doomed. But his mind could not be buried under the machines. In search of an alternative meaning system to communism, he tried Daoism in vain, and then found salvation in Christianity. After conversion, Adam quit the job and moved to Nanfang. He tried various jobs "in order to gain experiences and test my strengths and abilities," as he said. Before long, he started his own business firm. Meanwhile, he became a highly respected leader at the young people's worship service at the TSPM church. He also organized a Christian Businesspeople Fellowship (*shang ren tuan qi*).

The impact of the June 4 1989 incident is also evident in Ben's conversion. Ben was born in 1966 in Fujian Province. His mother's father was the first Christian in his family.

During the Cultural Revolution, my parents dared not tell me they were Christian. Only after I got into college did they tell me. But at that time I was wildly arrogant, and I ferociously debated with my mother. After graduating from college in 1988 I came to Nanfang. When I first arrived, I did not know the local dialect, local culture, local people, or local places. It was very hard. During the 1989 democracy movement period, I did not go to work, but took to the streets with great excitement. The development afterward was very disheartening. I thought there was no hope for this country. After June Fourth I went to church every week. At that time I did not understand the local dialect very well. But one Sunday the sermon was so powerful that I finally understood. Christianity is not a religion, but a faith. I now believe that the world and people are created by God. I believe that the Holy Spirit is very important. I feel the change and difference inside me.

Baptized in 1997, Ben was an active worker in the Christian Businesspeople Fellowship, which often gathered for Bible study or sharing at his office in an upscale building. He was the general manager of a shipping company. Besides Adam and Ben, Cindy and several others also mentioned the 1989 democracy movement in their conversion stories. Interestingly, they interpreted it not so much as a political incident, but more of a spiritual turning point, related to their feelings, sentiments, hopes, and attitudes toward life.

After the Tiananmen Square incident, many of the democracy movement activists fled to the West. A number of them have converted to Christianity. The most prominent is Yuan Zhiming. Before exile, Yuan was a Ph.D. candidate in Marxist philosophy at Renmin University of China. He was one of the scriptwriters of the popular television documentary series *River Elegy*, which criticized Chinese political culture and served as one of the incitements for the democracy movement.

In 1991, he was baptized in Princeton, New Jersey, and soon entered seminary. In the last decade or so, Yuan has been one of the most active and popular evangelists among the Chinese in North America. His writings and audio/video-taped preaching are widely circulated among intellectuals both outside and inside China. He is one of the advocates regarding the inseparable relationship between democracy and Christianity (Yuan 1992).

Another scriptwriter of the *River Elegy*, Xie Xuanjun, a renowned mythologist, also became Christian. Among the 21 student activists on the most wanted list of the Chinese government, Zhang Boli and Xiong Yan have become Christian ministers. Like my interviewees in Nanfang, these Christian converts now dedicate themselves to Christian evangelism instead of political activism. Many more lesser-known activists have become Christian as well. Meanwhile, some confessed Christians are also prominent political activists, including Han Dongfang, the organizer of an independent workers union during the 1989 democracy movement, who was jailed, exiled to the United States, and prohibited from returning to Beijing. Other converts include Wang Bingzhang, a veteran democracy activist in the United States who has been involved in organizing political parties against the Chinese Communist Party, and Yang Jianli, another democracy activist in the United States who has been jailed in China after he slipped into China to investigate worker uprisings.

Indeed, the year 1989 was an important turning point in regard to Chinese conversion to Christianity. In North America, until 1989, Christian proselytizing efforts among mainland Chinese students and scholars had very limited success. After the Tiananmen Square incident, many mainland Chinese flocked to Chinese American churches (Yang 1999, 2000). In the PRC, a similar sudden increase has been observed (Lambert 1999). In Nanfang, according to the official church records, there was a spiking increase of baptisms immediately after 1989 (see Figure 1). The sudden increase took many people off guard. Facing political ramifications, many churches conveniently “lost” their baptismal records of 1991 and 1992.

SAVED AT MCDONALD'S?

McDonald's opened its first restaurant in China in 1990. By 2000, dozens of “Golden Arches” dotted the rapidly changing skylines of Nanfang. Some are in skyscrapers and some in underground shopping malls. Unlike McDonald's in America, which is a fast food restaurant where people often rush in and out, the McDonald's restaurants in Nanfang that I visited in summer 2000 were always filled with leisurely crowds, with chatting noise permeating the whole restaurant and beyond. The tape recordings of my interviews at McDonald's are half drowned out by the noise. But that was my interviewees' favorite place to meet with a strange researcher on such a sensitive topic.

The attraction of McDonald's appears to be its culture more than the food: it offers a private space at a table in a public space at the restaurant. It is an accessible and acceptable public place to meet a stranger without exposing one's home or office. Meanwhile, as soon as two or more people sit at a table with a drink or a packaged meal, the table instantly becomes private until they leave. No other customers should invade this space. That was why clandestine Timothy Training Courses and small group Bible study sessions favored McDonald's as a gathering place. It was noisy. But the noisiness itself seemed to be a layer of protection—we did not need to worry much about the listening ears at nearby tables. As religion remains a politically sensitive topic in today's China, these kinds of precautions seem necessary.

But the symbolism of McDonald's goes beyond the immediate attraction of the atmosphere. McDonald's is a symbol of modern cosmopolitan culture. All of the McDonald's restaurants in Nanfang are spacious, well-lit, clean, and with well-maintained toilets. This is in contrast to the physical setting of common local restaurants. Anthropologist James L. Watson (1997) observes that the first presence of McDonald's in Hong Kong compelled local restaurants to renovate accordingly, resulting in a changed dietary culture. It is more than just dietary culture,

but a sign of the modern and middle-class lifestyle, a sign of cosmopolitanism. Sociologist George Ritzer observes that in America “Eating fast food at McDonald’s has certainly become a ‘sign’ that, among other things, one is in tune with the contemporary lifestyle” (Ritzer 2000:11). Anthropologists have observed that a new class of yuppies in China has embraced the company as a means of connecting to the world. “In the eyes of Beijing residents, McDonald’s represents Americana and the promise of modernization” (Yan 1997:41). “The Chinese media could barely restrain their enthusiasm for McDonald’s during the restaurants’ first three years of operation in the People’s Republic; the company was celebrated as a model of modernization, sanitation, and responsible management” (Watson 1997:4).

In light of these sociological and anthropological observations, we can see that McDonald’s and Christianity share similar symbolic meanings to the educated young Chinese: modernity and cosmopolitanism. For the Chinese, eating at McDonald’s is a sign of being in tune with modern culture and offers a sense of connecting with the outside, Western world. Similarly, believing in Christianity is accepting a universal religion that has been predominant in the modern West. Both McDonald’s and Christianity offer a sense of individual freedom, civility, responsibility, and status for the yuppies in urban China. Moreover, both have become accessible during the process of China’s market transition and global integration.

However, the symbolism of McDonald’s stops here. McDonald’s was one of the attractive places where young urban Chinese liked to gather for Bible study or talk about their newfound religion. But it is the Christian religion, not McDonald’s, that offers them salvation. My research assistant and I also conducted interviews at Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) restaurants and some local Chinese restaurants or tea houses that had a comparable physical setting. Besides McDonald’s, the English language carries similar symbolism. Some of my interviewees in Nanfang and other cities first learned about Christianity by practicing English with Westerners at “English corners” on university campuses or public parks. In the northeastern city of Dalian, the TSPM church offered an English Sunday School class in order to attract college students. Before long it evolved into the young people’s Sunday gathering, with 500 to 600 in regular attendance. In Nanchong, a remote city in Sichuan in the southwest, the church’s offering of an English Sunday School class similarly attracted hundreds of young people, including high school students. A few “tent-making” missionaries (see note 2) teaching at colleges there suddenly found an easy access to people for evangelization. I have also seen some newly built churches in the rural areas in the mountainous regions of Sichuan Province that have English names embossed on the church building. The function of such English names is more symbolic than practical.

The attraction of the English language, McDonald’s, or KFC is not so much for Westernization, but more for a sense of connecting with the outside world, reflecting the Chinese desire for global integration and modernity. Eating at McDonald’s or speaking English does not make a person American. Similarly, becoming Christian does not make a Chinese a Westerner. However, in a symbolic sense, adopting Christianity and eating at McDonald’s make the Chinese feel they have gained an equal footing with the Americans and other Westerners as modern world citizens.

China under the CCP is embracing globalization while traveling the bumpy road toward a market economy. The rapid changes involved in a transitional economy have both enticed and discarded individuals. In urban China, while struggling for success or survival in the market, many individuals begin to seek certainty, peace, and comfort in religion. Some people find salvation in Christianity, a nontraditional religion in China. In contrast to traditional Chinese religions—which are often regarded as premodern and parochial by Chinese intellectuals—Christianity today is commonly perceived as modern, cosmopolitan, and universal. The urban Chinese young people described in this article tend to adore McDonald’s. For them, both Christianity and McDonald’s are part of a modern, cosmopolitan culture. Moreover, McDonald’s also offers a kind of certainty, as it is known for its predictability and efficiency (Ritzer 2000). By frequenting McDonald’s and converting to Christianity, young urban Chinese get psychological peace, security, and certainty.

They also gain a sense of participating in the new and glamorous dimensions of contemporary cultural change without exposing themselves directly to the vagaries of the global market.

CONCLUSION

China is in great transformation. One of the profound changes is widespread conversion to Christianity. Some (e.g., Aikman 2003; Lambert 1999) have boldly predicted that within the next 30 years, one-third of China's population could become Christian, making China one of the largest Christian nations in the world. This in turn would reshape the world political landscape in "the clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1993, 1998). To prudent scholars, such journalist or evangelist predictions may seem presumptuous. However, the emerging scholarly literature (e.g., Bays 2003; Dunch 2001; Hunter and Chan 1993) also shows that Christianity is indeed growing very fast in China today. "Today, on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in church in China than in all of Europe" (Bays 2003:488). This article provides further evidence of Christian conversions among well-educated young people in urban China.

To explain religious conversion, the individualistic and institutional approaches have been dominant in the sociology of religion. The former focuses on the micro-level factors of individual crisis, personal bonds, and networks that are developed or broken down. The latter emphasizes the competitive strength of religious organizations as suppliers in the religious market. Factors of individual psychology and interpersonal bonds in small networks are certainly at work, and are evident in the interviews here. Meanwhile, the rapid growth of Christianity in China has important institutional sources: Christian organizations have been actively proselytizing. However, both of the individualistic and institutional approaches are inadequate to account for conversions to Christianity in China today. My argument is that the micro- and meso-level factors have to be situated in the macro-level, broader contexts, within which religious organizations proselytize and individuals convert. The crucial context for Chinese conversions to Christianity in China today is the globalizing market economy under political repression. The cases presented here are representative of Christian conversion stories that I heard during the research. The converts commonly struggled with various kinds of jobs in the emerging market and once lived lifestyles that they now consider morally unacceptable and devoid of meaning. They were lost in an exciting yet perilous market, became disillusioned with the repressive politics, and bewildered by conflicting values. Existential anxieties drove people to seek certainty amid puzzling uncertainties, clarity amid confusing ambiguities, and the absolute amid myriad relativities. Their interest in a religious worldview or thirst for religion was heightened. Some Chinese search internally within Chinese traditional religions, and some people find salvation in Christianity.

In today's China, religious seekers often seek out Christian churches to learn about this nontraditional religion. In line with the Chinese pursuit of modernization and global integration throughout the 20th century, many educated Chinese tend to prefer a meaning system that is universal instead of particularly Chinese. In the context of a globalizing market under political repression, many Chinese perceive Christianity as liberating, democratic, modern, cosmopolitan, or universal. They regard Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism as backward-looking and traditionalistic, and thus incompatible with the market economy and increasingly globalizing world. Moreover, the presence of McDonald's, foreign teachers, businesspeople, and evangelists has made this nontraditional religion more accessible. At this intersection of time and space, Christianity fills the spiritual void for many people in urban China and is very likely to continue to grow.

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NOTES

1. Moreover, China has become rapidly urbanized. According to the Chinese government published statistics, the rural population has decreased from 82.1 percent in 1978 to 69.9 percent in 1998 (see Chen and Huang 2004:199).
2. The PRC prohibits Christian missionaries. Westerners who want to spread the Christian gospel have to go to China as English teachers or professionals, like Paul went on mission trips by making tents for self-support (New Testament, Acts:18:3).
3. Almost all of my interviewees in Nanfang had an English (American) name, but I use pseudonyms here.

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