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## To Be or Not To Be...Christian: Explaining Chinese Immigrant Elders' Christian Participation in the U.S.

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**TO BE OR NOT TO BE...CHRISTIAN:  
EXPLAINING CHINESE IMMIGRANT ELDERS' CHRISTIAN  
PARTICIPATION IN THE U.S.**

**ABSTRACT**

In recent years, growing numbers of Mainland Chinese elders are participating in Christian congregations during short visits or extended stays in the U.S. This thesis explores social and cultural factors that explain these immigrant elders' involvement with Christianity while in the U.S. Based on face-to-face interviews with 20 Mainland Chinese elders living in Atlanta as well as participant observation at a Chinese Christian church and with a Bible study group, this study finds that loneliness and social isolation in a foreign land are the main reasons for Mainland Chinese elders' participation in Christian activities. Besides religious services, social service functions of churches and opportunities for fellowship are other factors explaining church involvement. Long immersion with China's religious history of syncretism renders these elders receptive to spiritual alternatives, such as Christianity, especially when dominant ideologies of Confucianism and Communism seem to be in decline in China. But most elders approach their Christian involvement with pragmatic selectivity based more on secular than religious considerations. In conclusion, I argue that social isolation and minority ethnic status, Chinese Christian Churches' social functions, and current social contexts in China are all factors that help explain Chinese elders' religious involvement in the U.S.

INDEX WORDS: Mainland Chinese elders, Christian congregation, immigration, social services, Chinese religious and cultural tradition

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EXPLAINING CHINESE IMMIGRANT ELDERS' CHRISTAIN  
PARTICIPATION IN THE U.S.**

by

GEHUI ZHANG

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

Georgia State University

2005

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(2005)

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, Chinese immigrants have become one of the fastest growing minority groups in the United States (Ng, 2002; Yang, 1998). Over the past quarter-century, in particular, the number of Mainland Chinese immigrants has greatly increased. Many of them have come to the U.S. to pursue advanced education and eventually settled down as first generation immigrants. Atlanta has become one of the metropolitan areas of the U.S. in which large members of Mainland Chinese students and immigrants reside. Atlanta's extensive educational system and job market have attracted more and more Chinese students seeking higher education or jobs. As the number of young Chinese adults increases, many elderly parents have immigrated to Atlanta to join them. A review of U.S. census data from 1996 has shown that Asian Americans were the fastest growing ethnic group of elders in the immigrant population over the previous twenty years (Casado & Leung, 2001). According to the 2000 census, 146,000 Asians were living in Georgia, most of them in the Atlanta and Savannah areas. Among them were more than 7,000 Asian elders above age 60 who lived in greater Atlanta, including a great many Chinese elders.

As more Chinese have come to Atlanta, the number of Chinese participants in Christian activities also has grown. Many Chinese elders, whether temporary visitors or permanent residents, have become involved in various Christian activities, such as Bible study groups or worship services. Some Mainland elders have been converted to Christianity after a short stay in the U.S. Interestingly, most of them were non-religious

in China or had only a slight acquaintance with Christianity prior to their arrival in the U.S.

While much research has examined the elders' religiosity from sociological, psychological and gerontological perspectives, studies specifically addressing Chinese immigrants' conversion to Christianity are limited (Yang, 1998). The fluidity of this population has perhaps contributed to the invisibility of Chinese elderly immigrants as subjects of academic study. Little has been known about their lives and general well-being, let alone their religiosity.

In this study, I have identified several social and cultural factors that may explain the increasing religiosity of Chinese immigrant elders. In this process, I describe how Mainland Chinese elders interpret their involvement in Christian church in the U.S; and I examine the meaning of their religious involvement in constructing their racial, social, and religious identities.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **BACKGROUND**

Aging, immigration, and Christianity have rarely been studied within the same research framework, although bi-intersectional studies have commonly done, such as aging and religious participations or immigrants' Christian practices. Prolific literature has examined the interweaving relationships between aging and Christianity. As the population of elderly immigrants has grown, a relatively large body of literature has also been devoted to aging and immigration. Nevertheless, little data has been produced regarding the precise study of elderly immigrants and their religious beliefs. Earlier intersectional studies, however, have provided insights into understanding the relationships between aging, religiosity, and immigration. In the following section, I will review and discuss the existing literatures on the above issues.

#### **Aging and Christian Congregations: a Brief Review**

A positive relationship between religiosity and well-being among elderly people has been widely reported in previous studies (Hilleras, Torres, & Winblad, 2001; Krause, 1997; Maxwell & Cockriel, 1995; McFadden, 1995). A large body of literature which investigates elders' religiosity has shown that those who have religious faith tend to enjoy better physical and mental health than the ones who do not (Johnson, 1995; Krause, 1997; Levin & Chatters, 1998; McFadden, 1999). In particular, researchers have pointed out that elders who have the Christian faith seem to benefit from its ideologies and institutional behaviors (Johnson, 1995; Maxwell & Cockriel, 1995; McFadden, 1995). It has been argued that Christianity does not share the contemporary tendency to value people according to productivity and youthful appearance; therefore, elders who are at

risk for experiencing a decline of social value as well as physical and mental health have sometimes felt able to maintain or regain their social worth through Christian faith (Johnson, 1995; McFadden, 1995). Meanwhile, the moral values and the other-worldly beliefs in Christianity have helped elders cope with loneliness and depression caused by their declining health and shrinkage of social networks (Johnson, 1995). While exploring elders' Christian faith and their well-being, researchers have emphasized the important role of Christian churches as functional social institutions. Findings have revealed that stronger community and social bonds can be developed through involvement in religious activities (Johnson, 1995; Maxwell & Cockriel, 1995). Given that Christianity is generally a congregation-centered religion in the U.S., elders can expand their social network as well as their sense of belonging through participating in Christian congregations (Johnson, 1995; Maxwell & Cockriel, 1995).

In the recent two decades, religious studies have expanded from mere attention to religion and well-being to the impact of religious practice upon individuals' self-adjustment, continuity of identity, and the sustaining of social roles. For instance, Johnson (1995) found that religious involvement helps people reconstruct their roles not only by strengthening identity but also by opening up new channels of communication and thus expanding links with the outside world (Johnson, 1995). Pargament and his colleagues (2000) categorized the key functions of religion on individuals into five aspects: meaning, control, comfort/spirituality, intimacy/spirituality, and life transformation. They argued that not only does religion provide a shared intimacy with other people as well as closeness with God, but it also assists them in coping with life's hardships and life transitions by helping them to "give up old objects of value and find

new sources of significance” (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000, p.521).

Likewise, the relationship between elders’ religiosity and life transitions occurring in later life has drawn more attention from sociologists and gerontologists. Some scholars have believed that the elderly, as a group, are especially vulnerable to stressful life events or life changes, such as retirement or disabilities, and are more likely to experience depression or anxiety (Atkinson & Malony, 1994). Religious involvement, in such cases, has purportedly played a role as a coping strategy for handling the range of difficulties that elders may confront as they age, such as symptoms of depression, chronic anxiety, and functional disability (Maxwell & Cockriel, 1995; McFadden, 1995). As such, elders’ religious identity and practices might be reshaped by life events and life interruptions. In their study about religious trajectories and transitions over the life course, Dayton, Krause, and Morgan (2002) examined the key points over the life stages which are most responsible for older peoples’ religious dynamics. They found that “adverse life events” greatly contribute to the increase of elders’ religious faith (Dayton, Krause, & Morgan, 2002). Negative life experiences often have served as turning points for older people’s religiosity. For example, those authors found identified that one of the major indicators of increasing religiosity, the experience of closeness to God, is often caused by the loss of some other core relationship such as the loss of the spouse (Dayton, Krause, & Morgan, 2002). This argument has been echoed by many findings about the relationships between widowhood and Christian beliefs. Widowhood has long been considered a drastic life interruption. The “off-timing” death of a spouse could cause especially strong feelings of loss and displacement in survivors. To widows, the loss of husbands has sometimes resulted in a shaking of the sense of “self” and rootedness

(Michael et al. 2003). Another consequence of widowhood has been the sudden challenge to a social identity that depended on marriage; the survivor has to adjust to the fundamental collapse of a major social role, that of husband or wife. Church members who have lost spouses often have relied more afterwards on their relationships with God and have tended to become more dedicated members of congregations (Michael et al. 2003).

### **Immigration in Later Life: the Challenges**

As the number of elderly immigrants grows, elderly immigration in a global context has started to attract increased academic attention. A few researchers have focused on elderly immigrants' lifestyle, social networks, cultural adaptation, and adjustment of ethnic identity in host countries. However, many issues about aging and immigration have not been sufficiently examined; for example, displacement in later life has rarely been a central topic in immigrant or aging studies. Most notable on that issue, elderly immigrants have been reported as usually being caught in a double bind, compared to their younger counterparts (Litwin, 1997). On the one hand, they have to deal with life interruptions and a sense of loss accompanying the aging process; on the other hand, they have to face challenges and hardships due to relocation in a new country (Litwin, 1997). The shrinkage of the social support system, the interruption of ethnic and social identities, and the challenge of acculturation have been among the consequences elderly immigrants must confront.

#### ***The Shrinkage of Social Support and the Shift of Social Network***

Whether or not older immigrants have been successful in finding meaningful and tangible social support crucially influences their life quality in the host country.

Specifically in regard to migration, “network connections have been seen to be a social capital, which facilitates transnational relocation” (Litwin, 1997, p. 45). In his study about Soviet elderly immigrants in Israel, Litwin (1997) found that social networks shifted significantly for elderly immigrants before and after their immigration. The dominant pattern of the transition appeared to be more familial-based after immigration; the elderly became more dependent on their family members in order to better adapt to the new social environment (Litwin, 1997).

One likely explanation is that a more public web of relations, such as community-based networking, although possible before immigration, was no longer easily accessible to elderly immigrants. Indeed, elderly immigrants have found difficulty in establishing new public social networks in the host country, especially given a new language and new customs. Elderly immigrants have tended to encounter more obstacles in creating social networks outside of their families than younger immigrants, especially in the early stage of relocation. For instance, elderly immigrants who experience mobility problems have found access to social resources and social support outside of the home to be difficult (Wu & Hart, 2002). The new family-centered social network for elderly immigrants is “more constricted, more accessible, more familial, and more intense” (p. 58); and this kind of social support network usually involves constant social exchanges among family members (Litwin, 1997). However, Litwin (1997) stated that, the centralization of familial ties in the elders’ social support systems does not necessarily lead to a better adaptation for elderly immigrants in their new lives. Instead, more conflicts and disharmony among family members could potentially be created. In other words, family-centered social support systems could be dysfunctional in reducing stress and pressure

that elderly immigrants confront in their post-immigration lives (Litwin, 1997). Quite possibly, external social networks of elderly immigrants, including ethnic churches or ethnic communities, have functioned as important alternatives for obtaining tangible and accessible emotional support.

***Lost in Uprooted Lives: a Myth of “Model Minority”***

Migration has usually been a disruptive life event (Beyene, 2000). In his study of Philipino American veterans, Beyene (2000) pointed out that in the global demographic view, “voluntary late-life migration” (p. 274) has increased world-wide as the elders have left home countries to pursue better lives, follow adult children, or seek more opportunities. The upsurge of Chinese elderly immigrants has not yet attracted the attention it deserves from scholars; so far, only a few issues have been researched. For instance, Casado and Leung (2001) have contended that migration as a life transition may cause a substantial sense of loss to immigrants, such as loss of status, social roles, or identity. They have argued that feelings of loss may be a reason for depression among elderly Chinese Americans (Casado and Leung, 2001). Other than migratory stress, some researchers have pointed out that cultural displacement, language barriers, lack of family support, and Confucian value of kinships also contribute to low life satisfaction and even depression among Chinese elders (Mui, 1998; Stokes, et al, 2001). However, existing literatures have not developed a point for adequately understanding Chinese elders’ immigrant lives. First, these literatures have predominantly concentrated on general life satisfaction and mental health of elderly Chinese Americans per se, and they leave many social and cultural issues untouched, such as acculturation, ethnic transformation, and religious belonging. Furthermore, the prevailing tendency has been to regard all the



foreign-born Chinese American elders homogeneously, failing to differentiate Chinese elders who came recently via late-life migration from earlier immigrants who have lived, worked, and grown older here in the U.S. Hence, more extensive studies about ethnic and social identities as well as cultural adaptations have to be undertaken in order to better understand Chinese elderly immigrants and their aging process in the host country.

### **The Social Functions of Christian Congregations among Immigrants**

The social functions of Christian churches and congregations among elderly immigrants have rarely been studied. Research focusing on the social functions of religious congregations among immigrants in the U.S. has not specifically targeted elderly immigrants. Most existing studies about immigrants and religion have either focused on the younger generation or simply treated elderly immigrants as undifferentiated from other research subjects. Based on the current studies, I will review the available literature on the social functions of ethnic churches in immigrants' lives and, in particular, the roles of Christian congregations in immigrants' social support system and the ethnic continuity.

### ***The Ethnic Church in Immigrants' Social Support System***

Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) have posited that the primary mechanism for religious congregations in providing immigrants social support is through their delivery of social services. Informal services, such as information exchange and provision of emotional support, have been among the most common and most helpful social services supplied by religious congregations to newly arriving immigrants. For instance, Chinese and Korean Protestant churches have reportedly encouraged entire congregations or, sometimes, select cell groups to provide immigrant with material aid as well as emotional support

(Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000). Similar social functions of religious congregations in immigrants' lives were echoed in other studies about immigrants' religious participation. In studying Korean immigrant churches in the United States, Min (2002) pointed out that one of the most important social roles of Korean Protestant churches has been to create and maintain the social interaction and fellowship among Korean immigrants. Being away from the home country and their families, he argued, Korean immigrants have felt socially isolated from the mainstream communities. Congregations have enabled them to produce a new social network and social support system in a foreign environment. Moreover, congregations have facilitated the establishment of supportive friendships as well as a sense of belonging for Korean immigrants.

***The Ethnic Church: Fosterer of Ethnic Preservation and Cultural Adaptation***

Immigrants, especially adult immigrants, have inevitably been challenged by the cultural and ethnic interruptions resulting from displacement (Litwin, 1997). For uprooted people, ethnic communities have served as very important networks for social services, and more substantially, for continuing ties to their ethnic culture. Having the opportunity to maintain the sense of belonging to their own ethnic groups has helped elderly immigrants sustain an integral self as their ethnic identities are threatened and interrupted by displacement. Among ethnic communities, ethnic churches have been traditionally understood as a critical component in playing this role (Campion, 2003; Dilk, 2003). Ethnic churches have not only served as social institutions to match the practical and emotional needs for immigrants, their congregations also have played a traditional role in preservation of native culture and ethnicities for immigrants (Bankston & Zhou, 2000; Campion, 2003). Through participating in congregations, immigrants

have been able to enjoy companionship with others who have the same cultural background and ethnic features, including the same language, food, dress, and rituals (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000). In the comfortable social and physical environment created by ethnic churches, immigrants' cultural identities have been cultivated and appreciated. Conceivably, maintaining native ethnicity has the potential to smooth immigrants' life transitions from home countries to host countries as well as to reconcile the cultural challenges as a consequence of immigration (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000).

### **Explanations for Chinese Christian Conversion in the U.S.**

Since the 1960s, the number of Chinese conversions to Christianity in the U.S. has increased rapidly (Yang, 1998). A few scholars have begun to examine the societal and cultural factors that explain this social phenomenon, and existing studies have provided three major explanations for it: the non-religious functions of Christianity, the institutional reformation of Chinese Christian churches in the U.S., and the social and contextual changes occurring in China.

#### ***Social Functions of Christian Churches***

Some researchers believe that non-religious benefits have presented important motivations for Chinese to convert to Christianity. These benefits, either material or emotional, include a wider social network, better educational resources, and emotional support (Ng, 2002). Others have even argued that, at some level, Chinese churches now have begun to replace Chinatowns as the primary social service agency for Chinese immigrants (Palinkas, 1982). For example, Palinkas (1982) explored how the Chinese churches assisted Chinese immigrants in coping with psychological crises encountered in their lives in a new country. He suggested that most Chinese immigrants experienced

stress caused by the immigration. Many Chinese immigrants, especially those living outside of Chinatown, have attended church seeking an orderly and friendly sanctuary from confusing and difficult adjustments to the U.S. (Palinkas, 1982). Ng (2000) and Yang (1998) contended that the social function explanation of Chinese conversion is already outdated. They both agreed that the social function theory does not provide a sufficient explanation for the current wave of Chinese conversion (Ng, 2000; Yang, 1998). As Yang indicated, many Chinese Christians have already obtained a high level of education and enjoyed upward mobility in American society. Material advantages have not been the main drive for Chinese immigrants to join a church; and most do not really depend on the church to provide them material support or better educational opportunity (Yang, 1998).

### ***“Sinicization” of Chinese Christian Churches***

When Christianity was driven out of China 40 years ago, Chinese Christian churches in America entered a phase of rapid growth (Yang, 1998). With the new wave of Chinese immigration since the 1960s, Chinese Christian churches have also undergone tremendous reformation inside of the institutions in order to attract more Chinese congregants (Ng, 2002; Yang, 1998; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001b). For example, all Chinese Christian Churches have expanded their roles from being simply religious institutions to also serving as social support organizations. According to Yang and Ebaugh’s study, Chinese immigrant congregations are not only just “sites for religious worship,” but also social institutions organizing various community services, such as offering English classes, providing child-care services, and arranging entertainment activities (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001 b, p. 275; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001 a). Similar to Korean Christians who

“Koreanized” Christianity, Chinese Christians have tended to “Sinicize” Christianity (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001a, p. 373). In Chinese churches, Chinese congregants have commonly gathered to speak and teach Chinese, celebrate Chinese festivals and cherish Chinese values. One can even find traces of Chinese Confucianism in Chinese Christian churches (Ng, 2002). Although rejecting and criticizing Confucian doctrines on human nature, they have tended to emphasize similarities between Confucianism and Christianity in terms of “familism” and “this-worldly asceticism” (Yang, 1998, p. 253).

### *Social and Contextual Changes in China*

In addition to the social functional explanations for the growth of Chinese Christians, assimilation theory and ethnic needs theory have been two other dominant explanations used to understand Chinese immigrants’ greater participation in Christian activities. The proponents of assimilation explanations have transplanted Gordon’s (1964) assimilation theory of immigrants and ethnicities into the integration function of ethnic churches. They argued that because Christianity is a major component of American culture, joining ethnic churches will foster better assimilation of new immigrants into the dominant culture and mainstream society in the host country (Yang, 1998). The theory of ethnic needs contended that immigrants’ churches serve as ethnic communities for them to preserve the native ethnic and cultural identity interrupted by immigration (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Min, 1992).

In his study of Chinese Christians and Chinese churches in the U.S., Yang (1998) argued against the explanations based on assimilation theory and ethnic needs. He argued that, generally, if Chinese immigrants try to assimilate into the American mainstream society, conversion is not the best means to achieve it. He points out, for

most of the Chinese immigrants who have already achieved a high educational background and middle class social status in America, the better way to become involved in the mainstream society would be in non-ethnic churches or mainline churches instead of those fundamentalist Christian churches. Simultaneously, being a Christian has not necessarily been an indispensable factor for an individual to be accepted by a community (Yang, 1998). In terms of ethnic needs, he claimed that it is not sufficient to explain the Chinese conversion because Christianity is a relatively new religion to Chinese people compared to Buddhism. With the spread of Buddhist temples in America and other non-religious Chinese organizations, Chinese no longer have to join a church to meet their ethnic need (Yang, 1998). Indeed, Yang concluded that the recent wave of Chinese conversion should be attributed to the social and culture changes in China. On the one hand, Chinese modernization has forced the central government to be open to Western culture and Western religion. On the other hand, Chinese cultural traditions have probably declined, and some even approach collapse, due to so many dramatic changes in quick succession. Many Chinese have expressed a need for other options to fulfill the cultural and spiritual void. Plus, the pluralist religious background in Chinese culture has prepared Chinese to be open to multiple approaches to spirituality. For Chinese immigrants now residing in the U.S., Christianity has become yet another religious system that has seemed both available and accommodating (Yang, 1998).

Chinese immigrants' conversion to Christianity has been a complicated issue interwoven with many factors. Each of these factors discussed above may have contributed to immigrants' conversions. However, among all the social and cultural explanations, one element has been lacking: Chinese religious traditions and ethics. For

new immigrants, especially elderly immigrants who spent most of their adult lives in China, one would expect that their traditional culture and ethical system might contribute to their religious approaches. Yang (1998) briefly argued that the traditions of Chinese religious pluralism facilitated the possibility of Christianity becoming an alternative religion in modern China. No known research, however, has focused on the influence of Chinese religious and ethical traditions in Chinese immigrants' conversion and understanding of Christianity. In the following section, I will give a glimpse of the contemporary literature discussing the capabilities and conflicts between Chinese cultural traditions and Christian teachings.

### **Chinese Religious Traditions and Ethics in Relation to Christianity**

Among all the historical components which have shaped Chinese culture and ethnicities, religion has played an important role. However, what makes the history of Chinese religions distinct from their Western counterparts is that Chinese society has never been perpetually dominated by any religion, nor have the masses of Chinese ever lived with apparent "religious preoccupations" (Granet, 1975, p. 151). Religion has rarely influenced the Chinese people and Chinese society at a systematic and substantial level. As Granet (1975) pointed out, there was no particular temptation for Chinese to "place a world of god above the world of men" (p. 153). A good example of the religions' superficial influence upon the mass of Chinese people and Chinese society is the development of Taoism<sup>1</sup> and Buddhism<sup>2</sup> in China. Although the two Chinese

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<sup>1</sup> Taoism appeared in China in 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C and became popular during 2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D. Taoists worship Xi Wang-mu and Lord Lao as major deities. Lao Tzu, the legendary author of Taoism

traditional religions, Taoism and Buddhism, have prevailed for more than two thousand years among Chinese people, religious institutions and agents, such as Taoist temples and Buddhist monasteries, have been marginalized in China at both micro- and macro-levels for most of the historical record. As Pye argued (1984, p. 53):

China never produced any great religious spokesmen--an indication of the basically secular spirit of higher Chinese culture. Historians have not recognized any great spiritual leaders; priests were not a part of the established elite; and the Chinese spirit was never profoundly influenced by the inspirational example of any man of God.

The limited impact of religion on Chinese culture and social systems does not necessarily mean that religion has no place in the lives of Chinese people. The concepts of gods, spirits, and ghosts have penetrated into the mundane world, particularly among common people. The practice of Taoism and Buddhism as well as the worship of popular deities has occurred almost everywhere in China. Even during the 1950s to 1970s, when most religious practices were attacked as either “feudal remains” or “superstitions,” ordinary Chinese people, especially people in rural areas still maintained some religious rituals. However, religious belief in one exclusive God or in an other-worldly existence

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fundamental scripture, “Tao Te Ching,” has also been worshipped as a god by Taoists since the Late Han Dynasty. Taoism is viewed as one of the three major traditional religions in China (Overmyer, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Buddhism was founded by Gautamna Siddhartha in about 500 B.C. in India. From the first century A.D., Chinese started to gradually recognize and accept Buddhism. By the seventh century, Chinese scholars adopted Buddhism and created Chinese Buddhism practices, of which the two most important schools were Pure Land Buddhism and Chan (Oyermyer, 1986).



has always been mostly lacking in Chinese religions. In fact, the practice of Chinese religions has long been a hybrid of multiple religions, philosophies, and folk beliefs (Granet, 1976; Pye, 1984). In this sense, Chinese religious sects have long experienced great religious tolerance and integration among themselves, perhaps more than those of Catholics and Protestants in the U.S.

### *Religious Pluralism*

The number of religious people in China has never been easy to estimate. One possible explanation has been that Chinese religions have never been institutionalized, nor do they employ a membership system as Christian churches do. The relationship between common people and religious institutions has been fairly loose, unofficial, and inconstant, especially among the Taoists, Buddhists, and followers of popular religions. Another important reason has been that Chinese religions and folk beliefs have long tolerated one another and achieved long-term coexistence. Granet (1975) even argued that Taoism and Buddhism, as the Chinese traditional religions, are actually “one religion” in China rather than two distinct ones. This opinion has been shared by other scholars such as Lucian Pye, who pointed out that one of the significant characteristics of Chinese society is the lack of severe tension between various religions as well as between the sacred and the profane (Pye, 1984). Overmyer (1986) provided some examples of Chinese religious syncretism in his studies of Chinese popular religion. Popular religion, which has been practiced by a majority of Chinese, included ancestor worship, sacrifices to spirits of sacred objects and places, belief in ghosts and demons, exorcism, divination, and the use of spirit-mediums (Overmyer, 1986). Many popular gods were deified human beings. For example, a god named “Guan Gong” or “Guan Er Ye” was a general

from the post-Han period (A.D. 25-222), who was known for his virtues and righteousness. Most “gate gods” (*men shen*) in China were also apotheosized ancient Chinese. During the Song dynasty (A.D. 960-1279), these religious activities had absorbed Buddhist ideas of karma and rebirth as well as the Taoist theory of multiple levels of gods and spirits. With the influence of Taoism, all the popular gods were situated and administered under a system similar to bureaucracy in a mundane world (Overmyer, 1986).

The syncretism of diverse Chinese religions has been parallel to the religious pluralism among Chinese people. In one of his most important works, *The Religion of the Chinese People*, Granet described (p. 145):

In a model prison in Peking, dating from 1912, there is a meeting hall. Behind the preacher’s pulpit are placed five images representing Christ, Lao Tzu<sup>3</sup>, Confucius<sup>4</sup>, John Howard<sup>5</sup>, and [Prophet] Mohammed. Too much importance should not be given to this syncretism based upon five religious elements. The fact that the Buddha is missing means nothing, nor the presence of John Howard either.

According to Grenet (1975), Chinese have long been difficult to clearly divide into followers of one exclusive religion or another. Secular philosophy, traditional religions,

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<sup>3</sup> Being the father of Taoist philosophy, Lao-Tzu lived sometime between 571 B.C. and 471B.C. He is also the author of Taoist fundamental doctrine “the Tao Te Ching.”

<sup>4</sup> Confucius (551B.C- 479 B.C), one the most important philosophers in China. He is the founder of Confucianism.

<sup>5</sup> John Howard is a prison reformer in the 1700s.

and folk beliefs have often been held by the same person. It did not seem to be a problem for a Chinese to believe or worship gods from different religious origins and folk beliefs. Before the Communist ideology became dominant in China in 1949, most Chinese, except for a few strict scholars and monasteries, believed in the existence of multiple gods (Overmyer, 1986). The essential differences between various gods and spirits, for most Chinese, simply had to do with their powers and functions. A Chinese might burn sticks of incense for his ancestors in the first morning of a lunar new year for good luck, pray to the “Kitchen god<sup>6</sup>” for the peace of their kitchen, and then worship Avalokitesvara <sup>7</sup>(Guanyin) in the evening for giving his family another boy. It has been extensively observed that in China, the rituals and monasteries of different religions were used in collaboration in times of temporal ceremonies such as funerals (Pym, 1984). In sum, the Chinese understanding and practice of different religions have displayed more inclusiveness than exclusiveness, more compromises than conflicts.

### ***Religious Pragmatism***

Scholars have accepted that Chinese have tended to practice religion with a practical attitude (Garnet ,1975; Overmyer, 1986; Werner, 1994). They worshipped gods and spirits with the expectation of obtaining certain advantages or benefits. Since gods, spirits, and even demons in Chinese religions have mostly been deified humans, they were supposed to understand worshippers’ needs better and also rely on people’s

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<sup>6</sup> A god in Chinese popular religion who takes charge of kitchen.

<sup>7</sup> One of the most powerful gods in Buddhism, who has been most commonly worshiped in China for over 1000 years.

offerings to maintain their positions in the profane world (Werner, 1994). Having more worshippers and offerings from the mundane world always meant a more stable status for a god among peer gods (Werner, 1994). In his analysis of Chinese religious rituals, Overmyer (1986) found that Chinese rituals present a basic theme of reciprocity. Worshippers practiced those rituals with a general belief that gods and humans have a reciprocal relationship: they need each other. People burned incense or offered food to the temples or shrines of a god in order to show their respect for his or her power and authority. Simultaneously, gods were expected to respond to worshippers in some way (Overmyer, 1986). This kind of reciprocal practice, in Overmeyer's view, has widely existed in most popular beliefs of all religions. However, the popularity of pluralism in Chinese religions made the relationships between Chinese people and gods both reciprocal and temporary. More specifically, if a god did not fulfill the needs of his or her worshippers, they might be considered as "incapable" and further lose people's awe or respect. The worshippers who abandoned their faith in one god would turn to other ones. This practical attitude toward religion was one of the major explanations for the lack of invariable loyalty to one Holy God among the Chinese people.

Overmyer's opinion on Chinese pragmatism was reflected in a few current religious studies about Chinese immigrants. For instance, based on an ethnographic study of a Chinese immigrant church, Ng (2002) found that Chinese first-generation immigrants congregate in churches because many of them enjoy the feeling of being protected by a new religion and its God. The conversion to Christianity, then, has often had less to do with confession of sin or dedication to Christian values than from recognition of one's powerlessness in a foreign environment (Ng, 2002). What has

attracted Chinese to churches in the U.S. has been their reliance on a “tutelary God” to overcome misfortunes and obstacles in their life in America (Ng, 2002, p. 205).

### ***Confucian Traditions***

While the Bible has played a crucial part in shaping Western ideology, in China, Confucian doctrines have served as the most important ideology among Chinese people. Originated from the sixth century B.C. and extending its influence to the present date, Confucianism has functioned as the theoretical framework of Chinese political, economic, and cultural systems in not only ancient periods, but in the contemporary China. For instance, some Confucian traditions, such as cultural ideals and individual perfection, were adopted by both Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist and Mao Zedong’s Communist governments (Pye, 1984). Confucian ethics have influenced everyone in Chinese society---emperor, scholar, landlord, and ordinary people (Pye, 1984). These ethics provided instructions for government and rulers, as well as for ordinary social relations, such as those between rulers and subjects, fathers and sons, and husbands and wives. Without any doubt, Confucian doctrines about the nature of human beings, the role of government, and fundamental moral disciplines have exerted profound influence in Chinese people’s lives. However, the impacts of Confucian ideology on Chinese people’s religious beliefs have appeared less evident and rather ambiguous.

### ***Confucian Ethic of the Other World and the Matter of Universal Love***

Confucianism has its unique understandings of the other world. As Confucius said, “You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?” (Lau, 1979, p. 107) Confucian teachings have ultimately focused on this world rather than the other world. Confucius had also been skeptical about the existence of gods and deities. In The

Analects, he remarked: “The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods” (p. 88). Despite the fact that Confucianism has been absorbed into every aspect of Chinese people’s lives, Confucian skepticism about gods and spirits, as Max Weber (1951) pointed out, has never completely shaken people’s faith in deities and supernatural forces. The ritual practices of various religions have been evident throughout the Chinese history.

Confucius also rejected the idea of “universal love,” which is fundamental in Protestant theology. According to Weber, Protestantism emphasized “a superior community faith and a common ethical way of life,” which go beyond families and kinships (Weber, 1951, p. 237). In contrast, Confucianism vastly prioritized the duties and responsibilities stemming from organic and practical relations, especially familial piety and sibling love (Weber, 1951). The five key relationships in Confucianism, for example, have been articulated as those between ruler and subject, neighbor and neighbor, father and son, husband and wife, and brother and brother (Pye, 1984). Universal love among human beings, to the contrary, has been considered destructive to people’s duty in familial piety and sib faith, and further made human beings and other creatures indistinguishable (Weber, 1951).

### ***The Goodness of Human Beings***

Max Weber observed a fundamental difference in the understanding of human nature between Christians and Confucianists. In The Religion of China, Weber (1951, p. 228) described:

He [a Chinese] who complied with the commandments, fashioned for the man of average ability, was free of sin. In vain Christian missionaries tried

to awaken a feeling of sin where such presuppositions were taken for granted. Then, too, an educated Chinese would simply refuse to be continually burdened with “sin.”

The concept of “sin” was missing not only among “educated Chinese,” but conceivably among common Chinese. One of the most striking incompatibilities between Confucian and Christian teaching had to do with the human nature. Confucianists believed human beings differ by degrees but they share one common nature which is inherently good. This perception of goodness of human beings has two indications: First, human beings were capable of unlimited “moral perfection” (Weber, 1951, p. 228). Secondly, people’s moral perfection could be achieved through education. Wrong or inappropriate behaviors were not the outcomes of any original “sin,” but insufficient education. In other words, any person had the potential of being a role model if he or she was given an adequate and proper education. Badness certainly existed in Confucian ideology. Severe cases of badness were associated with the very poor performance of particular duties and acts of faith, which were considered the most critical in Confucian teachings, such as offending ancestors, challenging supervisors in working places, and displeasing parents (Weber, 1951). However, this badness could be avoided or corrected through Confucian education. In essence, the Confucian worldview instilled no sense of “sin” in Chinese people; so, they were not only free of “sin” but also free of any special need for “salvation” from any gods. Chinese culture, as described above, exerted unique characteristics which contrasted with those of Christian cultures. It embraced multiple religions and demonstrated a pragmatic approach to the practice of religion. Within the Confucian tradition, there was no concept of either universal love or sin.

When Chinese elders have come to the U.S., whether as a visitor or permanent immigrant, they have encountered the American Christian culture that is dramatically different in fundamental ways. What have been the social contexts and cultural motives for Mainland Chinese elders to participate in Christian congregations? How have these elders negotiated their new spiritual journey with Chinese religious baggage in tow as they encounter new Christian teachings? While previous studies about Chinese immigrants' Christian practices hardly targeted elders, especially those from the Mainland as research subjects, this study has endeavored to fill this gap.



## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHOD**

#### **Research Design**

The goal of this study is to explore social and cultural factors that influence Chinese elders' involvement in Christian activities. Specifically, three aims were developed: 1) To understand the social and familial contexts of Chinese elders' religious involvement; 2) To explore the relationship between Chinese elders' lives as immigrants and their involvement in religious activities; and 3) To study the socio-cultural factors that may influence Chinese elders' religious activities.

Based on the aims of this study, a qualitative research method was employed. In particular, face-to-face interviews and participate observation were the two means for data collection because qualitative method, comparing to quantitative method, is more advantageous in providing in-depth understanding of Mainland Chinese elders' Christian practice. Face- to-face interviews also shortened the social distance between researchers and respondents and created a comfortable and trusting environment for the study subjects, especially when personal and sensitive issues, such as religious beliefs and practices, were the focus of the study. Participant observation was also utilized as one of the data collection methods in this research. Data collected by participation observation served as an important contextual source for better understanding Mainland Chinese elders' involvement in Christian congregations.

## **Sample**

### ***Sample Recruitment***

Study subjects were identified through the snow-ball sampling method. A local Chinese Christian church, Chinese Christian Church of Greater Atlanta (CCC) played a vital role in sample recruitment. This church, located in the suburb of Atlanta, is one of the major Chinese Christian churches in Atlanta Metropolitan and its surrounding areas. It was developed from a Bible study fellowship in 1970s and its membership reached over 5,000 at the time of this research.

I started the sample recruitment from one of the Bible study groups affiliated with CCC. Through the Bible study group, I was introduced to a senior Pastor of this Chinese church. After a period of my involvement in church activities on Sundays, I obtained the permission of participant observation in church activities as well as recruiting the potential respondents through church networks. Eventually, the senior pastor referred me to a few church members and fellowship directors who had connections with elderly church members from Mainland China. Acting as mediators, those church members first contacted elders to introduce the study and then with the approval from elders, I was able to obtain their contact information and explain this project and interview procedure in the follow-up calls. In this research, five elders were recruited through the elders' Bible study group; fifteen were identified through connections in this church.

### ***Sample Criteria***

Because the goal of the research was to explore the reasons and processes for Chinese elders' Christian participation, the respondents in this research were limited to Chinese elders from Mainland China who lived in Atlanta at the time of the study. The

age criterion for respondents was set at age 50 or older because retirement in China is at age 50 for females and 55 for males (Sher, 1984). Based on the goals of the research, one more criterion was added: Respondents must have not been converted to Christianity in China prior to their visits to the U.S.

### **Instrument**

A brief questionnaire and a list of 16 open-ended questions were used during the interviews (see Appendix A). The questionnaire was designed to obtain the basic demographic information of participants, such as gender, age, and living arrangements. These data were important for this research in two ways: on the one hand, they provided a general picture of respondents' characteristics and social locations; on the other hand, they allowed me to cross-examine the possible impact of individual factors on respondents' involvement in Christian congregations. Based on previous literature and the three aims of the study, I designed open-ended questions to aim at three major issues. First, to understand the social and familial contexts of Chinese elders' religious involvement, four questions were raised about the family situations of the respondents, including adult children's family conditions, living arrangements, children's religious orientation, and elders' prior knowledge of Christianity. Secondly, to investigate the relationship between elders' lives as immigrants and their participation in Christian activities, eight questions were raised. These questions included the frequency, the reasons, and the processes of their religious involvement. Thirdly, four questions were raised to study cultural factors that may influence Chinese elders' engagement in Christian congregations, such as Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism and communism.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted 20 face-to-face, in-depth interviews. During the interviews, the respondents completed a brief questionnaire and responded to a list of semi-structured and open-ended questions. The interview lasted proximately 45 minutes to an hour. Most interviews were conducted either in the churches which interviewees attended or at their homes. From August 2003 to February 2004, I regularly attended Sunday worship services in CCC. I also participated one of the elderly Bible study groups associated to the church. Detailed field notes were made in Chinese soon after the activities of participant observation. These notes were not translated into English unless they were used in the research findings.

### ***Language Issues***

Mandarin was used to conduct all the interviews. However, not all the interviewees could speak standard Mandarin because of various local dialects. Out of twenty interviewees, three elders spoke Mandarin with a strong regional accent. In order to achieve better communication, their adult children were invited to be present as interpreters during the interviews. Interview data were all transcribed and translated from Chinese into English. Data analyses were based on the English translation of the interviews.

### ***Consent Issues and Confidentiality***

A consent form with the approval of Institutional Review Board was presented to all the interviewees for their signature before the interview started (See Appendix B). Each respondent was given a copy of the consent form to keep. I started the interviews after the respondents had signed the consent forms. The consent forms explained the

main purpose of this study, what interviewees are expected to complete during the interviews and their right to decline the interviews. For purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all respondents in the study. Using the list of 100 most common last names in Chinese, I selected pseudonyms from the top twenty. Any last name identical with any respondent's real last name was avoided. Below I provide a table with the study subjects' age, gender, marital status, and pseudonyms.

**Table 1 Description of the Sample**

<b>Case Number</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Marital Status*</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
1	52	M	M	Zhao
2	52	F	M	Huang
3	68	F	M	Sun
4	63	M	M	Zhu
5	62	F	M	Fu
6	66	F	M	Ma
7	54	F	M	Luo
8	63	F	W	Liang
9	67	F	W	Song
10	64	M	M	Zheng
11	64	M	M	Xie
12	66	F	M	Han
13	73	F	M	Tang

<b>Case Number</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Marital Status*</b>	<b>Pseudonym</b>
14	70	F	M	Feng
15	61	M	M	Yu
16	63	F	M	Dong
17	55	F	M	Xiao
18	71	F	W	Cao
19	59	F	M	Deng
20	59	M	M	Zeng

\* M refers to “married;” W refers to “widowed.”

### *Interview Instruments*

Past Studies show that the Chinese in the U.S. tend to avoid research interviews due to both social and cultural reasons, such as fear of expressing opinions and animosity against interviews or social studies (Hinton, Guo, & Levkoff, 2000; Neundorfer et al., 2001). To minimize discomfort about interviews, a tape recorder initially was not utilized to conduct interviews. However, during the research, a large number of interviewees offered their approval of using a tape-recorder. Therefore, I tape-recorded thirteen interviews out of twenty. The respondents who were willing to accept tape-recorded interviews were asked to endorse their agreement on the consent forms. For those whose interviews were not tape-recorded, detailed field notes were used to write up those interviews. Both tape-recorded interviews and recollected field notes were translated from Chinese into English. Instead of transcribing tape-recorded interviews into Chinese and then translating them into English, I transcribed and translated tape-recorded interviews simultaneously into English.

### **Data Analysis**

I used the software, Ethnograph 5.0, to organize the full text of data for a more convenient data analysis. I employed the first two steps of grounded theory techniques in the data analysis. Using open coding, I identified initially emerging concepts by conducting word-by-word and line-by-line analysis. Then I grouped concepts into categories. For instance, social isolation, lack of belonging, and simplified social roles were categorized into “immigration experiences.” Cultural recognition, emotional comforts, and provisions of social services were grouped into non-religious functions of Christian congregations. Then I used axial coding to explore the relationships among these categories. I examined the frequency of re-occurring categories and studied their relationships, then, developed the core categories into major themes. Using the above concepts and categories, I found that many elders chose to participate in Chinese Christian congregations because they could share cultural and ethnic identities through their religious involvement. Finally, by synthesizing these categories, I induced two central themes from this study, which became the major findings in the following two chapters.

**CHAPTER IV**

**PARTICIPATING IN CHINESE CHRISTIAN CONGREGATIONS:  
CONSTRUCTING MEANINGS IN UPROOTED LIVES**

“We, human beings, are a group of lambs lost in a mundane world. We would never have any hope to be saved without our Lord God sending His holy son to us, His only one.”

-----From a Chinese Christian’s presentation  
in an Atlanta Chinese Bible study group

I was surprised when I attended my first Bible study meeting hosted by a Chinese Christian couple in Atlanta, because it was a Bible study group structured specifically for elderly Chinese immigrants or visitors, most of them from Mainland China. Although, it is a common sight to see Mainland Chinese elders strolling around in suburban Atlanta and in Asian food markets, it had never occurred to me just how many Mainland Chinese elders might be living around Atlanta. As I sat down with this group of Chinese elders who were all my parents’ age, the hosts of this Bible study group explained:

There are more and more Chinese elders coming here to visit their adult children. Although this population is quite fluid, the number remains quite large and is increasing. Their growing presence in the community is substantial and cannot be ignored.

After a round of introductions, I learned that not only were most of the Bible study participants not Christian in China, most of them had never even attended any Christian gathering prior to their visits to America. Intrigued by this interesting dynamic, these questions came to my mind: “Why did they choose to attend Bible study groups if they



are not Christians or have not showed any prior interest in the religion?” and “What do they think about the Christian teachings presented in these Bible studies?” In this chapter, I will present findings that describe the culture and ethnic interruptions experienced by Mainland Chinese elders in their immigrant lives. I will also illustrate the relationship between Chinese elders’ displacement and their participation in Christian congregations.

### **Interruption of Self-Identity**

In recent years, Georgia has gradually become one of the most popular destinations for Mainland Chinese immigrants. According to 2000 census, 29,851 Chinese immigrants not including Taiwanese reside in Georgia. Upon settling, many Chinese immigrants have invited their parents to come to the U.S. to visit. The length of these visits has varied greatly. According to applicable U.S. immigration regulations, Chinese visitors may reside legally in the U.S. for a maximum of 6 months, after which they may apply for a renewal of their visas for another 6 months or even longer. Certain individuals may also be eligible to apply for a change in their legal status from short-term visitors to permanent U.S. residents and eventually to U.S. citizens. In this study, five out of twenty respondents have become permanent residents while the remainder held visitor’s visas. Among 25 interviewees, the length of their stays in Atlanta ranged from two months to eight years.

Life in the U.S. has not proven to be an easy transition for Mainland Chinese elders, whether as permanent residents or temporary visitors. All respondents in this research came to the U.S. after their adult children had settled down in this country. With the exception of one respondent, each of the respondents lived in the same household

with their adult children. Most of them did not work in order to support themselves or their families in the U.S.; consequently, they had little chance for any type of upward-mobility in the U.S. The lack of language abilities, cultural recognition, and social network made it extraordinarily difficult for Chinese elders to build independent and rewarding lives for themselves, let alone to fully assimilate into American society.

Arguably, permanent residents might be expected to have different life experiences from temporary visitors. After all, their life interruptions were caused by long-term displacements; their adjustment would likely be more dramatic and sustained than that of short-term residents. Nevertheless, both groups have encountered common challenges, many of which arose as soon as they landed in this country. Among the various challenges and difficulties succeeding initial immigration, the challenges to ethnic identity and the loss of social roles were probably the most prominent ones reported by elderly respondents.

### ***Challenges to Ethnic Identity and Integrity***

Upon arrival in America, many Chinese elders noticed that, regardless of their social, economic, and educational backgrounds, they were labeled and perceived first and foremost as “Chinese.” In China, they were accustomed to being defined primarily by their socioeconomic standing in society; now they had to adjust to foreign stereotypes and connotations of being “Chinese.” They even discovered that a common green vegetable used in everyday Chinese cooking is labeled with an exotic name of “China Yoay,” (*You Cai*)<sup>8</sup>. But, of all the various challenges elderly Chinese immigrants faced,

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<sup>8</sup> A kind of green-leaf vegetable very common in China

the inability to intelligently communicate with people might impact their lives most.

Most Chinese elders have not learned to speak or understand English. Even those who received college educations in China reported that their English is not sufficient to carry on basic conversations with Americans. As a result, their language difficulties greatly restricted their social activities. They have not been able to understand local newspapers or television programs, nor to communicate with people outside of their immediate families. Language difficulties have sometimes deterred them from taking morning walks or afternoon strolls. Instead, they must rely on their adult children to establish all of their communication with the outside world. The most simple of activities, such as grocery shopping or going to the post office, has become almost impossible without assistance from their children. They felt that language barriers have taken away the independence they enjoyed in China, and as a consequence, they have become extremely dependent on their children just to carry on their daily lives. This type of social isolation has been even more severe for elders living in mainstream American communities or suburbs. Many respondents, in fact, reported that their adult children's houses are located in communities where there were very few Chinese people. Ms. Han, for example, came to the U.S. to live with her daughter's family after she retired. She had lived in Atlanta for three years but had yet to feel settled or comfortable with her life as an immigrant. She described her home in America as "a prison."

It's like a jail, a nice, pretty jail. I can't have any communication with others because I don't know English. And I cannot go anywhere by myself either, because I don't drive. It's just like putting me into a prison.

Transportation has become another major difficulty that Mainland Chinese elders

face in their daily lives in the U.S. Compared to most urban areas in Mainland China, Atlanta has developed as a city with somewhat fewer public transportation resources. For Mainland Chinese elders who do not know how to drive, therefore, the scope of their social life has been drastically limited. Furthermore, whatever public transport has often seemed unavailable or inaccessible to these elderly Chinese immigrants due to severe language barrier. Ms. Yu, who came to Atlanta to visit her son's family, compared her life in China and in the U.S.:

In Atlanta, there aren't many sidewalks for people to use. You cannot go out for a walk. And if you want to go shopping or go somewhere to have fun, it's very inconvenient. It's very different in China. You can go anywhere you want. Even if there're no buses going wherever you want to go, you can walk there by yourself [because many places are not that far]. We were able to enjoy much more freedom when we were in China.

The lack of public transportation has impeded Chinese elders' expansion of their social lives. Moreover, the language barriers made the public transportation system inaccessible which further jeopardizes Chinese elders' social isolation. Whenever they want to go to any place beyond a walking distance, they have not had any choices but to request a ride from their adult children. The lack of language competence and unfamiliarity with means of transportation has made Mainland elders suddenly become, as one of the elders, Ms. Tang put it, "deaf, dummy, blind, and disabled."

### *Loss of Social Roles*

#### *From “Working Professionals” to “Professional Grandparents”*

Most Mainland elders have come to the U.S. not just to visit but also to assume a specific task: to help their adult children to take care of the next generation. In this study, fifteen elders out of twenty reported that they needed to take care of their grandchildren as well as for doing other housework. In fact, childcare and housework constitute the major part of their lives in the U.S., whereas they had maintained multiple social roles while living in China. In China, in the public sphere, they were retired professors, doctors, high-school teachers, community leaders, or Tai Chi trainers; in their private lives, they were wives, mothers, daughters, neighbors, or friends. In America, however, their social roles have been considerably limited. Within their families, they are parents and grandparents and their primary duties are babysitting and housekeeping. Outside of their homes, they are merely regarded as “old Chinese people pushing around baby strollers.”

Ms. Han was a retired dentist in China. She and her husband, a former Vice President of a University, enjoyed a vibrant life in the city where they had lived for over thirty years. She had joined a private hospital after she retired and had been very devoted to her new career. When Ms. Han’s daughter first invited her to visit the U.S., she had declined the immediate “offer” because she had no interest in becoming a professional “grandma.” Eventually, however, she was persuaded by her husband and decided to give up her own life in order to attend to their daughter’s needs.

My life in China was pretty comfortable. I had my own career, and my own research projects. My colleagues were all very respectful to me. And the

income was pretty good, too. I was very happy working there. But after my daughter had her second baby here, she needed me to come here to help her because my son-in-law travels all the time, and they have another little girl to take care of. Actually I didn't want to come because I loved my life in China. Plus I was very absorbed in my work and I hated to take care of chores. . . .

Similar to Ms. Han, Ms. Fu was also a retired professional in China. After a thirty-year academic career in China, Ms. Fu had started enjoying a lively retirement life. She actively participated in various social activities and community service programs. She met with her friends and old colleagues regularly for dancing, exercising, and other forms of entertainment. In 2002 when her second grandchild was born in America, Ms. Fu left her family in China and came to Atlanta. Ms. Fu's son was working in Atlanta and her daughter-in-law was still a graduate student at the time of this interview. Ever since her arrival, Ms. Fu had spent most of her time on babysitting and housework. Her only social life was to visit a Chinese neighbor nearby. When asked about her life in the U.S., she described it as:

Just one word: Lonely! I was a professor in China. My life was really fun and I spent a lot of time having fun with my elderly friends. We always hung out together singing, dancing, or practicing martial arts in the park. In my university, we also have big parties for retired faculty twice a year. Well, but my life here is all about children-rearing.

In terms of their feelings about their domestic roles in their adult children's families, the elders' attitudes were quite diverse. In the Mainland, it has been very common for grandparents to take care of the grandchildren. They had regarded it as part of their responsibilities in their later life. However, taking care of their grandchildren in China is quite different from giving up their own lives in their home country and moving to the U.S. to become the resident babysitter. In this research, although all of the elders chose to leave their own families in China and come to assist their adult children in the U.S., it was certainly not been an easy choice to make, especially when they endured emotional loneliness and/or physical distress while in the U.S. A common quandary for these elders was whether to go back and enjoy their own lives in China or to keep making sacrifices for their children in the U.S. Since her immigration to the U.S., Ms. Song had lived with each of her two daughters and has helped both with raising the grandchildren. During these years, Ms. Song tried a couple of times to move back to China but was persuaded to stay each time. Ms. Song admitted that she has never really enjoyed living in the U.S. The only reason for her to give up her own life in China was, she said, that elderly Chinese people "all have gentle hearts." She elaborated:

During the first several years in the U.S., I stayed with my eldest daughter. She has a boy. They needed somebody to stay with him after he came back from school. You cannot leave him at home by himself. [Whenever I told them I wanted to go back to China], my grandson begged me, "Grandma, don't go, don't go." So [I ended up staying.]

When her grandson went to college, Ms. Song thought she could finally realize her dream of returning home to China. However, the birth of another grandchild led her to

put aside her own plans once again. In recent years, Ms. Song reported that she had been suffering from health problems, which made caring for her granddaughter more and more physically taxing. But “no matter how much pain you have on your legs and arms,” Ms. Song said, “you still need to take your responsibility seriously.” At the time of the interview, Ms. Song had already spent eight years in the U.S. and had no firm plans about returning to China.

### ***Gendered Roles: Why Women?***

In this research, gender issues surfaced as a significant topic. Among twenty respondents in this research, fourteen were female (See table 2). The uneven gendered distribution of respondents reflects the dominant pattern in responsibility management within contemporary Chinese families. Traditionally and especially in the elder generation, women were in charge of most of the housework, including child and elder care, house-cleaning and household management, and other domestic chores. Some elders in this study reported that they were torn by their domestic responsibilities on both fronts: their own families in China and their adult children’s families in the United States. One elderly woman, Ms. Sun, described her struggle in these words:

I mainly take care of the house [for my daughter during my stay in the U.S].

The housework is not easy. We have a huge yard. It takes a lot of work. Each time when I come to the U.S. the yard work alone exhausts me. It’s huge. I’m very tired of taking care of it. I also cook dinner everyday. They are extremely busy [referring to her daughter and son-in-law]. This time I will stay here until they move to the new house. And then, I’ll go back to China and I won’t come



back to the U.S. in the near future. My husband is still in China and his health is not that good.

Ms. Sun is not alone. In this study, eleven out of twenty interviewees who visited the U.S. and left their spouses behind in China were females. Nine out of twenty respondents had come here with their respective spouses; six of them are male. The gendered role among Chinese elderly immigrants was in line with Chinese traditional values, especially the division of labor within families. Major domestic responsibilities, such as housework, childcare, and caring for the elderly, were traditionally viewed as “women’s work.” If it has been decided that one of a couple is needed to leave home and go cross the Pacific Ocean to take on the responsibility of childrearing and housekeeping for their adult children, it was most likely the wife or grandmother, even if, in some cases, these women had to temporarily put on hold or abandon their own careers. It would be considered inappropriate for a man to assume “women’s work” in another country without his wife’s accompaniment and assistance. However, it was never a question, or perhaps even a clear expectation, that a woman could travel halfway around the world and assume the responsibilities of incremental domestic duties without the assistance of her mate. A similar pattern of behaviors and expectations was seen in intergenerational relationships among Chinese families. Caring for the grandchildren was still considered an assumed responsibility for the older generation, whether they lived under the same roof or ten thousand miles away.

In the U.S., elderly Mainland Chinese immigrants were forced to adjust to an unfamiliar, unique, and, from certain perspectives, unpleasant lifestyles. They socialize with a very limited, if any, circle of neighbors, friends, or acquaintances. Language

barriers made it difficult for them to communicate or associate with most of the outside world. As a result, they might even take on more intensified domestic duties of childrearing and housekeeping than they were accustomed to in China. Over time, their loss of identity, both from a racial and a social perspective, and their loss of independence have led to their eventual isolation from mainstream society. This identity crisis has created a need for elderly Chinese immigrants to pursue a sense of belonging and connection in the community. They crave social activities and a more meaningful life in their host country. Since their lack of language capabilities hindered them from getting involved in any mainstream American communities or social service institutions, elderly Chinese immigrants became very attracted to Chinese Christian Churches, which consist mostly of Chinese people and have seemingly become popular as substitute ethnic communities for Chinese immigrants in the U.S.

**Table 2 Demographic Characteristics of the Elders**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Valid %</b>	<b>Missing Data</b>
<b>Age</b>			0
50-59	6	30	
60-69	11	55	
70+	3	15	
<b>Gender</b>			0
Male	6	30	
Female	14	70	
<b>Marital status</b>			0
Married	17	85	
Divorced	0		
Widowed	3	15	

Variable	Frequency	Valid %	Missing Data
<b>Education</b>			4
No formal education	2	10	
Elementary school	1	5	
Middle school	3	15	
High school	2	10	
College and above	8	40	
<b>Years of Residence in the U.S.</b>			0
One year or less	12	60	
One to two years	5	25	
More than two years	3	15	
<b>Family Status</b>			0
Visiting with spouse	11	55	
Visiting by oneself	9	45	
<b>Retirement</b>			2
Retired	16	80	
Not retired	2	10	
<b>Having Pension in China</b>			2
Yes	16	80	
No	2	10	
<b>Having Medical reimbursement in China</b>			0
Yes	14	70	
No	6	30	
<b>Immigration status</b>			0
American citizen	0	0	
Permanent resident	5	25	
Visitor	15	75	
<b>Having Childcare responsibility</b>			3
Have	15	75	
Do not have	2	10	

Variable	Frequency	Valid %	Missing Data
<b>Having Housework responsibility</b>			3
Yes	17	85	
No	0	0	
<b>Living arrangement</b>			0
With adult children	19	95	
By oneself or with others than adult children	1	5	
<b>Adult children's religiosity</b>			0
Christian	13	65	
Non-Christian	7	35	
<b>Conversion/or religious commitment</b>			0
Yes	11	55	
No	9	45	

### **Joining Christian Congregations: Searching for a Chinese Community**

#### ***Chinese Christian Congregations: Creating Ethnic Communities***

Chinese Christian Church of Greater Atlanta (CCC), founded by a group of Taiwanese students in the 1960s, is one of the largest Chinese Churches in Atlanta and the surrounding areas. It had approximately 5,000 registered members at the time this research was conducted. CCC is the church in which most of the respondents in the research participated. Though a non-denominational Christian Church, CCC shares similar beliefs with many of the other Chinese Christian Churches in the U.S. For example, it preaches that Jesus is the only Savior and promotes evangelization as church members' primary task. CCC has maintained Chinese ethnic qualities in the religious

services and communal activities they host. In CCC, three pastors out of four are Chinese. The church provides two worship services in Chinese language every Sunday. The dominant language used among church members was Mandarin. The church celebrates major Chinese holidays, such as Chinese New Year and the Moon Festival. CCC even offered a fellowship structured specifically for elders, called the “Evergreen Fellowship.” Over the years, CCC has become as much a religious institution as a Chinese community center. Noticing the rapid growth of elderly Mainland Chinese immigrants in the metro Atlanta area, CCC began targeting these individuals for recruitment into the church. And since most Chinese elders living in Atlanta craved involvement in social activities, communication with peers, and cultural recognition, for many, it was not possible to resist the kind gestures and attention they received from CCC. Ms. Han described how a Chinese Christian introduced her to the “Sisters’ Fellowship”<sup>9</sup> of a Chinese church:

Ms. Liu asked me if I wanted to join in the “Sisters’ Fellowship.” You know, my life here is extremely boring and lonely. So I decided to go with her. The sisters in this fellowship were very kind to non-Christians, like me. We got together, chatting, singing, and having fun. It felt very nice. At the very beginning I just wanted to be there, to meet people and to be around them. It's all because of loneliness. . . .

For Chinese elders like Ms. Han, CCC has functioned as religious institutions as well as ethnic communities, where they can find people from similar ethnic backgrounds

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<sup>9</sup> The fellowship specifically designed for female churchgoers.

who speak the same language. Not only have Chinese Christian congregations created a much sought-after social circle for Mainland Chinese elders in the U.S., they also have given the elders some free time and space from their daily physical strain and emotional pressure at home. When asked how she feels about Chinese Christian congregations, Ms. Han, who converted to Christianity from atheism, did not speak much about how these congregations contributed to her drastic change in religious belief. Instead, she emphasized how Chinese churches and fellowships have played a crucial part in her “social life.”

I have been very happy since I joined the “Sisters’ Fellowship.” It gives me at least once a week to go spend time with other people. I like making friends. I feel happy being with them. Whenever I am upset, I would feel better after I spend some time with my friends from church. As soon as I go home, I feel bored again. I would be very happy to come here more often.

In addition to creating a familiar cultural environment for Chinese people in Atlanta, CCC also organized community services for its members. In the past ten years, CCC has organized more and more social service projects as part of their community outreach. These projects have included offering English classes, providing childcare, and arranging regular health check-ups for elders. These services have carried special appeal and have made congregations more attractive to Mainland elders. For example, many Mainland Chinese elders were eager to take advantage of free health exams because most do not have health insurance in the U.S. or any other access to healthcare facilities during their visits in the U.S. Thus, these services have been particularly beneficial to them.

Ms. Fu said:

In the beginning of my visit, I joined the “Evergreen Fellowship.” Well, I have a heart problem. And since SARS became an issue in the spring and the flu was going around, it was good going to the fellowship meetings because they gave us blood-pressure tests each time. Recently, they also administered flu shots. We only paid \$5 for the flu shots and the church picked up the rest of the cost. Last time they also checked our blood sugar.

By offering a familiar and welcoming cultural environment, distinctive Chinese ethnic touches, and much needed social services, Chinese Christian churches have created mini “Chinese world” for elderly Mainland Chinese immigrants in the midst of their lives as foreigners in the U.S. Joining and becoming actively involved in Chinese Christian congregations has allowed Chinese elders to reclaim and enjoy their ethnic and cultural identities lost during displacement. In turn, they have gained a sense of belonging while living in this foreign land.

### ***Christian Congregations: a Way of Seeking Emotional Support***

Mainland Chinese elders, as discussed above, found it practically impossible to develop friendships and seek other social support networks because of their social isolation from the outside world. This was especially true of temporary visitors. Meanwhile, the loss of multiple social roles further centralized the kinship and familial intimacy in their daily lives. As one of the respondents, Ms. Xiao explains:

In the U.S., our family became the most important and central part in our lives. We don't have many chances to connect with other people. . . . It's very different in China. When we were in China, our spiritual lives mostly relied on

[the connection with] friends and relatives or the community outside our small families.

Not only have elderly Chinese immigrants depended on their adult children for everyday assistance, such as establishing social relationships and providing transportation, they also developed a need for emotional support and expected to gain such support from their adult children's family. To their disappointment, however, their adult children were occupied with either work or study and rarely have time to spend with their elderly parents. Ms. Han recounts:

My daughter is very busy. She doesn't even have any time to talk with me.

Usually she doesn't come back from work until 8 or 9 PM everyday. Sometimes I asked her, "Hi, child, sit down with me for a few minutes. Let's chat a little bit." Her response always is, "Ma, I'm too tired to talk. You should be tired too with all the housework, right? It's time for bed." Then she would go upstairs, take a shower, and go to sleep!

Mrs. Liang converted to Christianity after she participated in the Chinese Church for a year. She was one of the few respondents who did not live with her adult children during her residence in the U. S. Her husband passed away when she was in her thirties. She raised two sons by herself until both of them came to the U.S. for college. During the thirty years of her widowhood, she never remarried. After her oldest son graduated and settled down in the U.S., Mrs. Liang retired and moved to this country, anticipating a joyful family reunion. Unfortunately, she ended up moving out of their house because of not being able to get along with her son and daughter-in-law. She has been living by herself ever since and does not have any other family or relatives in the U.S. Although



she holds over thirty years of teaching experience at a college in China, she has had to work as a babysitter to support herself in the U.S. When she narrated her life story and spoke about how she began to get involved in the Christian congregations, she said:

In the most difficult moments, I met Mrs. Li. She came to my home to visit me and asked if I needed any help. She was very kind to me and she even seemed concerned about the details of my life. I felt very warm. And actually at that time we did not know each other at all...I was so moved by her kindness...It had been such a long time that I felt this way about people. She helped me out with lots of things in my life. Without her, nobody would even know if I died in my home. . . .

Ms. Liang had experienced major depression as a consequence of her financial pressure and the broken relationship with her son. She narrated that she used to spend lots of time “crying,” and that she felt “abandoned” and “extremely lonely.” Her life in the U.S. became a little more bearable when Ms. Li introduced her to the “Sister Fellowship” at CCC. Ms. Liang felt especially grateful and fortunate that the CCC church members had always been kind and supportive to her. She felt she found another family in the U.S.; and with the tremendous emotional comfort that she received from her church, her “dried heart moistened again.”

When their needs were not satisfied by the immediate family members, Chinese elders began to seek extra social support and emotional comfort outside the home. The emotional support provided by Chinese Christian congregations seemed to almost meet this need. Whenever elderly Chinese immigrants encountered hardships in their immigrant lives, Chinese churches were often the communities they counted upon to

provide instant assistance. Involvement in a Christian congregation has become a crucial coping strategy for many of these Chinese elders.

### **Immigrant Status and the Level of Christian Involvement**

Most Mainland Chinese elders in this research described their lives in this foreign land in similar ways. However, experiences differed between temporary visitors and those who were planning for long-term residences in the U.S. For temporary visitors, experience in the U.S. can be seen as a mere episode in their lives, while permanent residents see this transition as the beginning of a new life in a foreign land. In terms of participation in Chinese Christian congregations, some respondents directly related their levels of church involvement to their immigrant status. Some temporary visitors described their participation as an outlet to alleviate loneliness in a foreign land, all the while, making a conscious effort to keep a certain distance from Christian teachings. They were willing to participate in various congregations-sponsored gatherings but consider a committed level of involvement as “unnecessary.” Mr. Zheng had been living in the U.S. for two months when he agreed to an interview; he was planning to go back to China in the near future. He attended the Friday Bible study group from time to time but did not want to discipline himself to be there every week. “It is not necessary for me to get too into it because I am leaving pretty soon,” he explained. However, he does not deny the possibility of becoming a Christian if he were a permanent resident in the U.S.

If I have a green-card<sup>10</sup>, I might eventually believe in God because Christianity and Church are very important to people in this country to establish their social life. But I am not in that situation, so why bother?

Five out of twenty elders were permanent residents in the U.S., four of them were baptized. The other fifteen elders were holding visitor's visas when these interviews were conducted; six of them admitted frankly that they have not regularly participated in Chinese Christian congregations because they are temporary residents. As far as they are concerned, the level of the involvement in Chinese Christian Congregations directly corresponds to their needs to assimilate into the America society. They seemed to be very aware of the powerful roles that churches and religion can play in American society. But since they viewed themselves as temporary visitors in this country, they had not felt the same level of need to assimilate that permanent residents seem to have. Therefore, full immersion in Chinese Christian congregations and Christian teachings seemed unnecessary for those who were planning to eventually return to China. They did not want to experience substantial religious challenges as they pass from one to another of these two different worlds.

### **Christian Evangelism: Parents' Participation and Adult Children's Religiosity**

In this study, all Chinese elders interviewed were here in the U.S. to visit their adult children. Therefore, their adult children's attitudes toward Christianity played an important role in their participation in Chinese Christian congregations. As noted above, nineteen out of twenty respondents, whether temporary visitors or permanent residents,

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<sup>10</sup> Referring to Permanent Residence Status

were living with their adult children. Because they depended on their adult children for almost everything from basic transportation to engaging in social activities, their adult children's attitudes towards their involvement with Chinese Christian congregations became very crucial. In this research, almost all the participants reported that their adult children supported their religious engagement at different levels. Adult children's facilitation of their involvement had a direct impact on Chinese elders' initial exposure to Chinese churches, their involvement in congregations, as well as the types and the frequency of their religious practices. Thirteen out of twenty participants reported that their adult children or their children's spouses have already become Christian themselves. All thirteen participants whose adult children are Christian reported that they were initially introduced to Chinese Christian congregations by their children; eight out of these thirteen elders were eventually baptized themselves. Ms. Huang, whose son and daughter-in-law are both Christians, made her first visit to a Chinese Church with her children right after her arrival in the U.S. Since then, her son and daughter-in-law have strongly encouraged her to attend Bible study groups and the Sunday worship service every week. "I go whenever they go. I do not have anything to do at home anyway."

Among the Chinese elders interviewed, their adult children's religious beliefs appeared to be very important factors influencing their religious activities in the U.S. After being converted to Christianity themselves, these young adults usually viewed their elderly parents as logical targets to whom they should spread the gospel. Evangelism of Christianity had even started prior to their parents' visits to America. The most typical way to spread the gospel to their parents was to send a copy of the Bible back to China. If their parents were already associated with another religion, they might try to convince

their parents to abandon their existing religious beliefs and accept Christianity into their lives. Ms. Tang used to practice Buddhism when she was in China. “I have worshiped Kwan-Yin<sup>11</sup> since I was a child,” she recalled. After her eldest son’s conversion to Christianity in the U.S., he began to persuade his mother to give up Buddhist beliefs and accept God’s calling. “My son called me and asked,” Ms. Tang described, ‘Mom, do you still worship Kwan-Yin?’ I told him I had already stopped but actually I hadn’t at that time. I lied to him.”

During her first visit to the U.S., Ms. Tang’s son took her to a Chinese Christian congregation. After she went back to China, her son and daughter-in-law continued to inquire about her religious orientation. Ms. Tang remembered, “He (her son) asked me to stop worshipping any deities because it’s useless. He told me Jesus was the only real God for us. He also encouraged me to join a Bible study group in China.” Four years after her first visit to the U.S., Ms. Tang abandoned Buddha and embraced the Christian God as her son wished.

In researching the decision-making process of Chinese elders’ involvement in Christian congregations, another issue worth noting was the shift in authority from the older generation to the younger generation within Chinese immigrant families. The adult children of the respondents in this research had all received graduate education in the U.S. Compared to their elderly parents, they undoubtedly enjoyed a superior level of educational attainments and skills and were more easily accepted by mainstream society. The sense of superiority sometimes seemed to transform into a sense of authority when

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<sup>11</sup> Kwan-yin is one of the most powerful Buddhist deities in China.

adult children were trying to influence their parents' spiritual lives. Mr. Zhao was converted to Christianity two months after he arrived in the U.S. Both his son and daughter-in-law had already become Christians. Mr. Zhao had less than three years of formal education and had been a peasant all his life. In contrast, his son was working in a postdoctoral program at one of the most prestigious universities in the U.S. after earning his Ph. D. degree from a top university. When Mr. Zhao talked about his transition from being an atheist to a Christian, he said, "People in those Bible study groups are all very well educated. There must be some good reason to believe in Christianity." He expressed strong faith in his children's choice of religious beliefs. "What they (his son and daughter-in-law) believe in could not be wrong," he said. "If they did not believe in Jesus, I would have never become a Christian."

**CHAPTER V**

**CONTINUITY OR RUPTURE: THE NEGOTIATION BETWEEN  
CHRISTIAN SPIRIT AND CHINESE CULTURE**

“Will you accept Jesus as your savior? Will you abide by the teachings of the Bible and regard them as your code of conduct? Will you respect all Christians as your brothers and sisters? Will you honor your parents and love the youth?”

-----Quote from a christening at

Chinese Christian Church of Greater Atlanta

During this research, I regularly participated in church services hosted by CCC.

The quotation above was spoken by the pastor during the baptism of new church members. With curiosity, I asked a CCC church member whether the questions used in baptism were derived from Christian scriptures and whether other Christian churches also included honoring one’s parents as part of the baptism. He said:

It [oath] does not necessarily have to be the same. It depends on each church.

We choose to emphasize the need to practice filial piety and to extend unconditional love to the youth (in this church), because, after all, these values are important parts of our Chinese culture.

For Mainland Chinese elders in this research, Chinese cultural and ethical beliefs played a central role in their Christian congregations and understanding of Christian teachings. Christian teachings and values preached at CCC, and most likely at other Chinese churches, have been filtered through Chinese ethical and cultural lenses. The compatibilities and conflicts between the Chinese culture and Christian principles have

often become deciding factors for Chinese elders in terms of whether to accept or reject Christianity. The rationale for this acceptance or rejection usually depended upon the religious, cultural, and social backgrounds of the elders. In this chapter, I will discuss three specific Chinese religious, cultural, and social characteristics which stood out in elders' elaboration of their Christian conversion: 1) the Chinese pluralistic religious traditions and its pragmatism; 2) Confucian ethics; 3) Communist doctrines. Whether convert or not, elders constantly invoked their cultural and social backgrounds to compare and contrast Christian teachings. For those who have been converted to Christianity, they have often experienced a sort of tension between their Chinese ethnicities and Christian identities and would find themselves constantly negotiating and reconstructing these two identities.

### **Chinese Pluralistic Religious Traditions and Pragmatism**

Among twenty respondents in this research, eleven elders were converted to Christianity after participating in Christian congregations in the U.S. The youngest convert was fifty-four years old and the oldest was seventy-three years old. The period from their first participation in Christian congregations to their respective dates of baptism ranged anywhere from two months to two years. Chinese culture, to which these elderly Chinese immigrants had been exposed throughout their lives in Mainland China, understandably played a vital role in their understanding and interpretation of Christian teachings. This study has found that Chinese elders' understanding of God appears to be quite pragmatic. Such pragmatism can be identified in two different ways: the practical understanding of the existence of the Christian God and the practical need for the tutelary God. Further, research data have shown that their religious pragmatism has not been



reached by accident but is a product of their Chinese cultural background and their life experiences.

### *The Existence of God*

The question of God's existence has been a central issue for Chinese elders who are considering whether to accept Christianity. The respondents in this research approached this question from various angles. Some elders focused on finding scientific proof to support or disprove the authenticity of Jesus Christ and the Bible. Some elders believed in the existence of an omnipotent God because they had witnessed "miracles," or occurrences that cannot be explained by the usual reasoning they use in their lives. Mr. Zhao was introduced to Christianity by his son and daughter-in-law. He described his main concern regarding the authenticity of the teachings of the Bible:

One key point for a person to believe [in Christianity] is if [what was said in] the Bible is true...I used to ask myself all the time when I read the Bible, "Is it true?" Things changed later...I remember when we studied Matthew. [In Matthew] Jesus predicted that a certain three cities will be destroyed. And people actually found historical records that these cities were truly destroyed at one point in history. [In terms of] verifying all these predictions in the Bible, there is definitely skepticism and antagonism. We [as society] began to have access to more sources of verification since the 1800s because of [the development of] archeology.

Besides the Bible, Mr. Zhao also read other Christian journals and newspapers, in order to collect more valid evidence about the real existence of God. According to his logic, a religion was only worthy of believing if its respective canon is credible. Over time, Mr.

Zhao found enough “proof” to substantiate the authenticity of Jesus and the Bible and thus began to follow his “proven” God.

For some respondents, scientific evidence has not been the key point for authenticating the existence of God and the Bible. As far as they were concerned, personally experiencing God’s omnipotent power was more convincing than “objective” proof of God’s existence. In other words, God seemed “real” not because they proved Him “real” but because they felt Him “real.” Ms. Song converted to Christianity soon after she immigrated to the U.S. During her interview for this study, she frankly admitted that she was not always devoted to God, not even after she was baptized. She was not a regular churchgoer, nor did she ever read the Bible.

I hadn’t truly believed in God at that time [when I was baptized]. I went to church only because you wouldn’t feel that lonely. There were so many Chinese people there. You felt very happy to see them and talk with them. . . . I couldn’t understand the Bible. I couldn’t even read through it. . . and I didn’t believe I could understand it whatsoever. . . . I’m not saying I didn’t believe it. I just wasn’t taking it seriously at that time.

The turning point in Ms. Song’s belief in God came during the first time she took her newborn granddaughter back to China. Being unable to read and speak English, she was very uneasy about the international journey by herself with an infant. “I prayed to God for smooth travels,” she said. As it turned out, Ms. Song landed in China without incident and even met people who were kind enough to help her during the trip. She believed that God had heard her pray and blessed her and her granddaughter during the entire trip. “[At that moment] I knew there was truly a God out there even if you cannot

see him,” Ms. Song said. “I have become more devoted to Him since then.”

To some Chinese elders, believing in the Christian God has not necessarily meant the exclusion of other gods’ existence. They may have stopped worshipping other deities if they became baptized, but their acceptance of Christianity has not translated into the rejection of other supernatural powers. The primary reason behind their choosing the Christian God over other deities was that the Christian God seems more real, approachable, or powerful. Ms. Song explained her views towards other supernatural powers as follows:

I think they [referring to other deities] are also there. But the reason I believe in God is because. . . First of all, Jesus is the God for the poor. He always helps poor people and saves people from their sin. [Even if you make mistakes,] you can be forgiven. . . . Buddha does not do that. He doesn’t care about poor people. He is a deity for the wealthy and the officials.

For elderly converts such as Ms. Song, the commitment to the “only” Holy God was not central in their Christian beliefs. In other words, their beliefs in the existence of other supernatural beings did not conflict with or negate their belief in the Christian God. Chinese elders’ Christian faith was not necessarily based on an exclusive belief in the Christian God as the only God. Instead, it was gradually established by accepting the God’s omnipotent power in blessing and protecting their mundane lives.

### *Searching for a “Tutelary God”*

Chinese elders’ practical understanding of God was not simply a coincidence. Data have shown that some respondents’ acceptance of God as the “protector” is directly related to their cumulative life experiences. In other words, Chinese elders’ yearning to

find a “tutelary” god has been partly created by the hardships experienced in their earlier lives. Born and raised in a rural area in China, Ms. Song lost her mother in her childhood and was separated from her father. She spent most of her youth with her relatives. “I was a little girl without anyone truly caring for me and loving me,” she recalled. “Although they did not treat me badly, the way my relatives cared for me cannot be compared with the way real parents cared for their own children.” At sixty-seven years of age, Ms. Song was still haunted by unpleasant and humiliating childhood experiences. “Once my uncle accused me of stealing their food in storage, but I did not. He would not let it go and even told the whole family I was a liar. Life was really tough and I went through so many hardships.” After she got married and had her own family, Ms. Song endured a difficult relationship with her mother-in-law.

After I got married, my relationship with my mother-in-law became an issue. She was a very difficult person to get along with. We lived together and it was a very unhappy time for me. In the rural areas of China, maybe you don’t know, whenever you visited your own parents, your parents would prepare gifts for you to bring back to your parents-in-law. One of the reasons my mother-in-law was always upset at me was that I never brought back any gifts for her when I went “home” to visit my relatives.

Some years later, Ms. Song moved to a city with her husband and started working for the government. Since she never had a chance to go to school when she was young, she encountered tremendous difficulties in her job. “The only education I had during my childhood was self-taught,” She described, “writing on the ash with fire sticks while I was cooking for the whole family.” Besides struggling to survive in the work place, Ms.

Song undertook full responsibility for the care their three children as well as all the domestic chores in order to support her husband's career advancement. Finances were tight for quite a long time. In 1990, after thirty-seven years of marriage, her husband suffered from a sudden cerebral hemorrhage and passed away within five days. Ms. Song was widowed at the age of fifty-four. Traumatized by the unexpected loss of her husband, Ms. Song seemed to lose most of her reading and writing abilities and suffered some memory loss as well. "At that point, the only thing I could do was to survive," she said. In 1996, Ms. Song moved to the United States to join her daughters. Right after her arrival, her daughter brought her to a Bible study group. She recalled her first church visit as being "very confusing" and felt "totally lost." She could not understand the Bible or any other Christian scriptures discussed in the meeting. However, she was very much impressed when she heard other people share their life stories and how they got through their hardships with the blessing of God. Without even finishing reading the Bible, Ms. Song decided to convert two months after she attended the first congregation. She explained:

I had so much sadness and grief in my life. . . . They said after one is baptized, God would clear all his sins and then all his unpleasant memories in his earlier life would just disappear. I was thinking at that time, (if it were true,) it would be perfect for me. So I decided to undergo baptism. I thought maybe after the baptism, all those sad memories about my life could be gone and I would be able to start a new life all over. Of course, later on I knew it's not the case."

Ms. Song was not alone in expecting God to serve as the "protector" in her life. Among other Mainland Chinese elderly Christians in this research, God was understood

only within the context of one's existing life. The connection between the respondents and God was embedded in this-worldly life instead of salvation in life after death. Some elders relied on God to resolve their everyday mundane problems more than to fulfill their spiritual needs. God, and His omnipotent power, were incorporated into every detail in their daily lives. Their pragmatic approach to belief in God and acceptance of the Christian faith were explicitly revealed in the testimonies of several respondents. Ms. Tang, who used to worship Buddha, decided to convert to Christianity after she started praying to the Christian God. "I'm disappointed with praying to Buddha, because they didn't really respond to me," she explained. In contrast, Ms. Tang asserted, God had shown His grace in all matters that concern or trouble her and her family. For instance, she believed that God has not only helped her resolve certain family conflicts she had with her husband, but has also alleviated certain of her physical illnesses like a miracle.

In March, 2001, my right hand began to really hurt and it lasted until October. It used to be so painful that sometimes it even made me cry. I couldn't even turn over in bed. It was just unbearable. On the night of October 23rd, I got up from bed and knelt down to pray, "God, it is okay that I cannot lift my arm, but the pain is so bad that I cannot even sleep! God, you're the only one who can help me. I am praying to you. Please reduce the pain of my arm so I can sleep at least." I prayed on October 23rd, and the pain was immediately gone on the 24th! It's just such a miracle! A miracle!

The "miracles" Ms. Tang experienced added important practical meanings to her religious belief. She became more aware of God's power and more devoted to Christianity ever since. Rarely thinking of God as her Savior in her afterlife, Ms. Tang

looked upon God as her omnipotent protector who helps her to overcome practical problems in her life. The same mindset also applied to certain other respondents. For most, the turning point for a non-Christian to become a real Christian did not necessarily occur at one's baptism, but more often was a consequence of perceived practical interventions in their existing lives by the Christian God.

### **Push and Pull: Looking at Christianity through Chinese Ethic Lenses**

Most of the Chinese Christian congregants in this research had never been exposed to Christianity prior to their visits or immigration to America. None of them had experienced a different culture before their residence in the U.S. In comparison to their education and upbringing in China, Christianity presented a new cultural and moral system to most of the respondents. The process of conversion was a process of constant negotiation between Christian values and Chinese ethical codes. Whether converted or not, congregants consciously compared and contrasted the ethical values with which they were raised and the gospel preached by Chinese Christians in the U.S. This negotiation between the two value systems not only influenced Chinese elders' religious transition, but also affected the level of their congregational involvement.

### ***The Concept of Universal Love***

“Love” was a key word that was repeatedly discussed in the respondents' description of their feelings toward Christianity and Christian congregations. Whether converted or not, Chinese elders in this research reported that they were impressed by Christian teachings about love, sincerity, mercy, and justice. The concept of universal love was considered the most compatible principle between Christianity and Chinese ethics. As for those who were baptized, the emphasis on love in Christian teachings

created continuity between their Chinese ethical standards and their Christian beliefs. For not-yet-converted elders, it helped to soften the conflicts between Chinese traditional values and Christian teachings. Ms. Xiao regularly attended a local Chinese Church each Sunday. She was a temporary visitor and asserted that she would not convert to Christianity. In a very straightforward way, she explained both her emotional acceptance of and her ideological resistance to Christianity:

I don't believe in God. I don't think God really exists. But (I saw Christianity) unite people together here and educate everybody to learn how to love others. Just like the pastor said in today's worship, "Love carries the same meaning in all religions." Christianity advocates that people should love, be humble and coexist with others peacefully. It makes a whole lot of sense to me. It doesn't matter if there's a God or not. These are the virtues all human beings should aspire to.

The idea of practicing universal love in Christian teachings has become particularly important to Chinese elderly congregants because it carries a realistic and practical meaning in their daily lives. Ms. Luo became committed to believing in Jesus while visiting her son in the U.S. The notion of love in Christian teachings was central in her understanding of Christianity and, therefore, became the very reason for her commitment to the Christian faith. Knowing that her only child may permanently stay in the U.S., Ms. Luo was realistic about the fact that she would not grow old in the company of her son, but only with her husband. She predicted her future life to be "quiet and lonely." Ms. Luo used to apply Buddhism to her perception of aging. She interpreted Buddhism in this way:



Buddhism interprets this worldly life as meaningless and full of suffering... In my entire life, I have always put others' needs before my own, whether at home or at work...I thought that I no longer had any needs or desires. I thought I held no expectations in life as I age. But now, I have to admit, unconsciously, I still have certain expectations. Actually, I have always had a very strong desire to... be loved.

Love, as far as Ms. Luo is concerned, has always been something that she has extended to others but has seldom expected in return. Through learning Christian teachings and attending Chinese Christian congregations, however, Ms. Luo realized that the love she has been giving to others can also be reciprocated.

Since I came here and started getting to know other Christians, I discovered that my love for people can also be reciprocated. . . . I suddenly felt that not only did I need love but I also could receive it. . . . Well, the key point is that (with Christians) you can tell that people love you. . . . Buddhism also advocates love, but the love in Buddhism is invisible. The love from Christians is real, visible, and tangible.

Ms. Luo perceived both Buddhism and Christianity as guiding lights that lead people through their mundane existences. Compared to Buddhism, Ms. Luo felt that Christianity seemed to better respond to her yearning for a future life. Ms. Luo admitted that she seldom reads the Bible or prays, which is why she does not identify herself as a devoted Christian. However, her appreciation for Christian love made her sincere in her commitment to Christianity.

Although most respondents shared a general appreciation for the universal love preached in Christian teachings and congregations, some Chinese elders, however, found certain concepts of Christian love problematic. Ms. Yu is a retired Chinese literature teacher. She attended private school as a child and systematically accepted Confucian ethics and teachings. Despite enjoying Christian services, Ms. Yu claimed that she could never convert to Christianity because she found certain aspects of the Christian gospel frustrating and even unacceptable. “I love spending time with people in Chinese churches because they are really nice,” she explained, “but I just cannot agree with the preaching of loving your enemy.” Ms. Yu identified herself a Confucianist, especially with respect to her moral values; she found the tolerance and forgiveness toward one’s enemy, as advocated in the Bible, are contrary to Confucian thoughts:

On this point, I am more in line with the teachings of Confucianism. I agree with what Confucius said, “If people reward badness with mercy, what should they reward kindness with?” Confucius believed that we should “treat badness with integrity and justice.” In other words, if people did something wrong, it’s wrong. . . . We should follow rules to deal with them. If we should punish them, we punish them. If we should forgive them, we forgive them.

As shown above, Mainland Chinese elders selectively accepted Christian gospels by constantly comparing Christianity to their existing values, whether Confucianism or Buddhism. For example, with a focus on universal love, Ms. Song converted to Christianity because in Christianity, she could feel reciprocal love that was intangible in Buddhism. But Ms. Yu ultimately rejected Christianity precisely because Christian love seems too unfair to her.

### *The Concept of Sin*

Based on my findings, the Christian concept of “sin” has seemed to be the most foreign to the respondents. Chinese elderly Christians seldom identified themselves as “sinners.” For some not-yet-converted elders, in particular, “sin” was a frustrating or even offensive concept, which hindered them from fully accepting Christian gospel. To Ms. Feng, being labeled a sinner was humiliating; she claimed that she would never convert to Christianity because she could not imagine herself being called a “sinner” for the rest of her life.

It was said in the Bible, “Everybody has sins. Telling a lie is a sin.” But who can guarantee they never lie in their lives? Nobody can promise, right? For example, sometimes I say to my grandson, “Andy, if you stop crying and get up, I’ll take you out to play.” If I won’t take him out to play or was not planning to in the first place, would that be considered a lie? There’s no way that I can promise to never lie again. In this case, I will be a sinner forever [based on the Bible]!

Although the respondents admitted the existence of people’s character flaws, such as greed, jealousy, and dishonesty, some of the Chinese elders felt that such weaknesses should be accepted as part of human nature. They insisted that people’s behaviors should only be judged within the appropriate and relevant context, and bad behavior should not be ignored or exaggerated for the sake of drama. They also felt strongly that faulty personalities should be controlled and corrected by human beings rather than be “saved” by an omnipotent god. Respondents who rejected the concept of “sin” in Christianity also denied the connection between human flaws and the Holy God. The Chinese

translation of “sinners” has been the same as the word for criminals (*zuirén*), which has created a conceptual confusion and added comprehension difficulties as well. Mr. Zhu expresses his confusion about “sin” and “crime” in this way;

Why (do they think) everybody is a man of sin? My understanding is nobody is perfect. Each person has different problems. Some of these problems are minor and some are very serious; for example, corruption in China is a serious problem. People have flaws but they are not sinners; like Chairman Mao said, “There isn’t a perfect man.”

Mr. Zhu was one of the most active congregants in this study. Although he greatly appreciated the moral education preached in the Bible, he was unsure of his intentions to commit to the Christian God in the future. His rejection of the Christian concept of sin serves as a major issue in his hesitation about conversion.

### **Christian Teachings and Communist Doctrines**

In this research, Communist doctrines have emerged as an ideological framework from which some Mainland Chinese elders have based their understanding of Christianity. All of the respondents were born between 1931 and 1950 and have spent a majority of their adult life under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party has highly promoted Marxist/Communist ideology in China. Most elders in this research have undergone constant brainwashing by the Chinese Communist government throughout their life in China. Among the various Communist doctrines, atheism and Darwinism have probably been the two most fundamental principles and the only doctrines taught by China’s formal educational

system to explain the genesis of human beings and the afterlife. Needless to say, Communist teachings conflicted with Christian teachings in very fundamental ways. Having been exposed to Communist propaganda for several decades, most Mainland Chinese Christian congregants applied Communist ideology as their dominant spiritual filter when they interpreted topics such as life and death. In fact, many respondents consciously employed Communist introduction as a frame of reference to make sense of Christian teachings. Instead of regarding Christianity and Communism as mutually exclusive ideologies, Chinese elders have discovered certain similarities between the two. Most interestingly, many respondents were optimistic about transposing Christianity into Communist China.

***Brothers and Comrades: The Ethical Teachings Shared by Christianity and Communism***

Similarities between the ethical teachings of Christianity and Communism were repeatedly discussed by respondents during the interviews. Some elders have pointed out that the universal love advocated in Christianity was the reminiscent of ethical doctrines emphasized in Communist teachings. Learning about the rhetoric of love and altruism in the Bible brought back their memories of their Communist education in the past. Ms. Sun's argument represented the opinions of many respondents.

Actually, a lot of them (Christian teachings) are quite similar to the creed of the Communist Party. For example, in the Communist Party, even though they don't say that you should love God, they do advocate that people should love others as much as they love themselves. Another thing people used to believe in is that you should give up your own interest for the group's interest; you should

devote yourself to the Communist Party. We used to talk about it all the time.

These doctrines are quite similar to some of those in the Bible.

Mr. Fu served in the Chinese military in his younger years. During his visits to his son's family in the U.S., he expressed a great deal of interest in Christian congregations. He attended a Bible study group on every Friday and worships on Sundays. He also became a member of classes targeted specifically for non-Christians organized by CCC. He claimed that Christianity was attractive to him because Christian teachings do not conflict with his Communist beliefs, especially in terms of universal love for and patriotic devotion to his motherland. He explained:

The Bible belongs to the whole world. The Bible educates people to love their countries, love their people, and to obey the laws of their government. . . . Our government educates us to love our country, too. . . . It doesn't conflict with our laws at all. It is just like in China, where the government encourages us to follow Lei, Feng<sup>12</sup>. Here, the Bible also educates us to help each other. It's exactly the same thing. . . . So far I haven't found any substantial conflicts between theism and atheism.

Another theme of comparability between Christianity and Communism was obedience to one's government. When talking about their understanding of Christianity,

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<sup>12</sup> Lei, Feng was a young soldier who was known for his altruistic behavior and his unconditional love for others. He died in an accident at a very young age while helping others. He was made a role model by the Chinese government in the 1960s.

many Mainland Chinese elders paid a great deal of attention to Christian teachings of civil obedience and respecting governmental authorities. Unlike Americans, who view religious belief as a private issue, some Mainland Chinese, especially Chinese elders, often talked about the need to promote religion at the political level. In fact, religious freedom has always been a sensitive topic in China since the establishment of the Communist government in 1949. Among various religions, Christianity used to be described as an ideological tool that the Western capitalists used to destroy the power of the Chinese Communist Party. Christians have been rigidly excluded from the Party, which, along with the repression of Christian evangelism in China, has created immense tension between the government and portion of the public. Religious restrictions by the Communist government have been witnessed by Mainland elders and made them extremely sensitive to possible political consequences. The legal protection of religious freedom under China's current political system has not relieved their concerns and fears. This concern was repeatedly raised by the respondents during the interviews. Some respondents especially appreciated Christian teachings of how civilians should not challenge the dominance of rulers, but rather, should obey them. In this way, they rationalized, converting to Christianity would not been seen as an act of opposition towards the current Chinese Communist government. On the contrary, abiding by Christian teachings would create harmony between the government and the people. As one of the respondents reiterated:

Now we're free to be religious in China. You have the right to believe in Christianity. Of course you shouldn't say that you believe in this one and so you're against that one. (i.e. Communism.) It's wrong. Speaking of religious

beliefs, every country has their specific situation. They are all different. China has its own situation and the U.S. has its own. You cannot measure them with the same standard. It's very important.

For some respondents, especially those who are Chinese Communist Party members, Christian teachings of obedience to one's government alleviated the ideological differences between Christianity and Communism. They also served as a type of emotional support for Chinese elders wanting to become involved in Christian congregations. Christianity was, in their point of view, something compatible with their loyalty to their home country and political association. They were able to integrate the identity of being a Communist and being a Christian congregant. One of the respondents interpreted his participation in Chinese Christian congregations this way: "Although I come here to study the Bible, I am not turning against atheism and Marxism-Leninism."

### ***Christianity: An Alternative Moral System for Communist China?***

All respondents of this research recognized and made very positive remarks about Christianity being the dominant religion of choice and the framework of moral values in American society. Several respondents also expressed their deep disappointment in the lack of comparable ethical values in China's current society. Some Chinese elders ascribed this ethical void to the weakening influence of Communism as a spiritual belief among the Mainland Chinese. As presented earlier, most of the respondents in this study experienced China's Cultural Revolution. They were taught to believe in atheism and Marxist-Leninist ideology for almost half a century. The ideal of a Communist society and Maoist thoughts used to be dominant in Mainland China's moral and spiritual system. In the past twenty years, however, Communism has gradually become less



dominant and influential, especially in the lives of the younger generations. As a consequence, China has begun to turn into a society where the former set of moral and ethical values are gradually being disregarded, where no major alternative spiritual or moral belief system is offered to the general public, and where, in turn, ethical values are strikingly lacking. Ms. Sun explained her conversion from a firm atheist to a Christian in these words:

I was an atheist before I believed in God. I didn't believe there was any God there. I was very faithful to Communism. Yes, when I was young, I was crazy about the ideal of a Communist Society. So I definitely didn't believe in (any gods), but later in China. . . to be honest with you, since the Cultural Revolution, (the Chinese) Communist Party did a lot of (terrible) things. Communists are not seen as role models in China anymore. But when I was young, they were all heroes in my mind. . . . I am very disappointed with them now.

Ms. Sun tried to join the Communist Party when she was young, but she was rejected by the Party. Ironically, right before she retired, she was invited to become a member of this Party she used to yearn for. Ms. Sun refused because "some Communists are so bad, and they have become even worse." Feeling deeply disappointed with the Chinese Communist Party, she became attracted by Christianity when she came to the U. S. to

visit her daughter. Instead of holding Chairman Mao's "little red book,"<sup>13</sup> now Ms. Sun has been carrying a Bible with her.

Mainland Chinese congregants in this study not only highly value Christianity as an individual choice in terms of religious belief, but also appreciated its social function of moral guidance. The current chaotic social order in Chinese society has led many to wonder how a new moral system can be built. After becoming exposed to Christianity, some Chinese Christian congregants believed that Christianity may potentially serve as moral therapy for China's "diseased" society. Ms. Xiao, who came to the U.S. to visit her son and his new wife, has long been a Communist Party member. What impressed her most about the U.S. were the trust and love among Christians and a relatively peaceful social order, which, in her opinion, was exactly "what the Chinese need the most now."

What do Mainland Chinese people need very badly now? [Love]. You know, the standard of living, on a material basis, is pretty good in China now . . . . People, like me, who have a middle class income in China, can enjoy a comfortable life. But how about our spiritual life now that our material life has improved? It's a question that the Chinese Communist Party should think about. I'm a Communist. But I am honest about it. We are more wealthy materially now, but our spiritual life is so poor.

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<sup>13</sup> The little red book is a book of Chairman Mao's quotations bound with a red cover. It was viewed as the Chinese "Bible" during the Cultural Revolution between 1966-1976.

Ms. Xiao admitted that Communism was no longer a dominant spiritual belief system in China. Social relationships amongst the people of Mainland China have become highly strained. The whole society is drifted away from social order and harmony.

People claim they believe in Communism because if they want to join in the Communist Party they have to say that. But they don't really believe in Communism. They may say so but they are lying. . . . My opinion is that, in current China, people's belief in Communism is shaken. The moral system has collapsed. Corruption is everywhere. The whole society is a mess.

With regard to the reconstruction of China's moral system, Ms. Xiao held high expectations for Christian evangelism in China. Some congregants, like Ms. Xiao, focused more on the moral code in Christian teachings rather than its religious significance. They believed that Christianity would offer a good option for China's moral system. To many elders in this research, this Western religion, which is still considered an antagonistic ideology in Communist China today, may become a form of promising "moral therapy" for the Mainland Chinese society. "The evangelization of the Christian gospel in China is not enough," Ms. Xiao said, from the point of view of a Communist. She believed that "China should be a main target of evangelization," and that if "we gather together under this banner, we might be able to positively affect China's current situation, and China might be able to regain a sense of moral value of what is right and what is wrong." Interesting enough, Ms. Luo used a common Communist slogan at this juncture to highlight her support for more aggressive Christian evangelism in China: "Gather together under this banner." The only, yet substantial, difference in this case was that she did not mean "the Marxist-Leninist banner" but a flag

representing Jesus and the Holy Cross.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

#### **Discussion**

The experience of Mainland elderly immigrants in Christian congregations, as shown in earlier chapters, is unique compared to other Chinese elders coming from other parts of the world. Partially due to the dominant atheistic ideology and the restrictions upon Christianity in Mainland China since 1949, the respondents in this research had rarely been exposed to Christianity prior to their arrival to the United States. Therefore, their active involvement in Christian congregations and further conversion to Christianity are particularly fascinating and intriguing. Although the findings in this research do not generate any definitive conclusions about elderly Chinese immigrants' religiosity in the U.S., the data do provide some critical insights into understanding the social and cultural contexts for Mainland Chinese elders' involvement in Christian congregations. In the following paragraphs, I will argue that social structural factors have contributed to Chinese elders' religious participation and conversion. These structural factors are spelled out specifically in four aspects: 1) immigration in later life, 2) social functions of Chinese Christian churches, 3) shifting familial authority, and 4) social contexts and cultural characteristics in China

#### ***Immigration in Later Life***

Coherent with Litwin's findings (1997), Chinese elderly immigrants in this study do appear to experience a double bind in their lives as immigrants in the U.S. On the one hand, immigration as a life transition does lead to dramatic cultural and ethnic interruptions for elders, especially for permanent residents. The cultural and ethnic

displacement produce a series of emotional hardships, reported by many elders, such as feelings of loss, lack of a sense of belonging, loneliness, and even depression. On the other hand, aging in the host country, accompanied with physical decline, loss of multiple social roles, death of spouse, and sudden new child-rearing responsibilities, further jeopardizes Chinese elders' life quality and well-being. A major consideration is that all Chinese elders in this study moved to the U.S. to join their adult children's families. Most of them, except for one, are noted as sharing the same household with their children and not working (in the labor market) during their residence in the U.S. In two major aspects, this particular social location differentiates Mainland Chinese elders in the U.S. from their counterparts immigrating from other regions. First, Mainland Chinese elders are unlikely to have stable incomes in the U.S., such as a Social Security income or pension. Most of them, in fact, are not eligible to receive any social assistance, such as Medicaid or Social Security. Secondly, as new and elderly immigrants, their lack of life skills or any possibility for upward mobility resulted in total dependency of these elders upon their adult children. This dependency further explains their feelings of powerlessness inside their families as well as in the new society, as illustrated by some participants. All in all, in order to better understand the aging process of Mainland Chinese elderly immigrants and their involvement in Christian activities, I argue that one needs to examine social and cultural consequences caused by the actions of immigration in later life.

### ***Interruption to Ethnic Identity and Loss of Social Roles***

The Mainland Chinese elders in this study, as described earlier, do experience two major challenges directly resulting from immigration: the interruption to ethnic identities

and the loss of social roles. The fact of immigration forces Chinese elderly to confront the racial transition from a “majority” to a “minority.” This identity change is further reinforced by their unfamiliarity with the social, cultural, and historical contexts of the U.S. Unlike their adult children who received higher education in the U.S., the lack of language ability and access to transportation greatly hinders Chinese elders with their social and cultural adaptation and in assimilating into the mainstream society. Their social isolation is compounded by their simplified social roles and increased domestic responsibilities. Similar to Litwin’s findings (1997), this study also finds that elderly Chinese were deeply involved in intergenerational exchanges with their adult children, particularly in house-keeping and caregiving inside their families. Domestic roles as parents and grandparents constitute their primary source of social status within the family and in the society. Consequently, the shrinking of social roles and network become the most evident change in their racial and social identities.

### ***Shift in Social Network***

In this study, the shift in elders’ social network from pre-immigration to post-immigration, demonstrates a pattern similar to what Litwin (1997) described in studies of Soviet elderly immigrants in Israel: the social network of Chinese elders moved from community-based ties before immigration to family-based ties after their immigration. However, data in this study show that familial reunions in the host country did not necessarily serve as quite the positive feature in elderly immigrants’ lives one might assume. Instead, the one-dimensional life that is purely family-centered lives and filled with domestic responsibilities oftentimes increase elders’ emotional and physical stress as well as exacerbate tensions between parents and adult children. Moreover, adult

children, as reported in this study, may not be competent and adequate in providing total emotional support for their parents. Given this situation, seeking external social comfort becomes an alternative coping strategy for Mainland Chinese elders to deal with their social, cultural, and ethnic “uprootedness” produced by the later life displacement.

One might ask: why do Mainland elders refuse to seek external help from social service institutions such as senior centers when encountering family conflicts or emotional hardships? As previously argued, Mainland elders are either ineligible for local social services or unable to get in touch with those social institutions because of language difficulties and transportation problems. This disadvantage is also embedded in the social stereotypes against Chinese immigrants as “model minorities” in the U.S., who can take care of themselves without assistance from social service institutions. During this study, none of the respondents, not even permanent residents, reported any knowledge of any local social service institutions. It appears that Mainland elderly immigrants remain invisible to social service systems despite the rapid growth of their population. In addition to the societal obstacles for Chinese elders’ access to public services, Confucian attitudes toward family conflicts and personal hardships also contribute to unwillingness to present familial problems to outsiders, including American service institutions (Mui, 1998; Stoke, 2001). However, among the few social resources available to Mainland Chinese elders, one institution not only provides social networks and emotional support, but also creates valuable friendship and personal intimacy in immigrant elders’ lives. That is the Chinese Christian Church.



## *Social and Cultural Functions of Chinese Christian Congregations*

### *Social Support Institutions*

The ways by which Chinese Christian churches function as social support institutions appears significant for Chinese elderly participants. This finding echoes previous studies about the social functions of ethnic churches among Asian immigrants (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000, Min, 2002). “Sinicized” Chinese Christian churches, as presented in earlier research, are contributing to an expansion of roles from just being religious organizations to becoming more comprehensive social institutions. The case of the CCC offers a clear example of this, having developed multiple roles by organizing various formal services, such as health tests, free flu shots, language classes, and daycare. Informal services, such as the exchanging of information and ongoing emotional support, are especially appreciated by elderly respondents. In Yang’s study (1998), he argues that social services no longer constituted a major motivation for Chinese immigrants’ Christian participation because of the rapid improvement of Chinese immigrants’ socioeconomic status (Yang, 1998). Findings from this study, however, reveal that social support from Christian churches still serve as an important incentive for Mainland Chinese elders’ involvement in Christian gatherings due to their limited access to other social resources and services. For example, several elders in this study report that health tests arranged by “Evergreen Fellowship” were the only health services available to them during their residence here. Meanwhile, involvement in a church congregation is considered, by many respondents, as an essential part of their social lives. Congregations also helped elders to establish friendships, expand their social network, and reduce the

emotional stress generated by immigration and familial conflicts.

### ***Ethnic Communities***

In addition to the instrumental mechanism, churches such as CCC also function as ethnic communities for their Chinese participants, a feature that particularly attracted Mainland Chinese elders. As described in the findings, the lack of language competence and life mobility makes Mainland elders feel socially isolated and even “handicapped.” Respondents demonstrate a strong desire for cultural understanding and appreciation; this desire is being met most often and most directly through participation in congregations. At CCC, Chinese culture and ethnicity is celebrated through Chinese language, meals, rituals, and traditional festivals. Elderly Chinese may join congregations not only for the supplemental services and social support, but also for the fulfillment of their craving for cultural and ethnic understanding and sharing.

For those elders who were non-Christian or non-religious prior to immigration, their choice to participate in *Christian* congregations to satisfy their ethnic needs instead of other ethnic religious institutions, such as Buddhist temples or non-religious Chinese organizations, deserves more explanation. Yang (1998) raises this same concern and argues against an ethnic-need explanation for Chinese immigrants’ conversion to Christianity. To address this issue, I would offer two points: 1) the importance of congregations, 2) the embracing nature of Christian churches. First, Christianity is a congregation-based religion. Chinese Christian churches, such as CCC, have emphasized the importance of regular and frequent participation. Congregations are organized, of course, to evangelize Christian gospel. But, at the same time, these gatherings successfully reduce the social distance among participants and create the personal

intimacy through arranging smaller group gatherings, such as “Evergreen Fellowship.” Those organizational tactics greatly accelerate the process of social and ethnic belonging for Mainland elders.

Secondly, administrative and evangelizing policies that Chinese Christian churches carry out may have led to a rapid growth in recent decades in the numbers of Chinese Christians in Atlanta. Chinese Christian churches are extremely active in converting and maintaining new members. They are more organized and institutionalized compared to other Chinese religious organizations, such as Buddhist temples, which place less emphasis on registering members and expanding congregational activities. Other non-religious Chinese institutions, such as the Chinese Business Association of Atlanta and several “same-hometown fellowships” (*Tong Xiang Hui*) are clearly limited in scope and inclusiveness. Chinese Christian churches enthusiastically embrace new participants, wherever they may be from and whatever their background. They intend to be both accessible and responsive to the needs of elder immigrants. These clear emphases benefit both the church and new participants.

In general, findings suggest that non-religious functions of Chinese Christian churches are of great importance to explain Mainland Chinese elders’ participation in Christian congregations. In explaining Chinese immigrants’ Christian participation and conversion, the particular lifestyle of Mainland Chinese elders in the U.S. probably contributes to their needs for social service, social support, and a sense of ethnic community. The provision of instrumental assistance and emotional support from Chinese Christian churches probably serves as crucial attractions to Mainland elders. However, not always is the non-religious explanation supported in this study. Similar to

the Yang (1998) and Ng findings (2002), this study also shows that the intention to assimilate does not appear to be a major motivation for elders' Christian activities or conversion. As a matter of fact, few respondents manifest clear expectations for becoming immersed in the American society; and they simply consider their participation in Christian congregations as an available and crucial means to facilitate a better adjustment for themselves in their lives as immigrants. As Mainland elders who are getting old in this country, struggling through any extra major life changes probably seems both too difficult to bother with and an unnecessary burden to undertake. Instead, the more realistic option for them is to selectively maneuver through their later years in the U.S. availing themselves of social resources that make their lives more palatable, manageable, and even enjoyable.

The finding that Chinese elders abide a great need for social and cultural services also has policy implications. Contrary to the "model minority" thesis that Chinese ethnic minorities do not need social services, I would argue that specialized social services for Chinese elders in particular are greatly needed. Most of these immigrant elders are not qualified for Social Security and Medicare; neither are they qualified for any social assistance, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Medicaid. To meet their basic medical needs, many Chinese elders go to the Chinese Christian churches to find free medical services or information. Centrally, there are some Chinese elders convert to Christianity and achieve a deep understanding of its theology and practice. And, even those who do not convert nor fully understand Christian education can enjoy gathering with other elders, exchanging information, and feeling supported. But, for all the benefits of churchgoing, there is also the real possibility that those who choose to hold on to their

traditional religious faith, whether openly or secretly, may feel forced into a place of alienation and discrimination in order to receive much-needed support and commiseration. The pressure to convert and to accept Christianity is very real and may actually push many needy elders away. Thus, to address the needs of this vulnerable elderly population, I recommend the creation of a neutral social service agency, such as a Chinese senior center, that can provide a social and cultural environment in which immigrant Chinese elders can gather with others like themselves, feel supported as well as receive some basic medical information and social services.

### *Shifting Authority in Chinese Immigrant Families*

The influence of adult children on elders' Christian participation and religious transitions is interesting and worth noting. Even with the transportation assistance from churchgoers, elders' involvement in various gatherings still crucially relied on their adult children's support. As observed, elders whose children were Christians participated more frequently and regularly than those who were not; they were also more likely to convert. In cases where the younger generation became Christians, without exception, the parents had been passionately encouraged to join Christian activities and then convert. The influence from adult children in elders' religious involvement can only be comprehended with understanding the dramatic shift in family authority that this implies. Of course, in China, elders have traditionally been treated with filial piety, meaning, among other things, great respect and obedience. But in the foreign setting of America, I argue that the powerlessness experienced by Mainland Chinese elders may have expanded from public settings, to even private settings, so that elders become a follower in their own families. In terms of adult children, the elder parents' powerlessness may not necessarily be a

result of an intended decline of filial piety. Instead, the everyday reality is rife with demonstrations of adult children's influence and control in terms of the means for doing anything in the new environment; then, too, there is their arrangement, well-intentioned or not, of their parents' work, leisure, and social activities. Moreover, the education and career success achieved by the adult children may add to this role-reversal; for example, the aging parents may have generated great respect for their children's achievement and religious choices, albeit perhaps unquestioning or bewildered. In any event, the dramatic shift in authority in Mainland Chinese immigrants' families from the older generation to the working-age adult children may render the choices of adult children in terms of lifestyle and religious faith greatly influential and appealing to their parents.

Based on this observation, one may argue from the perspective of modernization theory. According to modernization theory, elders' social status declines as societies become more modernized (Cowgill, 1974). In the case of Chinese immigrant elders, their change in social status or loss of authority may need to be understood not only in the social and historical contexts of the Chinese modernization process, but also in the globalization context of the expansion of economic and educational opportunities for the Chinese youth. Putting modernization theory in the global context, the U.S. may be viewed as a more "modernized" nation than China on the continuum of modernizing and modernized nations. Then, does Chinese elderly parents' loss of authority in immigrant families suggest that immigration has placed them in jeopardy on multiple counts? They have lost much of their personal identities and their social communities back in their home country. They have lost their ethnic majority status and entered into an ethnic minority status. They left a society that revered elders for one that largely ignores them

as inconsequential. Lifelong learning and a wealth of experience seem to count for little in a society that stresses higher education, new information, and technological knowledge. They are in probably the most advanced nation in the world but can neither speak nor travel without help. Even in their own family in the host country, they feel powerless to assert authority or make decisions because the new society is bewildering and their abilities and skills are not congruent; so, the adult children fill the void, assuming control and making the decisions.

For future studies of aging, immigration, and religiosity in light of the modernization theory, two theoretically important questions will deserve further exploration: First, do Chinese immigrant elders experience loss of authority because of their loss of Chinese ethnic identity and social community after immigrating to a foreign country, in this case to the more “modernized” U.S.? And secondly, do Chinese elders experience a decline in family authority in both the Chinese and global context in which societal value increasingly is placed on higher education, new information, and technological knowledge rather than traditional values and a wealth of experience?

### ***Social Contexts and Cultural Characteristics of China***

In their previous studies, Yang (1998) touches upon the surface of how social contexts in China and Chinese traditional culture contributed to the increase of Chinese conversion to Christianity. This study provides greater understanding of how Chinese social and religious traditions have emerged as important contexts for the understanding of Chinese elders’ church participation and Christian conversion.

### *Chinese Social Contexts*

Regardless of the enthusiasm about social service delivery and emotional support, Chinese Christian churches are in significant part social mechanisms intended for religious evangelization and conversion. In fact, social activities provided by Chinese churches are always intertwined with religious services. Very likely, Christian congregations are exposing Mainland elderly participants to a dramatically different environment from any they have encountered, since few have experienced any Christian education earlier in their lives. Yet, instead of brutally criticizing Christian beliefs, respondents in this study expressed various levels of curiosity about, interest in, and even acceptance of Christianity. Their openness to this “Western religion,” which had been mercilessly attacked in Mainland China, shows the impact of tangible connection with the social contexts of current Chinese society. As expressed by many elders, Chinese society is facing a serious cultural and spiritual void, which is responsible for the lack of common social values, moral system, and inter-personal trust. The Confucian values which were crushed during the “Great Cultural Revolution,” are facing another brutal challenge in the process of rapid Chinese modernization. Simultaneously, Communist ideology is losing its control over common Chinese people’s spiritual life. Elders in this study deeply worried that the moral decline and spiritual vacuum, accompanied by the drastic social changes in China, might potentially trigger a social catastrophe. On the one hand, the disappointment in the Communist Party and the discontentment with the ongoing Chinese moral crisis opened their minds to accepting other alternatives. On the other hand, the caring and loving environment created during participation in Christian congregations along with the moral values advocated in the gospel, such as honesty and



filial piety, facilitated Mainland Chinese elders' acceptance of some of the Christian teachings.

### ***Religious and Cultural Traditions***

In three respects, Chinese religious and cultural traditions influence Mainland elders' attitudes toward Christian congregations and conversion. First, the downplaying of the "only" God in Chinese religion facilitates the elders' acceptance of the coexistence of multiple Gods, which further smooths the role transformation from being an atheist or non-Christian to a participant in a congregation or Christian convert. This attitude of embracing parts of the Christian message on the part of both converts and non-converts was also demonstrated through respondents' emphasis on the compatibilities instead of conflicts between Christianity and other spiritual beliefs they might hold, including even Communist ideology. However, it is worth noting that the elders' emphasis of those compatibilities mostly referred to the moral and ethical dimension of Christian teachings. In other words, what attracts Chinese elders the most is the secular moral messages instead of the sacred ones delivered through Christian gospel.

Secondly, the findings in this study echo Ng's (2002) proposition of Chinese immigrants' desire for a tutelary God as well as the acceptance of multiple gods. However, no explicit analysis is provided in his study to explain the practical attitudes toward Chinese religious beliefs and practices. I argue that religious pragmatism, deeply embedded in Chinese religious tradition, may partly account for many Mainland elders' practical attitudes toward Christian teachings, congregations, and conversions. For instance, some elders relate their immigrant status to the extent of their congregational involvement; others only attend gatherings for social services. Many conversions happen

when the elders abandon previous spiritual beliefs because of the seeming powerlessness or incapability of deities they used to worship to act in the new setting, or their “testimony” of the omnipotent and “real” Christian God. The reciprocal and temporary relationship between Chinese people and the gods long in existence in Chinese religious tradition (Overmyer, 1986) is probably a good explanation for Mainland Chinese elders’ emphasis on God’s intervention in their lives in this world rather than on His guidance for the other world.

Finally, Confucian beliefs might also contribute to Mainland Chinese elders’ approaches to Christian teachings and conversions, for both converts and non-converts. Confucianists’ rejection of the concept of “universal love” creates difficulties for some elders to completely accept Christian teachings of “love” and “forgiveness.” Meanwhile, the inherent goodness of human nature in Confucian tradition and the lack of any concept of “sin” in Chinese religions may also push Chinese elders away from further acceptance of Christianity. It is possible that Chinese elders’ proposition of using Christianity as a possible “moral alternatives” for current Chinese society is built upon the Confucian perception of the individual’s moral perfection. Education was the major emphasis in Confucianism whereby people could reach for moral perfection (Pye, 1984). However, moral perfection was not only an individual matter but, more importantly, the foundation of an ideal society. Rulers influenced by Confucianism believed that if only all the individual subjects in society could behave ideally, then the whole society would be ideal (Pye, 1984). Believing in the ideal world embedded on individuals’ moral perfection, Confucianists may reject radical and substantial social changes, they may rely instead on education and moral control for ordinary people to resolve social problems or discord.

Likewise, Chinese elders, instead of expecting any structural changes, place their hopes on Christianity as an alternative system to promote Chinese people's morality and save China from moral decline and spiritual vacuum.

### *Conclusion*

In this study, I argue that immigration as a life transition acts as a significant factor fostering Mainland Chinese elders' participation in Christian congregations. The dimensions of aging, immigration, and religious involvement are interwoven, shaping Chinese elders' attitudes towards congregation and conversion. Furthermore, China's social and cultural contexts as well as religious traditions contribute to Mainland Chinese elders' acceptance or rejection of Christianity and its pragmatic interpretation of Christianity. Getting old in the U.S. for Chinese elderly immigrants is a complex social issue that deserves more research.

The major contributions of this study lie in three aspects: First, I combine elders' spirituality studies with ethnic studies, which enriched the literature in the fields of aging and immigration as well as the studies of immigrants' religiosity. Secondly, this study provides a better understanding for the social and cultural contexts of Chinese elders' participation in Christian congregations. Building upon earlier literature of studying Chinese Christian conversion, I add a new dimension by examining the Chinese immigrant elders' conversion to Christianity. Finally, this study offers an explanation for the confluence of Chinese religious traditions in relation to Christian conversion.

Being a small independent research project, the study's limitation is also evident. The sample size is small: it is based on intensive interviews with 20 respondents and several occasions of participant observation. Future studies will benefit from drawing a

larger sample of elderly Chinese immigrants with diverse backgrounds in terms of immigrant history and differing economic or social status. Similar studies may also be conducted with other Asian elders or different ethnic immigrants who are involved in Christian participation or conversion to generate comparative findings. A global and transnational perspective may also provide additional insights into understanding immigrants' religiosity and Christian conversion.

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## Appendix A

Cover Page:

Time of the Interview \_\_\_\_\_

Place of the interview \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewee's Name (pseudo-name) \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to the family he/she lives with: 1) Son \_\_\_; 2) Daughter \_\_\_;

3) Other \_\_\_\_\_

Contact information: telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Length in the U.S. \_\_\_\_\_.

Which Chinese Province the interviewee is from \_\_\_\_\_.

Brief Questions:

Your Marital Status: Married \_\_\_; Widowed \_\_\_; Other \_\_\_.

Are you visiting your adult children by yourself \_\_\_ or with your spouse \_\_\_?

How many years of formal education did you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you retired? Yes \_\_\_; No \_\_\_.

Do you have pension? Yes \_\_\_; No \_\_\_

Do you have medical benefits? Yes \_\_\_; No \_\_\_

Questions:

1. Could you tell me something about the children's family that you are visiting?
2. Have you ever had any contact with Christianity when you were in the Mainland?
3. Do you have any family members who are Christian or attend Church congregation regularly?
4. What does religion mean to you, including Christian, Buddhism and Confucianism?
5. Why do you seek for religious faith in Christianity instead of other religions such as Buddhism?
6. How did you get to know about Chinese Christian churches in Atlanta?
7. Have you ever been in a Christian Church before?
8. How do you attend Church gathering? With your family or your friends?
9. What kind of Christian activities do you join?
10. How often do you attend any kind of gathering?
11. Have you ever contributed to Christian churches?
12. Have you participated in other social services provided by church, such as potluck, picnic, health examination etc.? What do you think about this kind of services?
13. Do you practice religion privately, such as reading Bible by yourself or have evening prayer?
14. Do you think Christianity or religious activities are helpful to you? Do you think you have experienced any changes since you started to be involved in Christian activities? What kind of changes?



15. Will you continue to attend Church congregation or other kinds of Christian gatherings including private Christian behaviors after you go back to China?

## **Appendix B**

### Interview Participants Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research project about Chinese elders and their seeking for Christian faith. This purpose of this study is to find out the individual and cultural factors that influence Chinese Mainland elders searching for Christianity in U.S.

If you choose to participate in this project, you will: 1) complete a group of brief questions about the general background 2) be interviewed face-to-face by the researcher. During the interview, the researcher will ask you questions about the quality of your life in U.S., religious activities you participate and the attitude to Christianity. The interview will not be tape-recorded and will last approximately one hour.

There is no known risk to participating in this study. You may feel a bit uncomfortable or anxious during the conversation about the life in U.S. and the opinion to religion. You may refuse to answer any questions and may terminate the interview at any time. There will be no penalty for refusing to answer questions or deciding to stop participating. All information obtained during this interview will be kept confidential and you will not be identified by name. Any information gathered from this interview will not be reported in any manner that would personally identify you.

You will not receive any direct benefit from this study expect you may have a better understanding about how Christianity help the elders cope with loneliness and depression. Findings will be summarized and a thesis will be finished based on these findings.

Ms. Gehui Zhang, a graduate student of the Department of Sociology, Georgia State University, will conduct this interview. You may telephone her at 404-633-7258, or

Dr. Heying Jenny Zhan, Committee Chair, Sociology Department, Georgia State University at 404-651-1846, should you have any questions regarding this research. If you have any question about the IRB approval for this research, you may contact Susan Vogtner Compliance Specialist, Office of Research Integrity, Georgia State University at 404-463-0674.

A signed statement of informed consent is required of all participants in this project. Your signature indicates that you are willing to participate in this study. Even if you signed in this form, you still can refuse or stop your participation at any time. You will receive a copy of this form.

Date

Signature of Participant