

11-2009

# Socialization in Chinese Academic Immigrants' Conversion to Christianity

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SOCIALIZATION IN CHINESE ACADEMIC IMMIGRANTS'  
CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of Sociology  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree  
Master of Arts

Zhan Jiang

December, 2009

SOCIALIZATION IN CHINESE ACADEMIC IMMIGRANTS'  
CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the members of my committee who reviewed my thesis and made helpful suggestions. Many thanks to Dr. Steve Groce and Dr. Joan Krenzin for plenty of editorial suggestions. I particularly want to thank Dr. Steve Groce who inspired me to analyze religious conversion with the perspective of symbolic interactionism.

I want to acknowledge my debt to my sister, Yuan Peilin, for her help in accommodations during my trip for interviewing. I would also like to thank my parents for their love and support. Finally, I would like to dedicate my work on religious conversion to Han people who love their culture and tradition.

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SOCIALIZATION IN CHINESE ACADEMIC IMMIGRANTS'  
CONVERSION TO CHRISTIANITY

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December 2009

Pages 117

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The aim of this research is to find social factors in Chinese academic immigrants' conversion to Christianity using the perspectives of symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory. The research data are drawn from observation and interviews. Fourteen Chinese student converts were interviewed. The analysis focuses on the interaction between recruits and Christians. Results supported the idea that religious conversion happens progressively. Affective bonds are essential for the religious conversion of Chinese academic immigrants. Chinese Christian converts experienced five stages. First, they develop affective commitment to Christians close to them and regard them as their reference group. Second, an emergent generalized other is internalized in recruits' minds through recruits' acceptance of symbolic language in Christianity and interaction with Chinese Christians. Third, recruits understand the Bible with the perspective of Christians. Fourth, as the socially defined reality reinforces their beliefs and the affective bonds develop, recruits confess their sins and decide to believe in God. Finally, recruits strengthen their understanding of Christianity by intensifying interactions with Chinese Christians.

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Religious conversion is common in the USA because of the high degree of diversity and widespread presence of proselytization. For example, converts to Catholicism amount to one hundred thousand every year (Gordon 1967). Martin Baumann estimated in 1997 that American converts to Buddhism amount to 800,000, while 180,000 convert in France and 50,000 convert in Great Britain (The Pluralism Project 2007). In 2001, Time magazine (Biema 2001) reported there were 100,000 American Buddhist converts. Moreover, Jehovah's Witnesses appear to attract the most "in-switchers," who change denomination within the same religion and "out-switchers," who change to another religion according to the report of American Religious Identification Survey in 2001. Although statistics on religious converts are difficult to gather, because of social taboos, Newport (1979) suggests that there have been more converts since the 1950s.

According to Yang (1999) Chinese immigrants' conversion to Christianity rapidly grew after the 1980s. Also, this phenomenon is common on American college campuses. Well educated Chinese students and scholars from Mainland China, whose education includes Marxism and atheism, do not have any concept of the Creator, and some of them have inherited a fear of supernatural power from traditional Chinese culture (Kohn 2001). They can be defined as atheists who do not believe in a Creator, either without a conscious rejection of theistic belief or with a conscious disbelief (Smith 1974). Many

convert to Christianity after they migrate or emigrate from China to the USA, becoming interested in Christianity after their interaction with preachers and other Christians, especially other Chinese Christians. However, this conversion process remains unexplored, and the reason for the phenomenon is unclear. Another question concerns the process of conversion from atheism to Christianity, which is frequently referred to and explained by Chinese Christians in terms of “recognizing God and His Love.” What happens in this procedure and what kinds of essential factors exert influence on the process continues to be a persistent question. Moreover, it remains doubtful whether their belief in God and their religious commitment are the same as Western Christians. And, what is the role their Chinese background plays in their conversion? Thus, exposing their special patterns and the reason sociologically is necessary.

The purpose of this study is to explore the social factors in the conversion of Chinese students. I hope this study will shed light on the religious socialization and process of conversion. This study focuses on the interactions between Christians and atheists, on how atheists are socialized under the tutelage of churches, and on the factors making them decide to believe in Christianity and be baptized. I will explore why many Chinese Christians are confident that Chinese nonreligious immigrants will believe in God soon following their experience. It seems that symbolic interactionism well explains their process of conversion. My study begins with an exploration of change of meaning in symbols and rituals learned in the teaching of Christianity and ends with a description of the situational adjustment in becoming a Chinese Christian as well as the presence of plausibility structures of meaning in this process.

## CHAPTER II

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several theoretical perspectives discuss the main factors influencing behaviors of people in groups. According to symbolic interactionist theory, people make sense of their experiences by symbols shared in their group. The meaning of their experiences is created by their interaction with each other. People define their situations before they decide how to behave themselves. Thus, people in a group communicate by the symbols that the group uses and share similar feelings. On the other hand, social exchange theory gives insights into religious conversion. In this theory people will act to get the best rewards and least punishments. In sum, both theories help to explain why Chinese academic emigrants join the Christian group and become converts.

#### Symbolic Interactionism

To explain Chinese students and scholars' conversion to Christianity, I will apply symbolic interactionists' conceptions of self, symbol, reference group, definition of the situation, and ritual. As a main figure in development of symbolic interactionism, George Herbert Mead (1934) argues that the human being has a thing-like self that arises in social experience, shaped by social interaction. He or she creates his or her own world view through experience and interaction with others and society. According to the Chicago School, the self is an ever-changing social object and the self is a process of internal conversation and role taking. The individual could talk with himself or herself in

symbolic interaction, namely, in thinking with symbols. Mead also finds that a person is talking to one's self as one would talk to another person and continuously interprets his or her environment through his/her perspectives. It is through thinking or talking with their selves and others that people know who they are in relations, how to judge themselves, and what their identities are. Prayer could be regarded as a typical kind of the internal conversation. In William James's words, prayer was "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine" (James [1902] 1961:464).

On the other hand, people can only experience themselves by taking the role of others, both the role of individuals and of the generalized other (Becker 1970; Charon 2007; Mead 1934). Mead develops the concepts of "the generalized other," which controlled the conduct and thinking of an individual in a community, and "the significant others," who have importance in regulating one's behavior. Mead argues that "selves can only exist in definite relationships to other selves" (1934:164) and appearance of a self always involves an experience of another. In addition, a set of responses of the others of the group would be called out by self-consciousness. Tamotsu Shibutani (1955) explains that responses of the others may be learned and used in the individual's perspective as his/her reference groups borrowed to see reality, which is taken through social interaction. Because one's self-esteem is carefully protected and enhanced as a major determinant of human thought, behavior, and prime motivation, according to Rosenberg (1981), people are deeply influenced by the attitudes of others toward the self. As a result people often view themselves as they are viewed by others.

People take the perspectives of others. This is what Cooley ([1920]1964) labeled the “looking-glass self.” Consequently, self-judgment will be affected by others’ evaluations, self-perception of others’ judgments through internal conversation and the reference group. In the view of Bandura (1974), reward and reinforcement are essential for learning the response of others or the reference group. Discussion and argument in the interaction influence one’s desire to learn others’ perspectives and responses (Charon 2007). Success of persuasion is related to the learning of others’ responses by rewards, as the arousal factor, and argument, as reinforcement. Therefore, religious conversion could also be understood as learning stimulated by rewarding interactions with Christians and as modeling of Christians’ behavior stimulated by their imagery and verbal codes matching the nonreligious’ responses as well as reinforcement by practice. Supported by the group, the feeling helps the development of religious belief, such as melancholy, happiness, and ecstasy (James [1902] 1961).

Moreover, Shibutani also notes that internalization of perspectives shared in a group is possible through social participation. He also points out that reference groups arise through the internalization of norms. Some of these norms are beliefs, appropriate behaviors, and rituals of religious groups, according to Johnstone (1983). Norms provide meanings and interpretations related to other meanings (Johnstone 1983). Beliefs and rituals support each other and are interpreted in one’s religious conversion (Roberts 2004).

Thus, social interaction gives rise to meanings and symbols. People also learn symbols and meanings in social interaction. As one form of symbol, language enables people to communicate and is infused with meaning in social interaction (Blumer 1969). Symbols are also vessels in transforming fact into value in Geertz’s view. Values model

one's worldview or belief (Roberts 2004). According to Johnstone (1983), the construction of religious meaning in people is affected by religious expressions of other people and religious institutions. Converts construct their own discourses with religious language and symbols learned from the religious and transform to speakers from listeners (Keane 1997). Roberts (2004) also suggests that symbolic language is powerful in creating moods and motivations among devotees. Religion could be defined as a system of symbols consisting of ritual and myth, creating moods and motivations according to Geertz (Roberts 2004).

Moreover, McGuire (2002:16) indicates that "the very language in which beliefs are expressed structures believers' perceptions of the world." Believers experience the divine through response to it with speaking, chanting, or singing hymns (Ferguson 1985). Religious rituals not only represent meanings but also strengthen the meaning. Through rituals, devotees accept the affirmation of the reality or myths in a religion and learn to react emotionally. Rituals reinforce reality, and belief does the same (Roberts 2004). In this way the actor could understand others and assess appropriation of one's acts through symbols. Thus, taking the role of the other is the same as "taking on the perspective of the other" and using the symbolic framework of the other (Charon 2007).

Therefore, transformation of self is possible through taking on the perspective of a different reference group and internalization of meanings in its symbolic framework to interpret situations. Howard Becker calls this mechanism of change situational adjustment:

The overall mechanism of change in the self, therefore, consists of the continual changes that occur in the person's notions of how others are likely to respond to his actions and the meanings he imputes to his own actions by virtue of the imputations others have made earlier. In his effort to continue interaction, to

communicate, the person is continually confronted with his own wrong guesses on this score and thus with the need to revise the roles of others he has incorporated into his self. (1970:300)

The self changes as the social interaction changes (Berger 1963). Howard Becker (1953) pointed out that changes in the definition of the situation are necessary for the change of the self, and change of the institutions is accompanied by new patterns of belief and action.

With transformation of the self, perspective, reference groups, and significant others, the definition of the situation changes. Symbolic interactionists agree that people make meaning of their surroundings and interpret the situation to cope with the environment. According to Blumer (1969) the environment cannot be directly sensed by people. Instead, people define the situation and act consistently with their definition. Indeed, individuals define situations and act according to their perspectives taken from a reference group. People are guided by the perspectives of others to define the situation and control their actions. In other words, when a person in a group is in a situation in which the others of the group are present, he or she will act as they do because in this scene he or she will act under the perspectives of others and his or her self will also be like “a dramatic effect arising ... from a scene that is presented” (Goffman 1959:253).

As suggested by Howard Becker (1953), there is a socially defined reality built on socially created symbols. Social reality exists in social interaction (Simmel 1917). People’s truth comes from social interaction and practice. Thus, when symbols are infused with new meanings, people’s definition of the situation and reality changes, and they will act according to their new realities. These realities are highly subjective and mediate the inner integration of the devotees (Judah 1974; Roberts 2004). Roberts (2004)

says myths in a religion reinforce devotees' reality or worldview. In sum, perspectives, definitions, mind, and self are all dynamic and ongoing (Charon 2007).

Although Tamotsu Shibutani notes that the reference groups of most persons are mutually sustaining and "the choice of reference groups rests upon personal loyalty to significant others of that social world" (1955:568), loyalty to a reference group can be destroyed in situations in which alternative definitions are possible. He also indicates that the limits of effective communication set the boundaries of each social world or each reference group.

Berger (1967) explores the boundaries of meaning systems in reference groups, and he indicates that the meaning system provided by a reference group requires specific social interactions among people sharing the same meaning system, namely among people having the same reference group. This sharing is necessary for the group's continual existence. He calls the shared meanings plausibility structures of meaning. Furthermore, Berger implies that specific communities of believers are necessary for continual plausibility of all religious meaning systems or beliefs. In addition, McGuire (2002) suggests a religious plausibility structure of meaning fortifies the capability of recruits to acquire a meaning system with the social support and reinforcement from the group within this plausibility structure. Also, a person's significant others will strengthen his or her shared meaning system.

Following Shibutani and Berger's arguments, segregation from former reference groups and continuous interaction with another reference group will result in plausibility structure of meaning, namely, continuously and isolatedly interacting with a reference group as well as being restricted from other reference groups and meaning systems.

Moreover, Roberts (2004) suggests that the devotees' emotional commitments to religious groups replace family ties. Thus, a religious group replaces other reference groups as devotees' significant others.

Lofland (1966) also finds that extra-group affective bonds become weak, while intra-group bonds become close and intragroup interaction becomes intensive (Lofland and Stark 1965; Roberts 2004). As to loyalty to a religious group as the reference group, Rosabeth Kanter identifies religious commitment consisting of instrumental commitment to the religious group, affective commitment to members of the religious group, and moral commitment to the norms and values of the group and the religious meaning system as well as doctrines (Roberts 2004). Affective commitment enables devotees' ties to the religious group as their only reference group. Affective ties are created by renunciation of former ties to a reference group and communion with the new ties to a religious group as the only reference group.

In the Hare Krishna movement renunciation labels the devotees' definition of former reference groups as evil or insignificant. In addition, moral commitment is increased by mortification and transcendence (Roberts 2004). The mortification process emphasizes recruits' humbleness and worthlessness to create profound humility. Roberts concludes that mortification "engenders ecstatic feelings of intimacy and union with one's associates" (2004:105) and thus makes another more willing to obey the norms and values of the reference group. Also, he says that transcendence makes a person believe in the ultimate purpose and meaning of the religious group while he feels himself worthless and the group formidable.

The performance of actors and the setting will greatly influence people's definition of the situation in plausibility structures of meaning. According to Goffman (1959), people define the situation with the clues from the actors' appearance, manner, and the setting. The impression management of the actors will result in acceptance of their selves by the audience, controlling the audience and the voluntary action of the audience in the response to the actors. In such cases the setting and the personal front play important roles in impression management. The way the actors speak, the lines they say and the tone of their words are essential in giving impressions to audiences. For example, a PhD degree and a PhD's manner will make the situation and his or her lines more believable and persuasive.

In addition, teamwork is a fundamental component of impression management according to Goffman (1959). The performance team will present the audience a given definition of the situation. The members of the team are dependent on each other to make a perfect impression. Meanwhile, as Nemeth (1993) has pointed out, social status and confidence in one's position are influential in persuasion. Nemeth concludes, "Who holds the truth is very important" (1993:118). The status and style of the person who holds the truth are "more important for persuasion than being correct" (1993:118). Powerful people have influence on those with less confidence and lower status. Furthermore, the viewpoints of a unanimous majority exert great influence on people in the group.

In sum, symbolic interactionism suggests that religious conversion would result from the change in definition of the situation, new reference groups with new perspective and meaning taking, and eventually transformation of the self and environmental change that may cause change in goals and decisions and then actions. It also infers that religious

conversion will be a continuous process (Johnstone 1983). In addition, interactionists relate praise and approval reward to symbolic interaction. In this manner symbolic interactionism provides a solid base for the explanation of religious conversion.

### Social Exchange Theory

People actively choose their reference groups for benefits (Roberts 2004). Social exchange theory suggests that actors exchange benefits in social interaction. “The basis for exchange is that each side has something that the other wants” (Heath 1976:19). Homans ([1961]1974) suggests that social behavior is an exchange of activity. Many researchers agree that rewards are essential for religious conversion. Recruits may actively search for meaning in life, which may be satisfied by the beliefs in the religious group (Roberts 2004). Converts obtain benefits from their interaction with Christians, such as “promises of future rewards and supernatural explanations for life events and meaning” and social rewards (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Christians obtain approval from converts. Emerson states, “The flow of benefits through social interaction” makes people behave rationally. People actively produce benefits in their behaviors and “diminish marginal utility” (1981:32). Valued resources are exchanged by people in their interaction. Heath adds, “The exchange...enables both participants to be better off than they would have been without it” (1976:19). Life problems are the causal factor for conversion. Social exchange of resources, especially information, social support, and material goods, helps to build cohesion in interaction (Schaefer 2009).

Homans also notes that if people perceive the advantage to conform to a social norm, they choose to do it (1967). If recruits get rewards by conforming to the doctrines

of Christianity, they will continue their behavior. According to Homans ([1961]1974), people choose to act for more rewards and less cost. He states, “For all actions taken by persons, the more often a particular action of a person is rewarded, the more likely the person is to perform that action” ([1961]1974:16). People will compare the results of their behaviors and choose the behaviors rewarded most frequently and expect the rewards from their repeated behaviors. Furthermore, Homans reports, “when a person’s action receives the reward he expected, especially a greater reward than he expected, or does not receive punishment he expected, he will be pleased; he becomes more likely to perform approving behavior, and the results of such behavior become more valuable to him” ([1961]1974:39). Because of this process of getting rewards, people will repeat behaviors they see rewarded. In other words, newcomers in a religious group will learn to behave as Christians.

However, only when the rewards are reciprocal, the interaction of the newcomer and members can continue and be reinforced (Heath 1976). People tend to behave reciprocally and avoid indebtedness (Staub 1978). The rewards maintain and enhance the bonds through the interaction between people (Blau 1964). The bonds between people establish network ties which are influential. Blau states that if newcomers fail to offer rewards in return, they may subordinate themselves to people, like Christians, who could offer rewards. Offering rewards in return is necessary to being accepted in a group. The recruits want to get benefits from the relation with a religious group, while the group members will give the benefits the recruits expect in return for continual interaction between them. Smilde (2005) suggests that converts are highly influenced by their network location. For Chinese nonreligious students, value resources possessed by

Christians, such as advice, transportation, food, friendship, social and cultural support, provide exchange opportunities in the interaction between Chinese Christians and students. Chinese nonreligious student will receive approval and social recognition from Chinese Christians if they conform to Christian norms and values.

In addition, Homans states, “The more valuable to a person is the result of his action, the more likely he is to perform the action” ([1961]1974:25). The rewards are considered valuable according to people’s definition of the situation. The rewards can be either self-serving or other-regarding (Jerolmack and Porpora 2004). Converts may value meaning of life or belief highly if they define the situation with the perspective of Christians. Converts will come to value reward according to the Bible. If recruits begin to regard the accumulation of religious knowledge as valuable, they are more likely to attend church and Bible study. If recruits regard their friendship with Christians as valuable, they are also more likely to attend church. Stark also suggests, “Prayer builds bonds of affection and confidence between humans and a god or gods” (1999:283). If converts increase their confidence in the existence of God by prayers, they are more likely to pray.

### Synthesis of Theories

When nonreligious Chinese emigrate to the USA, they cannot avoid communicating with Christians who have a different definition of the situation from the nonreligious, particularly in value and ethics. The nonreligious Chinese will through interaction inevitably sense and experience Christians’ perspective and moral standards inherited from the Bible. Their response to the Christians’ reality will vary greatly based on their previous nonreligious reality. Because reality is established by significant symbols arising through interaction, symbols construct abstract reality. Knowledge, past

memory, or categorization are all recorded by symbols. Thus, it is possible that the interactions with Christians will alter or even change some nonreligious persons' definition of the situation by transformation of meanings of conceptions. The nonreligious could find ways to reinforce their former viewpoints by their previous nonreligious definition of the situation. However, most people cannot articulate their change of environment. Social networks and interpersonal bonds make recruitment more likely (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Meanwhile, social exchange theory indicates that members of religious groups will be rewarded for searching for the nonreligious and trying to include possible converts in the group and get rewards from their religious beliefs.

In addition, Chinese Christians have useful information about university life for Chinese students. Chinese Christians and nonreligious students are initially uncertain about their exchange of benefits. The uncertainty enables the emergence of exchange structures (Kollock 1994). Recruits will reciprocally find rewards from their conversion. Rewards will be defined situationally by recruits. They will seek meaning in life or explanations of activities from Christianity. They will seek to establish friendship networks through a church. If the role students play as converts is rewarding, they will develop affective ties to the religious group. The existence of affective ties reinforces intragroup interaction and sets the boundaries to recruits' former reference groups and former meaning systems.

According to Roberts (2004) "affective commitment usually precedes full acceptance of a belief system." Thus, the religious group begins to dominate the recruits' reference groups with intensification of affective ties. The recruits gradually feel the guilt

of lack of belief and feel humble. Then these people learn the value and meaning system of the religious group that will lead to their moral commitment. Religious language, such as prayers, reinforces the belief shared by church members (Keane 1997). As recruits join the community of the religious group, the plausibility structure of meaning begins to exert influence on them and limit their interaction with other reference groups. In the next process, they break from their former reference groups and let the members of a religious group become their significant others. In this way, the religious group could turn out to be the only reference group for the recruits.

Plausibility structures of meaning, therefore, exist around possible converts. Recruits redefine selves and internalize the religious group as a reference group while they constantly interact within the plausibility of structure of religious meaning. They will also learn new meanings and conceptions without denial and rejection from outsiders, along with validation of their feelings and beliefs from support groups. Without support groups or a reference group for previous beliefs, a new belief will form. Therefore, the lack of opposing opinions or the atheists' reference group should be observed in practice.

In such a case, new self-judgments will replace the old ones according to the new reference group and significant others in the plausibility structure of meaning. Because their knowledge is learned and believed through successful application, as interactionists argue, humans' beliefs are determined by their usefulness in a particular situation. Besides, the perspectives of the nonreligious will change, which results in the transformation of interpretation or definition of the situation. As expected, the Chinese nonreligious will be likely to interpret their definition of the situation according to that of

Christians. If the nonreligious act by reference to Christians, a transformation of nonreligious meanings and conceptions to religious meanings must happen.

For the Chinese nonreligious the model of plausibility structures of meaning may be applicable for their conversion because of the isolation of Chinese immigrants in an alien country, the control of the morality of Christianity over their environment, limited interaction with the nonreligious, rejection of previous self-judgment in interaction with Christians, and assumption of Christians' perspective. Although these Chinese immigrants can reach many significant others by other ways, their membership in a religious group restricts them from becoming familiar with other groups. Recruits' new definition of the situation will be confirmed by proof by the significant others and members in the religious group. Rewards from affective ties to the religious group also contribute to the possibility of continual interaction within the religious group and establishment of a new meaning system. Eventually the converts become believers who totally commit to the worldview of the religious group.

## CHAPTER III

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Western religious conversion theories usually emphasize religious conversion within Protestantism, Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism (Davidman 1991; Kaufman 1991; May 2005; Musick and Wilson 1995). As a result, the study of growth and decline of religious denominations is a popular topic of exploration in Western countries, especially effective recruitment strategies and theology features. Some researchers use this perspective to explore Chinese Americans' conversion to Christianity and argue that religious institutions play an important role in converting Chinese immigrants (Zhang 2006). Beckford's research (1978) on Jehovah's Witnesses found that conversion to the religious movement might be understood as a learned process of converts in which verbal accounts of their personal religious development are constructed. In addition, as found by Snow (1984) in his research on conversion to the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement, most of the conversion experiences were constructed in accordance with specific guidelines. Converts were instructed to watch and listen to other converts' experiences to learn how to construct an appropriate testimony. Conversion could be understood as a process whereby converts learned to construct "appropriate" verbal accounts of their personal religious development (Beckford 1978). Religious language also provides Taiwanese, immigrant, female converts with a new self and validates their independent status in the USA (Chen 2005).

However, interaction is also important for conversion. Intense interaction is essential for learning a religion. Being a religious convert through a social network is possible and “new social networks make new religious beliefs plausible (Stark & Finke 2000:117).” O'Connor, Hoge, and Alexander argue that "greater religious involvement as a child and greater religiosity of the family of origin will foster adult church involvement and personal spiritual practice" (2002:724). In addition, it is found that Hasidic children are learning faith through authority established by caregivers and rejecting ways of knowing, speaking and being (Fader 2006).

Informal socialization and “affective bond” are important. Glock and Stark (1965) found that Christians with many best friends who were also members of their congregation had higher confidence in God and religious experience. Perceived evaluative pressure from close friends influences young Christians’ moral choices. Conflict between different significant others may decrease the confidence of young Christians’ moral choices (Dornbusch 1993). Even people who were not interested in religion before could establish interaction with a religion through their friendships with members (Lofland 1966; Stark and Finke 2000).

Moreover, Johnstone (1983) finds that frequency of church attendance increases the possibility of accepting traditional conservative Christian beliefs. He also states that internalization of the religion is similar to learning the language of one’s own culture and sex role. Acceptance of meaning in social interaction establishes religious knowledge and its interpretation (Conde-Frazier 2007). On the other hand, “affective bonds” between the potential recruits and religious group members exists before religious conversion and

develops during interaction (Lofland 1966). Lofland also notes that preconverts' affective relationships outside the religious group are either weak or ineffectual.

Furthermore, intensive interaction is required for total conversion. Both Lofland and Stark and Bainbridge (Lofland 1966; Stark and Bainbridge 1985) report in their research that converts' interpersonal attachments to members of their religion are greater than their attachments to nonmembers. They think interpersonal attachment precedes conversion. Marin and Gamba (1993) also find that irrelevance of priests is an important reason for conversion of Hispanic Catholics. Hispanic converts perceived the insignificance of Catholic priests, and they searched for a more considerate church and community. This is also the case among working-class immigrant Chinese youths. Cao (2005) notes that immigrant Chinese youths in New York Chinatown convert to "an authority oriented Christianity" and regard the pastor as a "foster father." The church as a family with a strong affective bond creates a sense of belonging for these youths. Thus, plausibility structures of meaning and available reference groups are essential for religious conversion.

Stark and Finke (2000) explain that "stakes in conformity" motivate people to appreciate affective relationships. People will conform when they are rewarded or not conform when they fail to be rewarded. Higher attachment, especially strong friendship, means there is less deviance from the group. They conclude that people prefer to be seen as good in the eyes of their friends and family. However, the influence of Chinese culture should be noted. The attitudes toward internalization of norms among Chinese business students also are essential in religious conversion. Yvonne Turner (2006) points out that Chinese students in the UK only change their educational skills and knowledge without

the adaptation of the attitudes to learning, namely, to suppose learning is teacher-centered and didactic. In addition, with low confidence and willingness Chinese students are reluctant to challenge an expert superior and tend to avoid controversy to protect the social face of the superior and themselves (Tjosvold, Nibler, and Wan 2001).

Meanwhile, the socialization process reinforces one's ties within social worlds and maintains a person's religious beliefs and commitment to religious norms, and vice versa (Cornwall 1989). Thus, symbolic interactionism and religious socialization theory have provided a suitable perspective for religious conversion. These studies help to imply that norm learning and interaction between Christians and nonreligious people could improve understanding of Chinese academic immigrants' conversion to Christianity.

Yang (2005) has done interview based research and concluded that the lost feelings in society and political repression can explain religious conversion deeply. Yet his only data source is interviews and may be misleading because of popular excuses. Yang describes the representative stories that detail morally unacceptable behavior and lives devoid of meaning of alternatives-seeking intellectuals. However, all of his stories are selected as representative examples on purpose. His examples may be biased. Moreover, his argument seems to select examples to support his own opinion.

On the other hand, his stories send some interesting messages. Many interviewees state that they had previously tried Daoism and Buddhism to find meanings in life. However, because of their difficulties in comprehending these religions, the interviewees withdraw from Daoism and Buddhism and turn to Christianity. Converts seek peace and certainty in Christianity. Also, he suggests interpersonal bonds and desire for alternate meaning systems help to explain conversion of Chinese Christians. People need meaning

systems to explain their lives. In the study of Christian conversion among Akha Highlanders, Kammerer (1990) notes that the loss of customs and religion and ways of doing things provides important reasons for conversion. When Akha Highlanders lost ability to understand and afford *zah*, the customs and religion of Akha, they replaced *zah* with Christianity and were satisfied with their identity in Christianity, a cheaper and easier religion for them.

On the other hand, many researches argue that rewards are essential for conversion. It was reported that many Jews in Germany in the nineteenth century changed religion to expand job opportunities (Gordon 1967). Sengers (2004) suggested that people will become attached to a religious movement if rewards are offered by that religious organization. He also revealed that changes in the attachment to Dutch Catholicism could be explained by rewards. A similar interpretation was posited by Sherkat and Wilson (1995), who concluded that the recruits' calculations of the relative costs and benefits of various choices of religions in a marketplace partly explain religious conversion. For newcomers, socialization was motivated by relationship building for exchange of benefits (Korte 2009).

However, benefits of religion have been underestimated. Studies with Iranian migrants find that religion is an integrating agent and tool for migration. For example, Iranian asylum-seekers convert to Christianity to use religion and their new social and religious network within the churches of the host country to go to the West (Koser Akcapar 2006). This phenomenon is similar for Chinese Christians. It is found that conversion is ignited through helping behaviors conducted by church members at first, and later social networks are established by these patterns of giving (Abel 2006). In

addition, conversion to Christianity among urban immigrants in Taiwan indicates that the social support and practical blessings provided by the churches attracted converts even though the converts did not admire Christian dogmas.

On the other hand, new research shows that about half of the spiritual transformations happened during difficult periods in life such as illness, accident, divorce, or other personal problems (Smith 2005). This statistic supports a functional model that tension-producing situational factors will cause conversion (Snow & Machalek 1984). Tension-producing situational factors lead people to quest for internal and emotional identity validation. Social and emotional identity validation are also important factors in religious conversion (Gordon 1974). Converts' social and emotional identity problems are resolved by their interaction with people whose beliefs are useful.

Moral and cultural concerns are also cited in a study of Chinese students' conversion to Christianity (Wang and Yang 2006). This research emphasizes the ecological factors in the conversion. One of the factors is evangelical Protestant churches that are very active in proselytizing students to their denominations. Yang (1998) also finds that the coerced process of China and cultural destruction provide Chinese immigrants with freedom to "seek alternate meaning systems." Therefore, changes of norms need to be considered in the study of religious conversion. Previous studies imply that social interaction and rewards-exchange between Christians and nonreligious people could improve understanding of Chinese students' conversion to Christianity.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESEARCH METHODS

My research is based on available interviewees and religious-activity observation notes. The study population for the interviews consisted of 14 Chinese student converts from a local Chinese church and in other places in the United States who agreed to be interviewed. Another source of data comes from the notes of my longitudinal observation on the social interaction and rewards exchange between Chinese recruits and Chinese Christians. I observed worship services of Chinese in a church and the Bible studies for Chinese students and scholars. Observation was conducted during the Bible studying and church worshipping in a town of approximately 50,000 people in a mid-Southeastern city of the United States. There is only one Chinese Baptist Church there with 18-23 Chinese participants. It is located in a large local church that provides service for more than six hundred local Protestants. All the students and scholars study or work in a university in this city. All Chinese students and scholars are from China Mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Scholars include professors in the university departments, workers in the university labs, and visiting scholars in the university. The students' ages range from 18-35, and the scholars ages range from 35-55. Because of National College Entrance Examination and national policies and educational law, students and scholars educated in China Mainland are taught with the same materials in primary and secondary schools, including European history, Marxism, evolution theory, and nationalism (Hurd 1981;

Lewin 1987; National People's Congress of China 1995). Thus, the educational background of students from China Mainland could be regarded as the same.

I am a nonreligious Chinese student in the university and actively interact with Chinese students and scholars in this city. It is obvious that I am an object of Chinese evangelizers, and indeed they actively try to proselytize me. So, I had convenient access to all of the activities of Chinese Christians and interacted with them regularly in weekly religious activities because of their beliefs in the Gospels and desire to convert me. When my schedule permitted, I went to every church activity and wrote down what I noticed, especially the words and interactions of all participants. It was considered common to make notes during the evangelization as an expected learner in Christianity and a possible recruit. Usually I also answered the questions of Christians about the Bible. Thus, I was well disguised as a good recruit by writing down notes, too. When asked directly, I replied that I made notes about the words of teachers. No one noticed what I was doing except two students. My jotted field notes were made during the activities in the worshipping and the Bible studies.

After I went home, I expanded my notes to the actual field notes on a computer with details from my memory. In the beginning of my participant observation, I focused on the conversation practices, individual acts, and manners and consequences of interactions of people. I explored management of impression, including equipment, expression, manner, and verbal accounts. Then I noticed the new meanings and symbols introduced in the interaction. I analyzed the meaning of symbols, repeats of perspectives, and the pattern in the persuasion and interaction. Then I turned to the roles of participants

and the religious rituals and norms as the medium of meaning as well as the structures that contributed to the conversion.

Chinese Christians are always ready to share their feelings about God. My respondents did not reject any of my questions and answered in detail. In addition, my interview guide was designed to find the reason they converted to Christianity, what they thought about Christianity, what their attitudes toward Christianity were, and finally how they dealt with the conflict between their previous worldview and the Christian perspective. Because my interviewees are Chinese, I interviewed them in Chinese to make meaning clear to me and to them, and I translated the transcript to English later. I asked them questions to ensure that their answers were clear to me. I made the interviewing like natural conversation to make them forget that I was recording. For the analysis of the interviews, I focused on the meaning of their answers to my questions, especially the same accounts they used in a similar manner. Identification with my observation was explored, including meaning, learning, expression, perspectives, and the reference group.

Another location for observation was in the local Chinese Christian church located in a large American Baptist church in the city. Their worship begins every Sunday morning at 11 o'clock. Around 22-25 worshipers are Chinese Christians. Only several Chinese nonreligious students who are interested in American culture and English learning attend the service. Chinese Christians attend the service every Sunday morning. In addition, the Chinese Christian church usually arranges activities for Chinese students to recruit new Christians. In sum, the observations include every activity for recruitment of Chinese Christians in this city of the United States.

Besides church meetings there are two Bible studies. One Bible study is arranged by an American professor in the Department of History in the university. It is open only to Chinese students. This professor has been proselytizing Chinese students for more than ten years. This Bible study is at 7pm every Sunday evening and takes place in a meeting room in the History Department of the university. The recruitment of students is done by the professor sending emails to possible Chinese university students and scholars from an email list provided by a local Chinese Christian church or by invitation of some Chinese students who usually attend this Bible study. This Bible study has lasted for many years. However, its Chinese participants seldom attended it more than four years because they graduated from the university and left. The number of Chinese participants ranged from one to ten during my observations.

The other Bible study is provided by a Chinese associate professor in the university. He is also the leader of the local Chinese Christian Church. He and his wife serve dinner and have Bible study in their house for Chinese students and scholars every Friday evening. They welcome Chinese students and scholars to their house and encourage them to bring their friends along. However, they are able to send emails only to Chinese students and scholars on their email list previously given by these people.

### **Respondents' Demographics**

Respondents ranged in age from midtwenties to early thirties, including eight Chinese men and six Chinese women. They came from different parts of China. All of them were Han people, except one male Manchurian Chinese. They were represented in a wide range of academic disciplines. All respondents came from China and 13 respondents defined themselves as Christians. Although one female respondent defined

herself as both agnostic and Christian; even though she had not yet been baptized, she had confessed Christ publicly and practiced Christianity continuously. Another female student and two male students have confessed Christ publicly, namely they had made the decision to believe but had not yet been baptized. They also defined themselves as Christians and practiced their faith continuously. All of my respondents reported they were educated with atheism in China. Meanwhile, there was a female respondent baptized as an infant in China because her grandparents were Chinese Catholics. However, she defined herself as a nominal Catholic, not a Christian before she practiced Protestantism. They have believed in Jesus anywhere from one month to nine years. All respondents count their years as Christians from their confession to Christ when they made the decision to believe.

## CHAPTER V

### FINDINGS: RECRUITS AND CHURCH

Christianity is meaningful and helpful. This is evident from my observations and my interview respondents. Their rewards from Christianity were thought to be worth the investment of their limited time. Symbolic interactionism tells us that converts subjectively define their experience or choices as meaningful and valuable. It is necessary to discuss different stages in my respondents' conversion from the time they came upon Christianity, decided to continue learning Christianity, made confession, decided to believe, and established belief finally. This chapter has five sections: opening the door of Christianity, the Chinese church and the Bible study groups, internalization of religious meanings, taking the perspectives of Christians, and the religious plausibility structure of meaning.

#### Opening the Door of Christianity

When the academic year begins, Chinese students have many chances to be introduced into the circle of Christianity. In a foreign country, without relatives and friends, it is quite essential for Chinese students to make friends with local people and know the social rules of American society. Campus ministries, local churches, and the Bible study fellowships hold activities to help immigrating students meet their new schoolmates and share information about student life. Most important, American people from church are both willing to talk with foreigners and ready to help them, including Chinese students who lack sufficient abilities to communicate in English. For Chinese

students, it is a good chance for them to practice English and make new friends because church and Bible study arranged by the ministries are the only places for them to communicate with many people outside classes. From the first time they meet, students and ministry members exchange their contact information. The nonreligious Chinese students may also meet Chinese Christian students and leave contact information. With their contact information, the church or the Bible study will forward activity information to students.

One week after the first contact every Chinese student at the university received an invitation to the New Student Greeting Party, arranged by the local Chinese church. The party provided free food and drinks. Chinese Christians in the church played the role of the host and gave newcomers a warm welcome. The nonreligious students introduced themselves to people with whom they wanted to make friends. This Greeting Party functioned first as a party for Chinese students, second as an introduction to Christianity and this Chinese church, and finally as an opportunity to recruit newcomers to the church. The music and objects announced that here was a church, a part of American culture. The background music at the party was Chinese hymns, which described the character of God and meaning of the Scripture. Like visitors who went to someone's house where they had never been, the new students behaved cautiously and tried to make a good impression. On the other hand, Chinese Christians who belonged to the church tried to make students feel like family by feeding and talking with newcomers.

The next stage in the Greeting Party was Christian testimony. On stage some persuasive Christians were selected to tell their testimony about how and why they converted to Christianity from atheism, about how they lived happily with their faith, and

how they had been blessed by God. For the nonreligious students, testimony is like telling their experience, and introducing themselves in detail. Telling your experience is the initiation of trust and making friends in China. To reciprocate, the nonreligious students may accept the Chinese Christians' invitation to the church, a family and a place ready to help them. Also, the nonreligious students were informed that several Chinese Christians were professors or staff in the university. Between testimonies, the assembly sang hymns with music. When the nonreligious Chinese students decide to maintain their interest in Christianity and Christians, they will visit the church and the Bible study frequently. Then the socialization process of conversion begins.

Apart from being invited to the new student greeting party, my respondents reported another four reasons they went to the church for the first time. Six male respondents and one female respondent said they went to the church for the first time with their friends while one male respondent and three female respondents went with their older family members who were Christians.

I went to church first in 2006 with my friend; a Chinese friend invited me to the church. (Luther)

My friend took me to the church. At that time, I wanted to know more about Christianity. (Russ)

A Chinese student...said there are many teachers and students there. We can communicate together. (Olivia)

I went to the church with my wife and my mother-in-law because my mother-in-law wanted to spend Christmas with her friends in the church. They invited me. Because they invited me, I went. (Greg)

When I arrived in the USA, I went to church with my family. Before I went to the USA, my father was a Christian. In the first week in the US, my father took me to the church. (Bruce)

In the 2005 Christmas, because my mother attended church, she knew some brothers and sisters in the church. A brother and I were in the same chemistry department. He and his wife arranged a Christmas party in their house. I was free on Christmas so I listened to my mother's suggestion and went to the party with my mother and my husband. (Odilia)

When I arrived in the USA, I went to the church with my uncle and aunt for Sunday worship. My uncle and aunt were Christians and went to the church every Sunday so I went with them to have a look. (Mary)

When I arrived here for a month, they [Christians] invited me. I knew one of them who was my schoolmate and helped me apply for a bank card. (Russell)

Apart from eleven respondents, another female student reported that she went to the church because her grandfather died. She was helped during her mourning for her grandfather by the American church. Not surprisingly, affective ties are essential for Chinese students to be introduced to Christianity. On the other hand, Gray, Russ, Levi and Roxy are all curious about Christianity and want to know more about it. In addition, Gray went to the church regularly to borrow books from the church because he was lonely and bored by himself before his conversion. Moreover, another female student, Dena, said she asked her friend to take her to the church because she had read an evangelical book written by a Chinese scientist in the USA, which aroused her interest in Christianity. So, it is understandable that these five respondents continued to attend the church and the Bible studies to learn more about Christianity. It occurs to me that their interest came from their desire to understand the viewpoint of their important others who were close to them but had a different perspective.

I went to join a fellowship of the church in August, summer of 1999. A friend told me and invited me to have a look. I was curious about Christianity and wanted to know about Christianity. (Gray)

I think it was three, oh no, three and half years before. When I just arrived in the USA, my mother took me to the church. We went with my mother because she is a Christian. I want to have a look, what was church. When my mother became a

faithful Christian, her personality, every aspect has changed and become very optimistic, happy and glad. (Roxy)

In August 2005 a friend took me to the church because I want to know about Christianity. And he gave me a chance. So I went there. Because I was curious why a religion thought to be stupid and superstitious by our Chinese can exist in a developed country and why people smarter than me believe it. (Levi)

When they told this to me, I was impressed by their appreciation of the value of their significant others. Naturally these respondents were impressed by their significant others' attitude toward them. It is clear that both Roxy and Levi noticed the perspectives of their significant others whose definition of the situation guided both of them.

### The Chinese Church and the Bible Study Groups

Exploring the setting of the Chinese church and the Bible study groups these respondents entered and the roles they played in conversion of my respondents is important. Both church worship and the Bible study groups were actively evangelizing Chinese students. They are also the only places where Chinese students and scholars could be educated systematically about Christianity. Christian culture is dominant in every setting. The Bible study of the American professor was arranged at the meeting room of the History Department in an old hall of the university at seven o'clock in the evening. The old bell tower of the hall struck at that time and played religious chords with its cathedral chimes, which increased the impression that Christianity was closely related to American history and culture. The meeting room for the Bible study was at the end of the second floor in the west wing of the hall. It was very quiet on Sunday evening, and only the Bible study group was present. In addition, the chords sounded at each hour.

There were two tables combined together in the center of the room with ten chairs around them. There was a window in the wall opposite to the door. On the left of the

window there was a drawing of a cougar. On other side there was a map of the North American continent. The teacher sat at the north side of the tables. The students tended to sit on other sides except the north side where the teacher sat. At seven o'clock on Sunday evening, the teacher was accustomed to waiting for Chinese students and scholars for five minutes even though no one appeared. Nonreligious Chinese students and scholars never knew who would come to the class and who would not. But, their reasons for attending were the same—to practice English. One or two students also reported coming to learn American culture.

The other Bible study was at a Chinese professor's house. His house was full of Chinese artifacts and Christian signs. Behind the door there were a wooden cross and a Chinese ink painting with Chinese calligraphy of the Bible verse of Romans 12:1 standing on a desk. There was also a traditional Chinese peony and finch painting with calligraphy which said "Jesus is the treasure of my home." On the left side of the living room there were many pieces of traditional Chinese art on a desk with Christian books. In front of the sofa, there was a piano with family pictures on it. On the right side of the piano was the TV and VCR. Next to the TV was the fireplace decorated with candles and Chinese art the host brought from China.

The candles were lighted before the dinner and the Bible study began. In front of the fireplace there were Christian music CDs and DVDs. There was also a guitar lying on the carpet. On the wall of the passage to the kitchen there was a pseudo-Chinese traditional painting with Chinese calligraphy saying "to sacrifice you in this way for granted (English translation of Chinese translation of Romans 12:1)" and Romans 12:1-2 in Chinese. Next to the living room, the dining room and kitchen were combined and

divided by a narrow short wall which was occupied with candles. There was a refrigerator with pictures of Chinese students and scholars on it opposite to the wall. On the other side of the refrigerator there was a calendar printed by a church with its name and telephone numbers on it. There were eight chairs in front of the wall and a sofa next to the refrigerator. In the center of the dining room, there was a big table, which was always covered with food on Friday Evening. At the southern corner of the dining room, there was a small table with *Time*, Christian magazines, and other magazines on it. Between the dining room and living room there were small book shelves filled with a picture book of Picasso and Christian books and magazines which published articles about using a Christian perspective to explain problems in the life and even politics.

The church also played an important role in conversion. The Chinese Christian church is located on the second floor of a big local church. It has only one room on the north with two doors. There is an oatmeal-colored table next to the back door of the room. There is a glass book box at the back of the room displaying Christian magazines and audio products. On the box there are some editions of the Bible. The center of the room is occupied with more than thirty chairs. In the front of the room, there is a small piano and a cross podium. In front of the window, there is a wood wardrobe with hymn books and the Bibles.

Besides the room for the Chinese Christian church there are many rooms for American Christians along the passage of the second floor. The Fellowship Hall is at the first floor of this local church, directly under the room of the Chinese Christian church. There is a stage in front of the hall, one room next to the stage, and a door on the right side of the stage. There are more than 70 chairs in the hall. In the back of the hall there is

a place for video control at the left and a place for food at the right. Outside of the local church there are three high crosses in the front of the building. The church is clean, modern, and new and lacks the mystery of Baroque churches.

While students participate in the Bible study in a Chinese professor's house, only older members and faithful Chinese Christians attend the church. New nonreligious students attend the church out of curiosity, but they seldom come more than once unless they are motivated. Novice Chinese Christians and the nonreligious rarely take the worshiping in the church seriously. They are easily noticed by the observers because of their attempt to conform to other Christians. Novices cannot keep their attention on the worship while trying to observe the behavior of Christians. Also, these new members in the worship choose to sit in the back of the congregation while the most faithful Christians sit in the first four rows in the room. There are seven hymns in the worship, more than in the Bible study. There is also a sermon near the end of the worship. However, the sermon places more emphasis on the application of the Bible to everyday life.

### Internalization of Religious Meanings

The symbolic aspect of religious conversion begins with the internalization of religious meanings. The Chinese atheists will inevitably sense and experience Christians' perspective and moral standards inherited from the Bible. The first morality for them to learn is the concept of sin. This symbol is quite new for the oriental culture. In the interaction between the nonreligious students and Chinese Christians, the meaning of sin was placed in opposition to the meaning of righteousness. Sin was described as a label needing to be forgiven and purified. A sinner was described by evangelists as a hopeless

wretch in darkness, lost, blind, narrow-minded, chained or imprisoned, unforgiving, unrighteousness, impure, unreasonable, resistant, and stupid person, hurting others, lacking of love, and never saved after death. On the other hand, righteousness was made by evangelists equal to having faith and deserving of eternal life. Christians were described as righteous, sincere, altruistic, pure, free, joyful, immortally glad, reasonable, rational, hopeful, peace-loving, open-hearted, humble, truth-knowing people, full of love, wisdom, kindness, and relief as well as led and protected and saved with eternal life. A moral norm changes as meaning or interpretation of righteousness changes, and, thus, the standard to be a righteous man changes. The new moral standard infers that the right reference group for right behavior is Christians. The reason to become a Christian is obvious: the need to discard sin by accepting Jesus as the Savior. The meaning of life adapts to the new interpretation that life is in Jesus Christ, and people who do not have Jesus do not have life. Moreover, this life needs to be purified through rebirth. The reborn life is a gift necessary for eternal life and growth in Christianity. The reward for being reborn is joy, peace, and hope without burden. The response to this life is gladness. Gladness, joy, peace, and hope are meanings in the definition of life shared in the interaction with Chinese Christians.

#### Learning the Personality of God

Sociologically God is also a significant symbol. Human beings can talk to something only by imagining it is a person. Prayer teaches students how to talk with God as talking with a person and what students could request from God. The meaning of God is attached to purity, perfection, and love in the Bible study. His characteristics included being faithful, commanding, burden-taking and human-loving. God's love was said by

evangelists to be equal to being saved by Jesus or being transformed by God. Chinese evangelists' prayers began with calling God "clement Father of Heaven" and they also emphasized this characteristic of God in their teaching. However, the image of Father was emphasized more in the Chinese professor's Bible study. The function of protection by the Father is reinforced through teaching and prayer. Quotations below from the preacher are used to make newcomers know more about the personality of God. They imply that God will help people.

...for those relying on God, people do not matter to have difficulties in life because the Lord goes in the front of them.

...however, Father is more important because then he has a relationship with me. If He does not love me, He is merely aloof. Before I cry, He has already known my misery. When we are challenged in life, we could ask Him for help.

However, not only the image of a helping father was depicted but also the image of a loving father. When the love in English is translated to love in Chinese, there is a strange distortion of meaning in love, to the nature of the love of lovers. It can be illustrated by a hymn taught in the Bible study.

My heart shall long for you. You are my sun. You are my shield. You're my everything, all my love belongs to You. I want to be closer to You. My heart shall seek after You. You are my sun. You are my shield. You're my everything. All my heart belongs to You. I long to be face to face. Forever I'll love You with my life. Forever I'll wait for You, my Lord. You're my everything. All my heart belongs to You. I long to be face to face. Your love is the most beautiful. All my heart belongs to you. I long to be face to face.

Contrary to praising God, Chinese Christians describe themselves as humble and negligible people. Thus, they impress upon the nonreligious students the omnipotence and power of God. They emphasize and remind the nonreligious to be humble in their teaching and prayer again and again.

No man can be proud as he stands before God. Christians dedicate their honor to

God. The goal of the life is to honor God. We see the strength of God in our weakness. We see Holiness of God in humans' humbleness.

Although Christians are criticized for playing tricks on the weak, it is right to say "humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up" (James 4:10). In addition, it is supported by Peter's words "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

Clement Father, we come to your throne. I am humble and negligible. I cannot help but praise your power. I beg your omnipotence and your revelation of the omnipotence.

...so we humbly approach you and see our deficiency and weakness.

The prayers also taught that everything was gifted by God and everything was under the control of God. These kinds of prayers were usually rituals before dinner and after Bible studies. Practical wishes were necessary in prayer. In the Bible study of the Chinese professor, the professor will pray to God for all the wishes of the participants, especially those of the nonreligious students. The response to God's gift and all possessions of people is gratefulness and praising to God.

An example of prayer after the Bible study:

I know they are not accidental. All of these exist because you love us....We bring You our deep and sincere wish to tell You and plead with You for mercy. Lord, I beg you to act according to your own noble will and your love to achieve our goals. We put Noi's summer job in your hand....So we thank You, God. You are the God who knows our wishes and hears our prayers. We also put Nana's purchase of a car in Your hands. I plead You lead her to buy a suitable car....

An example of prayer before dinner:

Clement father of Heaven, thanks for your distribution of such prosperous food. We are grateful to you. Please give us a successful lesson this evening.

An example of prayer after testimony:

Thanks Father for letting us congregate to sing together....Bless new students. Help each other in their lives....

An example of prayer after hymn singing:

Clement Heavenly Father, thanks for Your arrangement this evening and thank You for bringing friendship among us....Please make Yourself known more to students. Please let Your Spirit help us understand Your words.

The high frequency of prayer was another pattern in the Bible study. Participants engaged in prayer before dinner and Bible studies and after the Bible studies. Prayer was also employed when the evangelists were moved by the hymns. Wishes were recorded and included in the prayer. It was common for the nonreligious students to share their wishes and let the evangelists include their wishes in the prayer, too. The power of prayer was emphasized by teachers in the Bible study, and the wishes were defined as heavy burdens that will be taken on and helped by God. Practical prayers included wishes to pass the exam or test, to choose a good major, to have a visa, to have a safe journey, to heal an illness, to find a job, to work well, to have a boyfriend or a husband, and to buy a good car. In this sense, prayers were functional instruments to reinforce the personality of God and the expectation of achievement. The nonreligious actively prayed. They were eager to voice their wishes to the evangelists and let them pray to God with their wishes, even though they did not believe in God yet. Because of their own participation in the prayer, these persons whose wishes were included in the prayer appeared serious and closed their eyes when evangelists prayed. It seems to me that they participated in the talking with God with the perspective of Chinese Christians learning from the Bible study.

The feelings expressed in the prayers were real and sincere. Christians in their prayer frequently showed their love, hope, excitement, gratefulness, sadness, and despair with crying. Its extreme pattern was observed in the prayer for farewell. Here is one of them.

Heavenly Father, Euny did not know You before, but she found You at last. Lord, please be her blessing and help her persistence in her faith. In her persistence she

will find blessing....And, let her become the light of her community in China.  
God, we hail You!

Thus, it may give the nonreligious an impression that Christians really talk with their God as if God is listening like a person. In addition, the appearance and real expression of emotion in prayer impressed the nonreligious as the image code of Christianity in their memories.

### Taking the Perspectives of Christians

The evangelists taught the perspectives of Christians with the sanctification of the Bible at first. The Bible was described as the truth and history. The truth of the Bible was reinforced by prophecies through the history taught by evangelists. The evidence provided to answer a question was also in the Bible, namely the perspective of Christians. The usefulness for Chinese Christians was that the Bible was used to teach, refute, correct and train in righteousness. The way for them to use the Bible was to find evidence from different Biblical books to support their argument. They also taught the nonreligious to find the answers to their questions only within the range of the Bible. Most important, the reason for their reliance on the Bible comes from the ignorance of their own rationality, namely, the belief that the faculty of human beings cannot understand the way of thinking of God, which is derived from Proverbs 3:5-6. Thus, I noticed the internalization of the norm that all participants in the Bible study should separate God and humans. The Chinese professor who taught one of the Bible studies as an evangelist emphasized many times in his Bible study that the magic of Jesus was possible only when he was God. All of those persuasions were used to internalize the first norm, namely, to suppose the existence of God before using the faculty of human rationality. Then they were observed to answer the question of the nonreligious with the verses under the premises that the

Bible is the word of God. That is, the arguments of evangelists must be supported by the truth of the Bible first. The religious way they answered nonreligious questions illustrates it.

To demonstrate the arguments of an evangelist by verses from the Bible:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your path straight (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Evangelists also added, “You must suppose that God exists and then use the faculty of thinking. Humans and God must be separated.”

To demonstrate the truth of the Bible with necessary but not sufficient evidence:

Many archaeologists have found the remains of cities described in the Bible. Thus, the Bible reports the history and what happens in history.

Believing is through feeling....The words of the Bible enter into my heart and change me greatly.

To answer the conflict between God’s blessing on Christians and illness:

God knows everyone’s destiny.

To demonstrate why the nonreligious need to believe in God by Pascal’s

wager:

If God doesn’t exist, you have no loss, and you obtain high morality. But if God does exist, you will lose such a lot of favors.

To answer how to define belief in God:

Saint Augustine and Aquinas claimed that your inner experience will change after your acceptance of the Holy Spirit.

To answer their doubt on praising God and why Christians are saved by faith:

You have a high standard for Christians....You should refer to the Beatitudes (in the Bible).

Eternal life is a gift from God, result of relation to God.

Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth...so that no one may boast before God (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). No man can be proud as he stands before God. Christians dedicate their honor to God. The goal of life is to honor God. We see strength of God in our weakness. We see the Holiness of God in human's humbleness.

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate (Isaiah 29:1).

You should change the attitude and admit that you do not understand but you are ready to open your heart.

Confronted with the doubts of the nonreligious, the evangelists also emphasized the power of God and the humility of humans. To be humble and not to challenge the existence of God were other norms that the nonreligious should learn in the Bible study. And, the way to demonstrate the Bible is through feeling in Chinese Christians' perspectives.

In my observations several novice Christian students supported this perspective and criticized other nonreligious students' lack of humility. Humility of people was the second norm shared in the Bible study. One new student convert criticized the nonreligious student who asked why the Bible is truth by saying, "Humans should show reverence for supernatural power and learn to be humble." Moreover, the third norm to the nonreligious was to open their hearts, give up resistant attitudes, accept the Holy Spirit, and learn to feel Him. In the perspective of Chinese Christians, the nonreligious cannot understand the Bible because they were resistant to accepting the Holy Spirit and opening their hearts, thus convincing some nonreligious students and making them accept the Holy Spirit first and then feel God. The students did not question the existence of God or the truth of the Bible.

Some students took the perspective of Christians for practical reasons. They found

it useful to deal with conflict with Americans. This way was also suggested by evangelists, and they were encouraged to take a further step, namely, accepting the Holy Spirit. In one Bible study group, two nonreligious students actively told the participants how they opened their hearts and gave up their resistant attitude. They said they found that it was useful to apply norms of the Bible solving problems.

In addition, it was typical for Chinese Christians to explain unbelief in Christianity with the parable of planting seeds. They persuaded the nonreligious to accept their perspective to explain why some people do not believe in Christianity. Chinese Christians divided the heart of human beings into four categories: soil by the path, rocky places, soil among thorns, and good soil. This was the thinking model for them and it was supported by their own testimony. This model was also decorated with images as follows:

The Word of God is like the seeds. The seeds fall by the side of the road or fall between rocks with little ground. And birds will eat the seeds, or they will dry and die. People in this situation cannot understand the Word of God, and the devil comes and takes away the seeds that have been put in their heart. They may remember the Word of God when they encounter difficulties but the root is not deep. Thus, the root of the Word needs to be fixed on the word of people and the root will absorb the nutrients and water. Then soil will gradually be produced. Sometimes, the seeds fall among thorns, and they have no room to grow. People in this situation do not take care of their lives and fail to give the seed room to grow and give grain. So, they need to learn to care of other people's lives and revise the Word and make it fixed in the heart. People with good soil for the Word understand the Word and are waiting expectantly for the Christ...

They tried to convince the nonreligious that converts' perspectives were credible and that the nonreligious will believe in God in the end as do the evangelists. The present condition of unbelief was attributed to the bad soil, namely, bad knowledge and attitudes of the nonreligious. They needed to improve themselves with the help of Chinese Christians. Thus, they tried to persuade the nonreligious with this model. By emphasizing the same experiences of Christians—how similar Chinese Christians were to the attitude

of the nonreligious now and how they improved their understanding about the Bible and finding God. Chinese Christians gave their testimonies in the Bible study or Sunday worship.

In five testimonies about finding God, there were some similarities among these Chinese Christians with PhDs or Master's degrees. At first, they were invited to the Bible study and had Christian friends. They found that their Christian friends were kind and ready to help them. Three evangelists of five said in their testimonies that they had troubles in the USA and got help from Christians before their conversion. This fact supports what Lofland (1966) calls the "affective bond" which exists or develops from interaction of meaning in proselytizing and intensification of interaction.

Later they recognized their friends loved them and the love of their friends was inherited from or moved by God's love. One evangelist convert said he "found faith influenced their (Christians') criteria in life," and they were good people. One evangelist convert said "their (Christians') love was influential and derived from real trust.... This love is love of Jesus." Another three converts said Christians were considerate and friendly in such an unfamiliar country.

One convert emphasized that Chinese Christians were nicer than others. Three of five converts remembered they were proud and relied heavily on themselves. Three of them said they got happiness, real friends, and a church family in their testimony. One of them stressed his personal good change after conversion to Christianity. Two of them highlighted their admiration of the wisdom in the Bible and how they applied the Bible to their personal lives. Two of them pointed out that they had obtained reliance, help, love, and hope from their conversion to Christianity. In this way converts pointed out the love

of God, the wisdom of God, the power of God, the truth of God, and how to obtain them by applying the Bible.

Considering the identification of the emphasis in the testimony and in the Bible study, I conclude that their testimonies are deeply influenced by the accounts or meaning construction in the Bible study, especially when these testimonies are also used to proselytize and function as the Bible teaching. My observation supports the argument of Snow and Machalek (1984). That is, testimonies of converts are learned from other people's conversion testimonies. Indeed, they took converts' perspectives to construct their own accounts on conversion.

Testimonies of Christians are better sources to illustrate how they receive the perspectives of Christians, and testimonies are very popular ways to proselytize the nonreligious and are regarded as main evidences of God. Some Chinese Christians testified that they accepted the Holy Spirit to experience whether or not God exists. They also encouraged the nonreligious to do it in the same manner. However, sociologically, accepting the Holy Spirit could be interpreted as accepting the perspective of the Christians. Nonetheless, they began to take the existence of God for granted and talk to God once they accepted the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, Chinese evangelists emphasized the importance of differentiating the person before and after accepting the Holy Spirit. In their words, "a person will know the person who believes in God and who does not. And others will see." Although it is difficult to understand scientifically the difference one experienced by accepting the Holy Spirit, a few nonreligious students repeated this Christian perspective and believed that others will see their differences after accepting the Holy Spirit. Without the shared

meaning in the differences, others cannot figure out what the differences were. The difference could be interpreted in any way according to an actor's definition of the situation. Eventually, the internalization of the Christian perspective is essential for the nonreligious to think and ask questions only in the range of the Bible.

### Responses to the Meanings of Symbols in Hymns

Singing Hymns and praying are rituals essential for the internalization of norms and responses. Hymn singing played an important role in the study of the Bible. The hymns were actively employed to teach students in the Bible study of Chinese Christians. During every Bible study the number of hymns sung varied from three to six. All participants sang in every congregation and took the role of the protagonist in the hymn to praise God. However, to the singer, the harmony of singing collectively could enable other singers as a whole to be regarded as "the generalized other." Because the meaning of love and truth were restricted to be the love of God and truth of God sent by His words in the Bible, the right responses to both symbols were defined in the hymns as opening of the heart, feeling free, and happiness. Some examples are as follows:

Lord, I love to sing your praises.  
I'm so glad You came to save us.

I'm happy to be in the truth.

His resurrection sets us free.

Holy Scriptures...make me wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

I once was lost, but now I'm found.  
Was blind but now I see.

On the other hand, the hymns were melodious with enthusiastic emotional expression and fluctuating tempos as well as sounds. Thus, the hymn cannot be more real

to the singer; it should be one's own expression and response as Christians to God. This social reality appeared from the practices such as singing and conversation and by thinking and taking perspectives of Christians in the interaction with Christians.

There was another form of song that I call proselytizing songs. Proselytizing songs functioned to induce the nonreligious to believe in God with inferring that God had a personality to love the listener in any situation. One proselytizing song is as follows:

Someday when you feel you have lost your courage,  
 Someday when you feel like to give up,  
 Someday when you feel there is none for you.  
 Someday when you feel ...  
 On that day you should pick up your spirit,  
 On that day you need to cherish yourself,  
 On that day, do not forget that someone still cares for you,  
 On that day, do not easily give up.  
 There is truly a living God who cares.  
 He loves you and is willing to help you.  
 Even though you may feel lost sometimes,  
 There is truly a living God who cares.  
 His hands are open wide to embrace you.  
 He will guide you through the lonely nights.  
 His love will be with you all your days.

Having heard this song, the listeners who have troubles will feel that the song is sung for them and feel the response described in the song, such as "cherish yourself" or "only God cares for you." They will take the perspective of the one song and define their situation according to it and accept the suggestion to search for the help of God and feel the love of God.

#### Taking the Role of Christian Student and Learning the Responses of Others

In the Bible study sessions, all the participants learned the meanings and norms passively without any opposing opinions so as to avoid controversy. It is obvious that the nonreligious students and scholars as well as the Christian peers took the role of students in the Bible study and supported the evangelists in the Bible study as their teachers or

authority. The behaviors of participants during the learning were the same—listening carefully without any verbal expression and fixing their eyes on the material to be taught. This is precisely the scene in the classes of China, which is pointed out by Turner (2006), who notes that Chinese students presumed that their learning is teacher-centered and didactic. They failed to challenge the authority so as to avoid controversy.

On one occasion an evangelist required Chinese students and scholars to play the role of students in a church while he established himself as a teacher directly. He articulated that “students should say consistently with what the teacher says. Say Yes.” He demanded all the participants repeat “yes” as he did twice. All the participants indeed followed his instruction. In addition, all the participants were also observed to follow his actions closely in a game. On this occasion the evangelists who told their testimonies stood in front of the stage while all the students and scholars, no matter whether Christians or nonreligious, sat quietly in their seats and listened without challenges. In a similar way, the nonreligious students and scholars sat silently in every Bible study and listened to the evangelists. It was obvious that every person had taken the role of student from the time he or she entered into the classroom, living room, or church. Considering the identities of these evangelists, professors or PhDs, they were expected to be authoritative. Most Chinese students and scholars called these Chinese evangelists either “teacher” or “doctor.” Indeed some of them were teachers or doctors in the chemistry department or computer science department. Even some nonreligious students were the students of the evangelists. Because of their impression management, it was common for everyone, especially the nonreligious students and scholars, to look on themselves as students.

Furthermore, it was not difficult to understand why the nonreligious imitated the behavior of evangelists during prayer and hymn singing and why they failed to challenge the opinions of evangelists but tried to support their arguments instead. What the evangelists taught and said was taken by students and scholars as what the authorities taught and said. The responses of the evangelists to the words of the Bible were full of confidence, excitement, and gratefulness. Their standards for righteousness were different, and they saw the nonreligious as sinners who needed help for their unbelief. When the nonreligious asked questions different from a Christian perspective, they were criticized as too proud and not humble creatures who failed to concede their sin. Contrary to the nonreligious deviants, the Chinese students who behaved in the way of Christians were praised as kind and diligent students who pursued the words of God enthusiastically. Actually they were the significant others for the students, and these Chinese Christians become the reference group of Chinese students in the USA.

The attitude of evangelists is to attach emotion, thus causing students to react to the symbols in the Bible. Both American evangelists and Chinese Christians' responses to faith or righteousness were pride, smiles, praise, support, and agreement. Their responses to God were filled with confidence, gratefulness, love, honor, and praise. Moreover, the Bible was symbolized to be equal to truth, history, fact, and the word of God. When students answered questions from the perspective of the Bible, they were praised and rewarded. However, those students who asked questions beyond the perspective of Christians on the Bible would be answered indifferently without any praise or support.

When the nonreligious students entered the Bible study, they were unfamiliar with

the perspectives of the Chinese Christians. Thus, some of them always asked questions outside the Christian perspective or the Bible and challenged it at first. The opinions of the nonreligious student included “the Bible may not tell the truth,” and “God cannot heal illness.” The answer of Chinese Christians to these doubts was never strictly sufficient. However, the strategies used to provide answers were some findings in archaeology and people’s testimonies and the rational choice of humans. The unwillingness to assume the truth of the Bible was widely observed among the nonreligious who attended the Bible study for the first time. In addition, in their sermons or interactions with the nonreligious, Chinese Christians noted that many scientists were Christians so as to demonstrate that science was compatible with Christianity and even supported Christianity. Students rarely challenged their positions because most Chinese evangelists were professors in the university with PhD degrees.

In one of my observations, a male Chinese nonreligious student was surrounded by three evangelists who were trying to convince him that he was a sinner. Evangelists made this student open the Bible and read the verses that included the definition of a sinner. Another evangelist asked a question in Chinese, “Everyone is a sinner. Not crimeless. Everyone is jealous or proud to some extent. Have you ever been jealous or angry?” This student seemed to be convinced and nodded his head. One evangelist praised his quick learning and ability to understand. In addition, this student later agreed, to me, that he was a sinner. This shows that the responses of others changed his perspective and made him redefine himself. In another observation, a female student who quickly understood the target of the game introduced by evangelists was praised with applause. The student who answered the question of the evangelist was rewarded with

praise or agreement and responded with happiness. Thus, rewards are important for recruits to learn the appropriate responses of Christians.

Contrary to praising well-behaved students, deviants who refused to cooperate or who asked questions beyond the Christian perspective were criticized and treated with annoyance or indifference. In one observation an evangelist was annoyed and forced students to say “yes” after he found there was no reply to his question. In another observation the evangelist seemed to be annoyed and embarrassed after he found that no one replied to his question about whether or not a hymn was beautiful. He explained that the silence was because everyone had eaten too much food and went on to lead students to sing it again. In addition, in the Bible study, students who replied to questions of evangelists beyond the Christian perspective were treated with indifference and without praise, or even with criticism on their pride. In one observation a deviant question was defined as a “meaningless” question and no direct answer was provided.

Moreover, after the teaching of the Bible, the Christian students tended to apply the Christian perspective and asked teachers questions about other responses of God in the Bible. Their behaviors reinforced the Christian perspective and evidenced the consistency of the Bible to themselves and the nonreligious students. Thus, the nonreligious students will remember the answer to the question of the evangelists and reply more easily in later interaction by taking the role of Christian students to please others.

### The Religious Plausibility Structure of Meaning

When the Chinese students and scholars come to the USA, they always find that their new environment is different from their previous environment in China. Loneliness

and helplessness are common in a new place, especially with the obstacles of language and customs. This fact is also supported by the testimonies of the converts. The congregation arranged by the Chinese Christian church was the only place to talk with people in Chinese, play without misunderstanding, and find a feeling of home. The nonreligious newcomers were invited to the Chinese professor's house for dinner and to enjoy the Chinese food in America. Christian students were more concerned about the Bible study itself. The differences were well expressed in the purposes for attending.

The nonreligious students referred to attendance as "going for dinner," while Christian students called it "fellowship" (Bible instruction). Also, it was well supported by the conclusion of the host in the beginning of the semester. He expressed clearly, "According to others' experience, they happily enjoy dinners. They usually like to have various Chinese foods here. Second, some make friends through our congregation." For the newcomers, their intentions cannot be simpler—to find friends and enjoy the dinner. However, the environment into which they fit and the interaction in which they are involved determined the intense interaction with Chinese Christians and the adaptation of the newcomers' perspectives on the future. It was the same for attending church and the English professor's Bible study. The intentions of the newcomers for English Bible study are also to practice English. The newcomers attend the church to meet friends and have conversation and dinner. Chinese Christians also successfully develop affective bonds and intense interaction with students by providing dinners and activities. The intense interaction of Christians and the nonreligious was bolstered by material rewards and affective bonds, such as Christians' kindness and rewards through the feelings of family and friends. The Chinese Christians described themselves as nice and kind people. It also

enhanced the affective bonds. I found that no one in the interactions with Chinese Christians said they were not kind and considerate.

However, the nature of the interaction determined the proselytizing activity involvement. Chinese Christians always offered testimony to the newcomers if they participated in a formal congregation. As described above, Chinese students and scholars could not choose not to take the role of students during the Bible study or testimonies. They were not free to challenge the opinions of the evangelists so as to avoid controversy and criticism and they were expected to show respect, especially when Chinese Christians offered free food and help. Moreover, the Bible study or testimonies were located either in classrooms, evangelists' houses, or the church. These locations restricted people's self-determination, autonomy, and freedom of action (Goffman 1961). People in the classroom were expected to behave in a unified and harmonious manner in the teacher-centered and didactic environment. If they were invited as guests to an evangelist's house, they were supposed to respect the host and avoid controversy with him or her. Then in the church, Chinese people were supposed to respect the foreign culture and the positions of Chinese Christians. Thus, recruits were surrounded by the religious plausibility structure of meanings.

On the other hand, the nonreligious students remained silent and passive and isolated themselves from other reference groups that disagreed with the opinions of Christians. In addition, they had to take the role of students and the perspectives of Christians in the Bible study. The most significant matter was that these evangelists with a PhD or Master's degree interacted constantly with the nonreligious and developed affective bonds. With affective bonds the Christian support groups could easily validate

the right feelings and right beliefs consistent with Chinese Christians' perspectives.

Chinese Christians may become the reference group to the nonreligious if the intense interaction could continue and be reinforced. Moreover, other Christian students in the Bible study and the evangelists played as a team to the nonreligious students. They were observed to cooperate to support the argument of each other and, thus, presented a given definition of the situation, namely, the truth of Christian views. Teamwork convinced other people that their definition of the situation was real. It helped to construct the social reality in this religious plausibility structure of meaning.

## CHAPTER VI

### FINDINGS: REWARDS AND AFFECTIVE BONDS

There is no doubt that the church worship and the Bible study impressed my respondents, not only because of the perspective and norms of Christianity taught in the worship and the Bible study, but also because of Christians' friendship in the church. It should be also noted that once a Chinese student decides to become a recruit and attend church or Bible study groups regularly, people in the church will be closer to him or her. Thus, intensive interaction with Christians is possible.

#### Rewards in the Belief System of Christianity

Five out of the fourteen respondents told me they wanted to know more about Christianity as their reason to attend the church. Some of them found the Christian meaning of life after their first visit. Christianity provided a system of truth or the goal to live, or doctrines worth submission. As Russ said:

Before I went to the church, as an absolute atheist, I was unable to think deeper about a view of life because if I thought deeper I would feel the meaninglessness of my life. With the view of atheism, I thought humans were merely a bit of protein. I cannot accept this result. Because although I can run, do something, and help others, it is meaningless, isn't it? Like people help you, you are merely a bit of protein. In this, if humans' divinity is detached, then we can do almost everything and we cannot do nothing. I will ask you why I cannot do, can I? Like many illegal actions. This is a high topic to discuss, involving basic ethics in humanity. These topics are full of burden. I was depressed and aimless. I wanted to know where the pillar of morality was. I cannot find it in atheism; I did not know where the basic pillar of morality was. I must do what other people wanted me to. Namely, in morality I was the expectation of other people. They hoped that I was a good child and behaved like a good child and a good husband, and then I should. But I thought it was not enough, insufficient and failed to maintain the boundary of morality which decayed easily as a result.

Russ wanted to search for meanings in Christianity because his previous belief in atheism offered a less favorable interpretation for his situation and problems in the USA. Recruits began to reflect and compare their previous belief system with that of Christians after they interacted with Chinese Christians. They found several new questions they had never considered before. Reciprocally, they would like to be guided by the perspective of Christianity and would be satisfied with the Christians' definition of the situation, which helped them to better understand their environment. The values and norms of Christianity also made Russ feel safer in terms of morality.

I became interested in Christianity. I knew some wisdom of Jesus before [I met the church], like "whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also," These wisdoms are significant to me and unavailable in other human moral teachings. I felt them very meaningful. So I preferred to know more. Gradually, I believed it. (Russ)

Like Russ, Kurda had similar feelings and stated that Christianity provided him with a good explanation of life and reason to live.

In my childhood I always believed there was somebody that governed the universe. But I did not know who. I believed people had fate when I was young...I believed there was a power controlling our fate secretly. But I did not know what the power was. So I went to worship Buddha, to query about palmistry, and to ask shaman in order to know my future. I had asked many people about that, but none of them could give me a good and complete explanation. But I believed in the existence of deities. When I arrived in the USA, I accepted Christianity, which seemed to me as the same as Buddhism or Islam in China. But by studying, I found Christianity explained human life and reason of life completely. It could give me a good explanation of my life from beginning to end. Therefore, I thought it perhaps was a part of my needs. Then I began to learn Christianity and experience it. (Kurda)

Truth and explanation of life were emphasized by Russ and Dena. They explained their reason for attending church as the pursuit of truth. They defined Christianity as truth after they found Christianity meaningful.

In the very beginning, probably, I believed there was a truth. But I did not know

what it was. I think this [conversion] is a process to find the truth. (Russ)

[I attend church] in order to pursue truth. I thought no matter who, they had their faiths. If somebody does not believe in God, he believes in atheism. So after comparison, I felt theism was more reliable, namely evidences of atheism was not reliable. Therefore, I believed the truth told by the church as well as evidences given by the church. (Dena)

However, pursuit of truth or explanation cannot be understood as the converts' purpose to visit a church initially. As Dena stated:

[I attended church frequently since my first visit] because I felt their [Christians] words were quite correct. After I went to the church, I felt my life was unknown and vague before. Thus, I understood the meaning of life and the reason that human beings lived in the world. I suddenly felt illuminated and elucidated.

It is not because they knew that truth existed in Christianity in advance, but they defined Christianity as truth after they interacted with Christians and accepted meanings and definitions in Christianity. In reality, both respondents did not have a clear conception of truth before attending church so they readily accepted the definition of truth provided by the church. Their interaction with the church furnished their unclear conception of truth with meanings and symbols found in Christianity. Once they attended church regularly, their perception of truth became clearer through interaction with Christians. Through it these converts were rewarded with the object which they defined as truth or meaning of life. The reward makes them more likely to attend church regularly.

Apart from three respondents who were satisfied with the meaning system of Christianity, another two respondents found rewards from their accumulation of knowledge about Christianity before their conversion. A male respondent and two female respondents also said their interests in Christianity motivated them to visit the church frequently. Luther went to the church regularly because he liked history very much.

At that time [before I believed], I merely wanted to learn about...what Christianity

was because I did not know before. (Luther)

Sometimes I thought that Christianity was dominant in the American culture. So, sometimes I thought I should learn every aspect of the USA because I had a chance to be here. (Olivia)

Interest in the truth or knowledge of Christianity motivates people to continue interactions with Christians and actively accept Christian symbols and values. It also occurs to me that they did not have any idea about Christianity before they entered the church. It is natural for them to accept everything taught in the church. As Russ said, he did not previously have a clear conception about truth. At the same time, Christianity claims itself as truth, and Christians who interacted with respondents were supposed to claim it as truth, too. This socially-defined reality will be built once they visit the church regularly, but people hardly differentiated the change in their environment. Through social interaction and practice, this socially defined reality becomes intense in the newcomer's mind set. However, rewards available through the belief system of Christianity are not enough to encourage people to become members of the church. Other rewards matter.

### Rewards in Affective Bonds

Personal bonds and friendship also motivated some respondents to attend the church regularly. Affective bonds are critical for newcomers' conversion. One male respondent and two female respondents were proselytized first by their relatives, and five male respondents and one female respondent by a friend or Chinese schoolmates, and one female respondent by her teachers. In addition, three female respondents and five male respondents out of the fourteen respondents went to church for friendship. It is common for Chinese people who are in a foreign country to meet their countrymen in the Chinese

churches to which many Chinese immigrants belong. Chinese people choose to go to ethnic Chinese churches where their friends or acquaintance in universities are located.

Luther had Christian friends in the church. Bruce said in a similar fashion, “When I arrived in the USA at first, I did not have any friends. There were people of my age in the church so I went to the church in order to live happily.” Kurda added:

Because there were many delicious foods. And I wanted to make friends with them. Most important, the majors of the preacher and his wife were the same as mine. I had many questions to ask them.

In the same way Mary said, “I have nothing to do. I wanted to study about Christianity. On the other hand, I went to eat food. In addition, it is good to talk with my schoolmates and learn about their experiences. It is much better than staying at home alone.” Gray concluded that both friendship and knowledge about Christianity were equally important for him as reasons for attending church. “The material reward is friendship. If you need help, perhaps you can find people you trust.” (Gray)

Meanwhile, three out of the six female respondents in the study admired the love among Christians in the church. Olivia said she attended church because she felt the friendliness of people in the church, and she was also impressed with their consideration. She admired the moments when many Christians enjoyed themselves together. She came regularly to join them, and their teaching gradually made her convert. Another male respondent, Gray, also stated that he converted to Christianity because Christians were considerate toward him, and their lives were attractive to him.

I was indifferent to Christians in the past because I thought Christianity was merely their faith, unrelated to myself. However, before my graduation from high school, another group of Christians cared for me which made me desire to understand why they were considerate of me. They accepted me so I confessed that I was a sinner in front of God and I wanted to accept Jesus Christ as my savior. After I made a confession and the decision to believe God, I was baptized

soon. (Gray)

Affective bonds are clearly incentives for newcomers of the church to take the perspective of Christians in the church with whom they interact. Affective ties initiate newcomers to regard Christians as their reference group. For some converts, such as Gray, Kurda, and Olivia, friendship precedes their adoption of a Christian's definition of the situation. Once they have established affective commitment to Chinese Christians, they become more likely to accept Christians' perspective.

Fourteen respondents all agreed that Christians were friendly, and four of them wanted to understand the love among Christians. Also, they tend to be influenced by their consideration or love and define the situation with their perspective. As Shawnee said:

Christians could learn a positive attitude in life if they follow God. They can learn tolerance and love. I have seen this change in other Christians. I thought I wanted to follow God, too, because I was moved easily by their most authentic change. Therefore, when these people I never knew before came to comfort me and continue to encourage me during my sadness in life, I was impressed. Besides, the people in that church were very helpful to me in that period; they always supported me and encouraged me. (Shawnee)

Shawnee's conversion experience began with the love of God transferred through the love of Christians. When she suffered from the death of her grandfather, she felt the love of God through the church. She stated:

Although their words to me could not help me much when my grandfather died, there was an invisible guidance. It was very strange. I met God at that time. Although my grandfather died, I entered the palace of God to learn His words seriously. In my process of study, I might have been scornful or earnest at the beginning, but people in the church influenced me greatly. I saw their change of life after they converted to Christianity. They told me about their witnesses. My schoolmates, such as Kurda, also changed a lot. So I confirmed my resolve and gradually I became sure about my pursuit of Christianity. Finally I believed.

Russell felt the same way: "Because every time I attend church I feel love among people, which is reflected in their lives. I think it is arranged by God, which I had thought

was lucky before.”

After a time rewards in affective bonds influence newcomers to internalize the socially defined reality in the church and be guided by Christians’ perspective. It is important to note that my respondents adapted their definition of friendship to mean love of Christians or love of God. It is amazing how quickly affective bonds change one’s definition of the situation. Through affective bonds to Christians close to them, newcomers sense the change of meanings. What newcomers saw and heard gave them an image of reality even though newcomers tended to underestimate the influence of their significant others. Roxy attended church and made her decision to believe Christianity because she was moved by the love and care from Christians. She described herself as a lucky student, grateful for the unselfish help from her teachers after she arrived in the USA. Also, she was moved by her preacher and his wife because of their unselfish devotion to help her and teach her how to become a good Christian. In addition, she said that she experienced her mother’s witness, which made her believe in God’s invisible help. Roxy highlighted the love from the church,

Their love is more than love from my relatives sometimes. It is very hard to express. When I was in trouble, for example, I moved to another place and needed someone to help me. I called Carroll, and all Christians came to help me move immediately and completed the moving quickly. It can be seen that they care about me frequently, and their care is more than my relatives’ sometimes.

Newcomers gradually replaced their former worldview with the assistance of affective bonds. As they wondered about the origin of Love, they accepted the definition and meaning of Love from Christians. Greg struggled in his academic studies and lost hope and motivation for the future after he came to the USA. He got help with academics from some Chinese Christians in the church and was influenced by them. He continued to

interact with Christians and wondered why they were so considerate of him. As a result, he thought their faith and beliefs might be true. His interaction with Christians became intense, and he learned more about the Bible. However, he also consciously searched for the rewards in his emotional commitments to the church. Although he recognizes himself as a Christian, Greg actively waits for rewards from God. He said “If God will answer my wishes, I will go to be baptized.” Thus, material or spiritual rewards reinforce newcomers’ devotion to Christianity along with affective bonds to Christians.

Help or spiritual support from the church is another factor in Chinese students’ conversion. Russ agreed that he could get help in his life from Christians if he attended church. But, he emphasized that help from Christians was not his main reason for attending church. The reward for Bruce to attend church is a psychological sustenance for him, such as praying when he had troubles. And he could get help and support from the church. He made many friends in his church. Greg also said church was helpful in providing a social network. In sum, social exchange opportunities are sensed by some newcomers in the church, and spiritual support seems to be influential to them.

Half of the fourteen respondents experienced frustration in the process of their conversion. Shawnee experienced frustration after the death of her grandfather and during her emotional problems. She said:

Emotional problems also motivated me to search for the help of God and convert to Christianity. I am a person frequent in dilemma. Sally [preacher’s wife] knew my weakness. She always counseled me. I tried to calm down. Sometimes a sentence in the Bible seemed to teach me how to confront my situation when I participated in the Bible study. I used to drink alcohol on the weekend and tried to make myself drunk and forget something because I was easily influenced by emotional affairs if I was clear-minded. I was very sensitive, and it was difficult to balance my life. I was very miserable and suffered from insomnia before, but now I feel better.

In a similar way, Gray said he converted because he did not know the purpose of his life. He did not know what to do and lost hope for the future. Russ and Bruce agreed that they were frustrated in their academic studies during the process of their conversion. Greg said that he was frustrated by his application for school admission. Odilia admitted that she experienced many frustrations in academics and family affairs before her conversion. All of them searched for comfort or help from the church. Luther indicated that he converted because God answered his prayers about troubles in his family and he wanted to keep the promise he made to God in his prayer. Through frustration, the affective bonds between recruits and Christians are reinforced and recruits are also more likely to define their situation with the perspective of Christianity. Luther said his things were stolen by his roommate before his conversion. Although he disagreed, it affected his conversion; he admitted he reinforced his faith in Christianity and assured his intention to join the church after he met bad people. Russell said he became closer to God every time he experienced frustration.

### Rewards for Attending Church

Eleven respondents said that they attended church for spiritual rewards rather than material rewards. However, another three respondents clearly received material rewards from the church. Social networks and friendships were cited most by my respondents. It is interesting that all respondents refused any economic help from church. Kurda stated that his rewards for attending church included spiritual rewards and feeling more mature. Shawnee and Mary also confessed that there were material rewards and spiritual rewards from attending church.

Mother Chen is good at cooking. This is the biggest material reward. We can enjoy delicious food. A spiritual reward is to learn the words of God and stories in

the Bible. It gives me time to reflect, namely when I'm confronted with something, I will reflect on the real situation and use the knowledge from the Bible in my life. Most of time we can learn. (Shawnee)

Many rewards. First, I can become a better person than before. Second, I can become acquainted with many people and learn from them, such as their experiences. Anyway, many rewards. (Mary)

A spiritual reward from attending church is to know your purpose of life. (Gray)

Mary added that religion helped her understand the meaning of life. Although Shawnee did not receive any economic help from church, she expected economic help from church if she attended the church regularly. Olivia also thought it was helpful to establish a social network by attending church, and she admitted that there were material rewards like food and transportation. However, she emphasized that the friendly atmosphere in the church is the most important reason for her to attend church. Roxy also conceded the existence of material rewards, such as invitations to dinner. However, she preferred to understand material rewards as transmissions of love. Dena also agreed there were economic rewards, such as help when moving. She also said she could have a lot of fun with her Christian friends.

Odilia conceded that there was some kind of material reward in attending church, such as finding a job through the church. But she stressed that material reward could not be received by using the church as a tool intentionally. She agreed that psychological sustenance as the spiritual reward was an important reason to attend church. Levi agreed with her, "There are spiritual rewards that help you calm down to deal with things coolheaded. Besides, there are many Chinese people in the Chinese church. In addition, I have enjoyed more activities since I attended church." Three respondents referred to attending church as a way to relax. As Dena said, "The most important reward is spiritual

relaxation. And you can depend psychologically on your brothers and sisters in the church in the USA.” Luther also said attending church could reduce his pressure, and teachings in the church could inspire him. But, he also denied material rewards and did not expect economic help from the church. Moreover, unlike other respondents who emphasized the traditional doctrines of Christianity, Luther regarded Christian doctrine or values as a way to make good friends and live optimistically. Greg also attended church because he said he could feel peaceful and happy.

I do not think there is material reward unless you are parsimonious. However, there are spiritual rewards to attend church. For example, if you are stressful, you could relax by attending church. If you have trouble in work, academics, family, or confusion, I think you can get help from the Bible as guidance for your life and study. (Greg)

Greg and Odilia were attracted by the protection offered by God. Troubles and difficulties in the life may spur newcomers to search for spiritual help from faith. This process is possible only after they have accepted the definition of the situation by Christianity.

Their witnesses made me attend church. It occurs to me that there is an invisible power to protect Christians or help them succeed because I have seen their harmonious and orderly lives. (Greg)

At that time I encountered many difficulties in life that I could not bear on my own. So, I needed the Lord to overcome difficulties...First, my mother was ill and needed surgery. Second, I had trouble in academics...and I quarreled frequently with my husband. So, we suffered in our lives. We needed another power to protect us. Then we saw many mature Christian couples in the church enjoy a satisfied marriage and amicable family, no matter whether they were rich or poor. It was attractive to me so we attend church regularly. (Odilia)

Levi said in a similar way:

I was moved in the church because I had some trouble in my life, and I could not bear sometimes. So, I chose to pray, and it was really helpful. So, I believed. (Levi)

Greg, Odilia and Levi sensed the different attitudes of Christians, and they were attracted by the rewards for them in the belief of Christianity. Because the rewards are so plentiful for recruits, they become more likely to attend church and interact repeatedly with Christians.

### Significant Others

When I asked them whose opinion was the most important to them, half of my respondents referred to their Christian friends and confessed that these people influenced their conversion. Two of them cited preachers' opinions. They stated that Christians who were regarded as professors or wise men or women influenced them greatly. Kurda and Shawnee regarded the preacher and his wife's or other senior Christians' opinions as important.

During my process of conversion, some persons, especially one or two, influenced me greatly....They are professors. (Kurda)

People with wisdom in church. If I have a question, I will ask them. Like Sally [preacher's wife], she always gives me suggestions of life. Because I am a faltering person, I always hesitate and regret it after I have done something. So, I suffer from burdens and unhappiness. As a psychological expert, Sally came to comfort me. Like Nicholas and Lillie [other Chinese Christians in her church], they are very erudite and unobtrusive. So, if I have a question, I will ask them for advice. I will consider it. Most of the time I will calm down and read the Bible to find any inspiration. (Shawnee)

Russell agreed, "Opinions of the pastor and his wife are rather important to me, but it is based on the Bible." Roxy was proselytized by her friends, a preacher, and a professor in her university and his wife. And she stated that she was influenced by Christians close to her.

My mother and Morty and Sally and many people in the church care about me. It makes me see the differences between Christians and ordinary people. Their unselfish love affected me. (Roxy)

Mary added:

Parents' opinions are important to me. But in the USA teachers' opinions count. Although I do not pay much attention to others' opinions, the viewpoints of people in the church about me are highly important. If they think I am excellent, I will be happy because it is a positive assertion on me.

Mary also said the teachers in the Chinese church influenced her conversion. "If I study by myself, I will be weak and deviate from Christianity, so I go to Bible study with Christians. Then I feel I am bad and incorrect and need to learn from them."

Mary also stated:

I feel I will deviate from God if I stop attending church and interacting with brothers and sisters. I had even shaken my faith in Christianity because I must go to work during that period. I doubted about my faith because I seldom went to church during that period.

She said she rejected the job offer this semester so as to attend church regularly again because she felt wrong about her doubt. She agreed that she wanted to be like her Christian friends who she regarded as her teachers before she converted.

I want to learn. And they have expectations of me. The teachers in the church hope I can teach a chapter of the Bible. So I want to go the church. I do not want to make them disappointed because Teachers Zhang and other members expect much of me. As intimate friends, I want only to make them satisfied. And I feel I could tell them anything in my heart. They will not laugh at me or deride me. Instead, they will patiently analyze my misconduct and give me some good advice. They are very kind. (Mary)

I note that Mary has strong emotional commitment to Christians in her church and takes their attitude seriously. Gradually Christians who interact with recruits will become their significant others. It is not surprising that recruits are deeply influenced by the attitudes and expectations of their Christian friends toward the self.

Like Mary, recruits are guided by the perspective of Christians in defining their situations and taking action. Kurda also stated that he was baptized because one of his

Christian friends, the preacher's wife, suggested to him to be baptized. He accepted Christianity because he wanted to learn about God.

Remembering him [his friend] is one of my reasons. Besides, Sally suggested to me that I be baptized because Christians should be baptized. Both of them motivated me to be baptized. (Kurda)

Kurda said, "I was baptized in order to remember one friend. At that time, I did not understand baptism very much. I did not know the importance of baptism. So I did not have a strong conception of the meaning when I was baptized." It occurs to me that the expectation of his Christian friend prompted Kurda to be baptized, and he was strongly affected by his Christian friends.

Thus, not only the teachers in the church were taken as significant others, but Christian friends also affected converts. As Shawnee stated:

I was influenced by Christians in the church. They are people who guided me to this road and helped me along this road. I saw my friends change a lot after their conversion. I thought Kurda influenced me greatly because we came to this university at the same time. My impression of him changed a great deal after he converted. His personality and attitude toward life improved. I felt his change also came from God. He really learned something from God.

Like Shawnee, Mary also admitted that her friendship with people in the Chinese church greatly influenced her conversion and motivated her to study Christianity. Mary told me that her Christian friends in the Chinese church thought that she had grown up and become more mature. She agreed that she wanted to be virtuous in their eyes. Odilia added:

Opinions of a sister in my church were most important to me at that time [before her conversion]. I think she is a good Christian. Her husband is also kind. But I talked with her more. Her opinion about me is significant. They have moved to Minnesota. I still talk with her frequently. I will phone her when I have happiness or difficulties.

Olivia also stated that her decision to believe in God was influenced more or less

by her friends, and she planned to be baptized when her understanding of Christianity qualified to some extent. Levi admitted that he was influenced by people close to him, and he agreed that he believed in Christianity because of his Christian friends or acquaintances to some extent.

Because my wife is a Christian, I converted very quickly. Because my wife was ill, I went to the church frequently and interacted with many Christians so I was attracted by something in these Christians. (Levi)

Levi did not know how his church counterparts felt about him. But he said he became closer to his friends in church as he had expected. Meanwhile, Odilia, Luther and Bruce also stated that opinions of their friends encouraged them to behave as Christians.

I was greatly influenced by one of my Christian friends who is mature in spirit. She exerted a strong influence on my conversion. I think most of her opinions are correct. She is different from novice Christians with simple ideas who converted for a short time. Before I believed in the Lord, her viewpoints were important to me. (Odilia)

Some brothers and sisters said my spirit was gifted. Certainly I was very happy. I was glad about their opinions of me because sometimes I feel I am not really qualified. (Bruce)

People close to me had influenced me to some extent, but not much. Their words and behaviors indeed influenced me. Like Kurda, they influenced me on the way to deal with people and inspired me to imitate them. (Luther)

In addition, Luther told me honestly that he was baptized because his friends always urged him to join the church. Luther also repeated his Christian friend many times. He wanted to be a good guy, like his Christian friend, Kurda. He said, "I only know I must be a righteous person and try my best to be like Kurda."

Moreover, Gray and Russell also admitted that they were influenced by Christians close to them. Gray had seen virtue and morality in the behavior of Christians. Russell said that his conversion was influenced by his friends or acquaintances whom he knew

very well. “If I thought Christianity were superstition, why do people in America doing research like I who are not more unintelligent than I believe in it? They indeed influenced me. I must learn about the reason why they are Christians.”

Unlike other respondents, Russ regarded God as his significant other.

Before I believed in the Lord, my father’s opinion was most important to me. However, after I was involved in Christianity, it became God’s viewpoint that is important to me. Teaching and words of God are my ultimate principles. Anything contrary to these is incorrect. (Russ)

On the other hand, Greg thought his own opinions were important. “My opinions are most important to me. Opinions of people in church seem not to be very important for me.”

Dena said she used to accept everything told her by the church.

I am sort of objective now. Actually I evaluate teaching of the church with an objective and fairly critical attitude. I do not accept everything totally. However, I accepted their teaching absolutely when I was a novice....I accepted absolutely before because the main idea was really so correct that human beings do not emerge by chance. It is full of purpose and meanings. (Dena)

As I expected, newcomers’ Christian friends exert influences on them. Proper attitudes and Christians’ meaning systems transfer to recruits by interaction. Shawnee told me about another experience that impressed her greatly and made her believe that people would convert as she had. Her Christian friends in her church were always told by their Chinese friends who scorned Christianity that they converted at last. Shawnee concluded:

So, this is an example. It may not be the time for some people to hear the gospel or be moved by the words of God so they did not believe. Some people heard the gospel and knew some words of God, but these words did not work yet, but there will be a seed in their hearts. One day, if they encounter big difficulties, perhaps they will remember there is a God in this world and pray to Him. Gradually they may enter the church one day.

She added that these things were heard from her Christian friends. Shawnee's expectation is normal among Christians and taught in the Bible study. Also her expectation reflected her own experience in conversion. Shawnee added she was attracted by the special attitudes to live among Christians. She told me:

I think it is like gambling. Even if there is no God, we will not lose if we have once believed in God. You can gain more understanding and the right way to live and improvement of life. So, you can gain many things during the process of learning the words of God. So, I think it will not be an investment failure, but a good psychological investment.

Because I observed this quotation in the Bible study, I asked her if she had learned this from other people. Shawnee admitted that she heard it from other Christians and had also told other people. In a similar way, Olivia said she made her decision to believe in God because she was told by Christians to experience their destiny after death. Thus, it is not surprising that Olivia who came from the same church as Shawnee shared the same idea.

### Affective Bonds and Rewards in Prayers

Thirteen out of the fourteen respondents said they were moved by prayer the first time they prayed. Six respondents stated that they were moved by other Christians' prayers for them before their conversion. They explained that they were moved by prayers because they sensed love from Christians. Prayers improve friendship between recruits and Christians.

Because I think it is an expression of love...I am moved by their real affections because I feel their confidence and love are from God. That is why it is so great...Through their prayer I feel our friendship is strong. In the church we are called as brothers and sisters. Really like a family, we care and help each other as brothers and sisters. (Shawnee)

I am quite moved. When my husband and I suffered from many difficulties, there were many brothers and sisters praying for us. I was quite comforted in my heart.

(Odilia)

Because their prayers for me come from their love, especially when I did not know them yet. I felt their love in the church. (Russell)

However, only a new convert, Greg, said he was seldom moved by prayers for him.

### Rewards in Prayers

It is interesting to notice that eleven respondents prayed for the first time to ask for rewards from God. Eight of them had troubles in their lives. Four of them prayed for academics, while one prayed first for a family member.

It is helpful because God has helped me achieve my prayers. (Bruce)

I needed to pray to God because of problems in a romantic relationship. (Kurda)

It (the first prayer) must be prayer for a good score in school. (Luther)

Prayed for examination. (Olivia)

For success in examination. (Gray)

When I received the first admission, it was the first time that I was grateful to God, and I prayed to thank Him. (Greg)

Before I came to the USA, my mother suggested I pray to God. I did not know what God was, but I thought my mother's God might help me if He helped my mother. So, I talked to Him. I prayed that He could take me to the USA successfully. (Roxy)

When my grandfather died, I prayed to God seriously that I wanted to meet my grandfather for the last time even though I had not considered becoming a Christian until that moment. I prayed to God because there was no one I could beg to when I lost all my hope. (Shawnee)

Three of them prayed first for confession and forgiveness of God. Based on my observations, recruits redefine themselves to respond to Christians close to them.

At the moment I believed in the Lord, I prayed that I could grow mature in His spirit and learn more about Him and He could let me return to China as soon as possible. (Mary)

In 2002, at the moment I believed in God, I prayed for His forgiveness about my misconducts. (Russ)

I prayed for the first time perhaps when I was in trouble. No, it should be the moment when I made confession according to the guidance of the pastor. I prayed that the Holy Spirit might enter my heart and I would like to accept Him as my Savior. This is the first time I prayed. (Russell)

Odilia told me that she could not remember her first prayer, but she said she gradually prayed to God since she attended church. In a similar way, Dena prayed with Christians when she first entered the church.

The helpfulness of prayer was emphasized by my respondents. Twelve out of fourteen respondents believed in its helpfulness. In addition, seven respondents had high expectations that their prayers would be answered by God.

It must be helpful. I cannot say God will guarantee me 100%, but I feel God will show you a way thought correct by God. (Levi)

Prayer is very helpful. But personal effort is essential to achieve a dream. Our principal action should be consistent with the doctrine of God. Honestly, although I am a Christian, I still want to pursue my dream of wealth. I like money, I also like a comfortable life, but it depends on the way I choose to get my goals. In the past I preferred a popular standard of behavior, an immoral standard of behavior which is disliked by God. Now I do these things with doctrines of Christianity and the standard of God to achieve my goals. (Kurda)

Luther added that the proper method of prayer was an important step to achieve the desired outcome. Bruce agreed that prayers and diligence were both necessary to realize dreams. For Shawnee, prayer is not only helpful but also brings her happiness.

Prayer is helpful though you may not see the result. I think it is a comforter of the heart. You can get peace. Sometimes when I pray for my friend, not only for myself, I will feel happy and joyful. Besides, prayer is the time to get close to God. I tell Him about my distress or praise Him. (Shawnee)

Luther, Roxy, Gray and Mary added that prayer relaxed them.

Sometimes, prayer helps me to reduce pressure. Again, I believe sincerity will be efficacious. Sometimes it is really efficacious. (Luther)

Prayer soothes my heart and tells God about my wish I do not know how to express. People always experience misery or happiness. When burden comes, I think God will help you if you pray because misery is also a kind of love. (Roxy)

Helpful. Prayer helps me and God know my needs....If I do not speak out, God will not notice. Prayer also supplies me with an person to tell and to reduce the repression of reality. (Mary)

Prayer is helpful to pass your burden to God and know more about the opinion of God. (Gray)

Dena thought prayer enabled her to know her needs. “Most important, prayer is a process of self-reflection sometimes. You can know more about your needs and wishes. Then God will help you so it is doubly effective.” In addition, three respondents stressed communication with God through prayer.

For the growth of a Christian, prayer is important. (Greg)

The most helpful reward of prayer is to communicate with God. When you open your heart to talk with God, you actually clean the dust off your heart. It is a process of purification, purification of your spirit. (Russ)

Prayer is communication, as communication between people, between parents and relatives. It is necessary to pray every day if the relation with God has been established. Of course, rewards exist. For example, friends will depart from each other without contact. If you do not acknowledge Him, He will not acknowledge you. Surely I desire the chance to communicate with Him because He loves us and gives us a lot of things. I pray for many things, and I know He has arrangements for me no matter whether or not my wishes are accepted. (Levi)

I noted that these converts learned the meaning and the function of prayer gradually with help from the church. Recruits define prayer as a request for rewards from God before they are taught the proper expectations about prayers. With the teaching of the church, recruits begin to define prayer as a way to communicate with God. They wait for God’s plans for them and do not worry about whether or not their prayers are answered. Recruits learn the personality of God through prayer under the instruction of

the church. As Odilia explained, she did not focus on her communication with God and her growth in God until she learned from the church and her experience about the proper expectation about prayer.

Prayer is the way to communicate with God. No matter whether or not the Lord answers your prayers, we should not focus on this. The Lord has His own will and arrangement. It is essential to bring our wishes to His throne and let the Lord see our needs and know our dependence. This is told by my church. I did not have that viewpoint from beginning. I used to hope strongly that my prayers would come true. But, after I experienced more, I found the Lord did not answer me every time. Rewards from the Lord are more than I can imagine, not only what I need.

Mary shared a similar belief about prayer. She also thought prayer was important to tell God about her wishes, but a wish may not come true because God may not think it is good for her. She also admitted her expectation was learned from the church and the Bible. Their understandings of prayer are similar. Even though Odilia and Mary clearly understood that prayers may not be answered, they believed prayer was very helpful.

Many prayers will not become real. However, praying will bring me peace. Though some prayers, I could clarify what I should do to deal with an affair and how to change my problem. (Kurda)

In a similar manner, Shawnee stated, "Prayer could give me peace, peace of mind and confidence to take action to achieve my dream." Gray agreed with her.

Prayer is helpful for a dream. You need to tell God about your expectations, and you also should know your expectation may not be guaranteed by God.

Russell thought prayers could improve his relationship with God, but he did not think prayers would always be answered because God's plan may be different. Russ agreed that prayer is very important and transferred a correct attitude from God. Odilia expected God would be happy if people prayed to Him. However, she said that the method of praying was not important. Dena said diligence was more important and God would bless our

diligence. However, new converts denied the importance of prayer. Levi stated that prayer was necessary to achieve a dream. Greg also said he relied on himself and he did not trust the power of prayer. Therefore, learning the meaning and function of prayer is progressive and depends on the intensity of interaction with Christians' and recruits' emotional commitment to Christians.

#### Talk with God by Prayer

When I asked how these converts knew they could talk with God, Kurda stated that prayer was a method to express his emotion to God and he was happy once he talked things out in prayer. He did not know whether or not God heard him. In a similar manner, Olivia thought prayer was about telling God her wishes. Different from Kurda and Olivia, Shawnee said she was told that God was beside them if six persons prayed together. She added "I really believe I can talk with God, and I believe He can hear everything I said. Before my baptism maybe I wasn't as confident as now, but I have become more confident since my baptism." Gray learned from church that, "Prayer is a right of Christians to talk with God." Greg also said that he was taught by the church and Bible study groups to talk with God through prayers. Levi believed that God is magnificent enough to hear his prayer. Mary and Russell also believed that they can talk with God through prayer.

Luther said he told his wishes to God when he prayed. If one of his wishes came true, he would think it was sometimes because of God. He thought he was not faithful enough to attribute all his achievement to God. Likewise, Bruce believed he could talk with God because his prayers had been answered. Dena said she merely believed she cannot talk with God unless her prayer was answered. Odilia did not know whether she

had talked with God by prayer. She said her spiritual life was not good enough. Thus, converts' confidence in God almost always comes from the converts' reference group. Because converts cannot describe God by themselves, they can only get a clue about God from their reference group. Interaction with Christians is important to establish a solid image of God in the mind of recruits. If their wishes come true, recruits' confidence in God will be reinforced.

### Holy Spirit

The pattern continues in converts' description of the Holy Spirit. Converts believe in the Holy Spirit, not because they can feel it or describe it but rather because they accept Christians' definition and description of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit turns out to be a social reality to converts through their interaction with Christians. As Kurda stated, "I cannot say I have ever felt the Holy Spirit. I cannot say what the Holy Spirit is like. But I believe in the Holy Spirit was with me once I made confession and was baptized according to the doctrine of the Bible." Mary also cannot describe the Holy Spirit, and she only knew the Holy Spirit was in her after her confession because the church told her it was. On the other hand, Roxy commented, "It is a mysterious thing for me. When I was moved or inspired or intended to make a mistake, invisibly there was something to forbid me to do it and make me aware of the immorality of my intention." Odilia said that she did not know the feeling of the Holy Spirit. She thought she felt the Holy Spirit when she was moved by teaching of the Bible study or hymns. Shawnee stated that she had often felt the Holy Spirit because her friend in the church told her that she would feel moved if the Holy Spirit were in her heart.

My friend in church said I was moved when I saw people praising God or glorifying God because of the Holy Spirit in my heart, and I feel guilty and

embarrassed when I am doing something inconsistent with the opinion of God. It is also because of the Holy Spirit in my heart. (Shawnee)

Russell and Dena had an opinion similar to Shawnee's.

I think I could feel some voice from the Holy Spirit, a familiar voice coming out from the words of the Bible, such as "do not judge others" or "be amicable with brothers and sisters," or "do not quarrel." (Russell)

It occurs to me that the Holy Spirit sometimes urges me to do something or not to do something, but I never feel it talks with me. (Dena)

Shawnee, Dena and Russell viewed their socially created selves as the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, converts also find that awareness of the Holy Spirit comes through their experiences. However, Russ doubted this: "This is a tricky question. It is hard to say because I do not know if I was moved by the Holy Spirit or thought it by myself."

Meanwhile, Bruce said that he had experienced the Holy Spirit. He has seldom been frustrated since he arrived in the United States. He ascribed that to the protection of God.

In the opinion of another four respondents, the Holy Spirit is too vague to be perceived. Olivia was unsure, "I'm unsure whether or not I have felt it ever, but I do not know the feeling." Greg agreed. Moreover, Luther and Levi said they never felt the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to note that Greg and Levi are new converts. It supports the idea that conversion is progressive and determined by the intensity of interaction with Christians.

### Witness and Hymns

Witness is the public profession of a Christian's experience concerning one's faith and is used to proselytize the nonreligious. Half of the fourteen respondents preferred to believe in Christians' witnesses before their conversion. Russ also said that he believed in Christians' witnesses before he believed in God. Dena and Russell said they believed

most of the witnesses since the beginning of their church attendance. Mary stated that she was very moved by Christians' witnesses and prayers before her conversion. Luther explained that he believed sincerity brought efficaciousness. Roxy believed in the existence in witness of God through her parents' and other people's witnesses. Levi told me that he believed in witness after he had read a book about the witness of a Chinese dissident on how he fled while being hunted by the Chinese government. Gray said that he tended to understand other Christians' personal experiences with God although he used not to believe some of their experiences. Nonetheless, belief in witness precedes belief in Christianity because people are more likely to take the perspective of others with whom they interact. Through the experience of Christians, recruits establish religious knowledge and its interpretation and apply it to their own lives. As Greg stated:

Their witnesses could be divided into two categories. On the one hand, they may witness through their lives. If I see it, then I believe. I can discover through their lives and behaviors an explanation of why they do it. Thus, I will believe his God is real. However, on the other hand, I have heard some witnesses told by others that are similar to believers of other religions. I think this category cannot be used as the foundation of faith.

Odilia agreed:

I believed in the guidance of Christ in Christians' witnesses and changing of their lives and personalities and families....I did not believe it from the beginning. Actually at first I used to doubt them. However, after continual interaction with them and the difficulties confronted in my life, I began to pray to God. And, I felt the reliability of God after I had established a relationship with Him.

### Hymns

Hymns could be understood as recitation of someone's witness. All of my respondents liked to sing hymns. They admired the beauty of hymns. Five of the six female respondents said that hymns brought them happiness and peace.

Hymns soothe my mood and help me express love to God, no matter whether in

English or Chinese. I like to sing hymns because I can express my feelings and emotion. (Roxy)

Some hymns are very beautiful. I sing hymns with other people in the preacher's house every Friday. There is an unseen power to cheer me up and relax me after singing hymns. It encourages me. Hymns are not only a good way to praise God but also a way to bring me comfort and happiness. (Shawnee)

Very beautiful. I feel warm hearted after singing. Words in hymns are beautiful. I like to listen and sing. (Mary)

Dena felt hymns brought her happiness, too. She said that God would be happy if we sang to Him. Sometimes Odilia also felt hymns could express her ideas. And she felt comfortable and closer to God after singing hymns.

Some lyrics are beautiful, such as Wildflowers. That hymn is consoling. We drifted in a foreign country without any foundation here, uncertain about the future. But actually if God could protect wildflowers and arrange for you, surely He will protect our lives. That is why the words we sang soothed me. (Odilia)

Likewise, Luther stated, "The simplest answer, beautiful songs...give me a sense of belonging." As I noted in my observations, recruits take the roles of the protagonists while singing hymns to praise God. As a consequence, they could take the perspective of the hymn to define their situation. Recruits, like Odilia, transfer their mood to the object in the hymn and, thus, get rewarded with the love of God. Greg said that he was also aware that people would be moved when they sang hymns. But he noted, "However, this sensation is natural for humans, and it may appear while we sing other songs. I do not think this is the power of the Holy Spirit. But I think singing hymns and praising God are quite different. If your heart is not ready, you are merely singing songs." He also said that he was moved because some expressions in hymns matched his mood of that day or talked out his viewpoints. Russell added:

I like hymns. But I did not like them before my confession. I used to be intolerant with hymns because they were not consistent with my viewpoint. However, I can

sing out proudly since I have learned more about Christianity and truth in the meaning of hymns.

Russell thought singing hymns was a good way to construct a relationship with God and be closer to God through praise. Sometimes he was moved to cry and felt grateful because he made confession and decided to believe in God. He could recollect moments when he encountered trouble and how God guided him to success. However, as a new convert, Levi liked some, but not all, hymns. He liked hymns with beautiful melodies. He was not interested in lyrics that did not impress him. It seems that it is harder for men than women to take the perspective of the protagonist in the hymn because most hymns are expressive, which men may resist at first. However, if male recruits have accepted the meaning and gotten used to the perspective of Christians, they will be positive about hymns. As Kurda said, "Some hymns correctly reflect my glorification of God." Besides, Gray and Bruce said hymns made them closer to God. Russ agreed:

Hymns are like prayers and are also a process of spirit purification. Many hymns are very beautiful. God also required us to praise Him by hymns. Music could touch your heart in depth, which could not be touched by thinking.

As noted in my observations, recruits sang hymns to internalize norms and responses to symbols of Christianity. They learned to express their feelings in accordance with the Bible. As I expected, recruits really felt the hymn singing was for them and felt the response described in the song.

## CHAPTER VII

### FINDINGS: ADAPTATION TO THE VALUE OF CHRISTIANITY

Learning the conception of sin is very important for Chinese students' conversion. Eight out of the fourteen respondents accepted the definition of sin and confessed their sin before they decided to believe in Christianity. This step is essential for the nonreligious to possess a positive attitude about studying Christianity. These respondents were aware of their sin before believing in Christianity. They stated that they could not realize their sin in China, but they confessed their sin after they were taught about the Bible by Christians. Shawnee stated that her belief in sin was learned when she entered the church.

I am a sinner according to the Bible. It does not mean I am a murderer or an arsonist. But, indeed everyone commits misconduct every day, such as lying, plagiarizing, or laziness. Actually they are all sins, light or heavy. Nevertheless, they are enough to make everyone a sinner. (Shawnee)

Similar to Shawnee, Mary confessed her sins before she believed in God because she thought she was imperfect. In addition, Russ, Greg and Gray also confessed their sins before they believed in God. Greg stated, "I am a sinner. When I first came upon Christianity, I did not believe in it, but I accepted its definition of sin. Then I accepted God." Kurda also stated, "I am a sinner; I knew after I met Christians." He added,

Then one time, when I studied Christianity, I found the emphasis of sin in Christianity was more than any explanation of sin in other religions. As time passed, I remembered when I did something wrong one day, I felt I was blamed by my conscience, great blame from my conscience. Before I met Christianity, I never experienced that degree of blame in China even though I had done it before. When I was blamed extremely by my conscience and realized my sin, I

needed to search for help. As a coincidence, on that day when I felt guilty of my sin, the preacher asked us what we wanted to say. So, I told him I needed someone to forgive my sin; I needed my sin to be forgiven. Then he asked me to make a prayer to decide to believe in Christ. After I completed my prayer to decide to believe, I felt my guilt considerably lessened, but it did not mean I would not feel guilty any longer. Since then I have been sensitive to sin, not in form, but sin of personality. When I found things contrary to the principles in the Bible, I became very sensitive to those things. I tried to fight with my sin as my understanding was enhanced, but I found I cannot resist the production of my sin, including hatred, resentment, envy, pride, and many other sins. However, I found Jesus Christ was able to pardon my sin. He could reduce my feeling of sin and help decrease my intention to commit sin, and gradually he reduced my crime and guilty behavior. As a result, my understanding of Christianity improved, and I became closer and closer to Christianity.”(Kurda)

Kurda’s experience is typical among converts. Recruits learn the meaning of sin and the attitude of Christians toward sin and interpret their environment through the perspective of Christians. They have learned the definition of sin according to the Bible. At the same time recruits take Christians as their reference group. As a consequence, their attitude toward themselves changed. Through interaction with Christians, recruits establish a truth based on Christianity. They redefine their previous experiences. As Odilia stated,

I confess that I am a sinner. I have realized it since I went to hear sermon in the church. I was also clear about plenty of my wrongdoings before. I have known that I often did not behave well before I learned about Christianity. Everyone has shameful or disgraceful experiences and feels guilty about them. After I believed in the Lord and knew the conception of sinner and the meaning of sin, I connected them with my former experiences.

Once they made confession to Christ and decided to believe, they went to church frequently and regarded attending church as a duty. Kurda reported that he did not spend all his time in the church and did not believe every aspect of Christianity until he made his decision to believe in Christ. He also admitted that he converted gradually. Russell’s behavior was similar.

I have felt I am a sinner since I put up my hand to make confession and made the decision to believe in God. I was aware that I used to take action for myself

before improving my status or grades. I seldom admitted that I was a bad guy. But after I confessed my sin, the church became the center of my activities.  
(Russell)

In addition, Greg felt he changed somewhat after confession. First, he would tell people that he was a Christian, and second, he became sensitive to sin. Dena said she learned to believe in God and her sin at the same time. Luther thought that he was a sinner after he committed misconduct, not from birth. Confession is a rather important moment for recruits to assure their status as a sinner. Their self image as sinner is constructed through interaction with Christians, on Christians' attitudes and responses toward them. Through Christians' evaluation of them, recruits view themselves as sinners and, thus, change their judgments of themselves.

Moreover, recruits are surrounded by the boundaries of Christian meaning systems and confined to effective communication with Christians rather than other reference groups. When I asked them whether they had studied the history and doctrines or theology of Christianity, most of them said that they had learned very little. They merely learned content in the Bible from various Bible study groups or sermons in the Sunday worship. Ten out of the fourteen respondents said that they learned teachings only from Christians. Four respondents said that they learned the history, doctrines, and theology of Christianity after they had made confession and had decided to believe in Christianity. Kurda, Gray, and Shawnee learned the Bible stories from other Christians during the Bible study. Shawnee also told me she learned Christianity from her brothers and sisters in the church and the Bible study after she became Christian. In a similar way, Russ said that he did not learn theology, doctrines, and history until he believed in God. Russ and Levi learned these in the church after they made confession and the decision to

believe in God. All of these were taught by Chinese Christians. Gray also reported that he had learned the history of Christianity and essential doctrines after he believed in God. After other Christians made the suggestion, he read the history for himself.

Also, Bruce said that he did not learn theology, doctrines, and history systematically. Some of these he learned from a workshop arranged by American Chinese churches. He had participated in fellowship and worship for many years before that. Odilia and Mary agreed,

I haven't studied these systematically. I merely joined in Bible study groups to learn content in the Bible. (Odilia)

I haven't learned [history and doctrines and theology]. I have studied the Bible but not the history of Christianity. I haven't learned Christianity systematically. I have only studied what the church taught me....I learned stories of the Bible from teachers in the Chinese church here. (Mary)

Most respondents have participated in the Chinese Christian church because they have a sense of belonging to an ethnic Chinese church. As Odilia stated,

My husband and I went to American churches for a period. Their teaching was good, but we did not have a sense of belonging there, like guests. It is a very big church served by many volunteers. We did not need to do anything; we went and left so we came back to the Chinese church. By serving people of the church and serving God by serving people, you can establish profound relationship with brothers and sisters in the church and, thus, produce a sense of belonging to our host church. (Odilia)

Moreover, the teachings of the church reinforce the plausibility structure of meaning. Several respondents said that the teachings of the church were necessary for them to understand the Bible. As Odilia said, she may not understand some content in the Bible and needs explanations from senior Christians in the fellowship. She feels she does not understand fully even now. Kurda also stated he consulted other Christians about the history, doctrines, and theology of Christianity. However, Greg and Luther said that they

learned some by themselves except for the teachings of the church. But Greg admitted that some stories cannot be understood without the teaching of the church. The explanation about the Bible provided by the church strengthens the humble attitude of recruits toward Christianity and willingness to be guided by the perspectives of the church on Christianity. In my observations the teachings of the church are seen perfectly in their responses, “You should change the attitude and admit that you do not understand, but you are ready to open your heart.”

### Belief and Doctrines

Seven out of the eight male respondents, including Bruce, Gray, Luther, Greg, Kurda, Levi, and Russ, stated that they learned Christian doctrines after believing in Christianity. However, Russell learned doctrines of Christianity before he believed in God. He participated in the Bible study before he made confession because he wanted to know more. Based on his own observations, he felt Christians were brilliant people. So he wanted to know why they believed in Christianity and prayer, which he thought stupid.

Unlike male converts, female converts stated that they had learned some doctrines before they believed in Christianity. Mary said that she continually learned Christian doctrines in the Chinese church after she arrived in the USA. She added that faith was constructed on knowledge of doctrines. Another four female respondents agreed.

Yes. I went to the Bible study before I believed in God. (Odilia)

Maybe I had been taught some doctrines before I make confession and the decision to believe. (Olivia)

I struggled and vacillated between faith and my former belief and then learned some doctrines before I believed in Christianity. (Dena)

Most doctrines were learned after I believed in Christianity....Before my baptism I went to church regularly and joined in their Bible study in the stage to learn it. I

should say I did not know very much. After baptism I continued to learn. So, now I know more but still very little about things needed to study because the Bible could tell you a lot of things. I have learned very little. I was baptized not because I had understood it but because I was moved and wanted to pursue it and decided to believe in it. (Shawnee)

However, Roxy stated that she did not learn doctrines but learned some stories before she believed in Christianity. It seems that male converts do not internalize the doctrine of Christianity until they recognize their status as believers. Furthermore, most women are more sensitive to the environment and more likely to be influenced by the attitudes and expectations of people close to them. It is also easier for women to interact effectively with Christians and construct affective bonds with them. Thus, women accept doctrines of Christianity faster than do men.

#### Taking the Perspective of the Bible

When I asked my respondents why they thought the Bible was truth, their answers varied. However, most of them stated the Bible interpreted everything in their lives. The Bible is truth because the Bible explains everything. Recruits will come to believe in the Bible when they apply the perspective of the Bible to explain their experiences and are rewarded by the explanation. Kurda agreed that the Bible taught him many ways to handle his affairs. He added, “When I experienced miseries and happiness, I felt words in the Bible were the ultimate principle for me, which guided me to experience miseries and happiness. I found that words in the Bible interpreted everything I experienced in this world.”

Olivia had a similar opinion of the Bible. Having learned from Bible study, namely from other Christians, she thought that explanations in the Bible for some kinds of thing were reasonable. Luther also stated that he believed sincerity brought

efficaciousness. He cannot explain what has happened in his life, and he cannot find the reason with all his efforts. So, he chose to attribute what has happened in his life to Christianity and the Lord. He agreed that he understood issues that he could explain with Christianity, and his method was taught by others after his baptism. Luther emphasized that he believed in God because he needed explanations. Rather than believing the Bible totally, he only believed in the true part of the Bible. He insisted on the old Chinese proverb that truth and virtue and beauty were true. In addition, when I asked why he chose Christianity, he said he did not want to be forbidden eating pork. Kurda also agreed. Thus, the doctrines of Christianity were reasonable in their minds.

Luther said he had doubted Christianity when he met dishonest Christians. Likewise, Dena believed the Bible was true because of the prophecies and morality described in it. It is evident that recruits like Luther found explanations for and validation of their behaviors from the Bible through the teachings of the church. Thus, it is obvious that converts' reference groups determine how converts think about the Bible. When Shawnee and Roxy explained their reason for believing in the Bible, they clearly referred to other people's opinions. Shawnee believed in Christianity not because Bible was truth but because other people told her that it was truth.

Because many people do not believe in the Bible and many people are demonstrating it, I am willing to believe despite the fact that I cannot demonstrate it by myself. Besides, there are many facts I know. I can use them to testify. The author of *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* spent plenty of time to research the Bible and finally converted to Christianity. Thus, in spite of controversies between theism and atheism all along and their disbelief in the resurrection of Jesus, it cannot influence me very much. Personally, I will believe in it once I have chosen to believe though I am unable to attest to it. (Shawnee)

Roxy explained that she believed in the Bible for three reasons. First, she knew the ancientness of the Bible. Second, there were many people who were moved by the

Bible and believed in it. Last, she thought she should accept the Bible as truth through her study and the teachings of preachers. In a similar manner, Russell believed that the Bible was truth because he thought that although the Bible was written by different authors, it was consistent. On the other hand, recruits take Christians as their reference group before they believe in the Bible. Recruits learn from Christians to discard their former perspectives. Recruits are taught that they cannot understand the Bible with their previous perspectives. Gray stressed that there was nothing in the Bible that he did not believe, and there were only things he cannot understand.

It was very hard for me to believe in the resurrection of Jesus before. I tried to open my mind and accept the fact. (Gray)

Russ also said it was a very long process for him to believe that the Bible is the truth, and he came to believe by studying little by little with his counterparts and the help of his church. He admitted that he had doubted the truth of Christianity, but he said that is why he studied it. He stated that his doubts were dispelled by the teaching of the pastor. Bruce said he believed the Bible was the truth because he had read many Christian books. He also said he had doubted the truth of Christianity and he dispelled his doubts by the teaching of the church and the Bible. Odilia believed in most of the Bible. Some details in the Bible that were unrelated to modern times were difficult for her to understand.

Therefore, taking the perspective of the Bible is a long process. New converts tend to apply their previous perspectives to interpret the Bible so the teachings of the church are important to help them discard their previous perspectives. Greg grasped the theme of the Bible but did not believe in every word in the Bible. He said he did not agree with old interpretations of the Bible. He also did not accept the abstract content in the Bible or some orthodox interpretations of the Bible. He was unsure whether every

word in the Bible was true because he was unable to investigate.

I think it was the world and humans that Jesus saved, but he did not say we should continue to obey previous laws; thus, I think it is stupid for modern people to live like Pharisees. But, I don't mean we can indulge ourselves. I think I still judge according to what I have learned before. I probably do not accept everything told by others. (Greg)

Although recruits take the perspective of the Bible gradually, their belief in sin is fixed, as noted earlier. It is important for recruits to take a positive attitude to learn the Bible under the instruction of the church. Levi did not know much about the value of Christianity, but he believed the Bible was the truth.

I believe in the truth of the Bible because I can accept what I have seen and learned up to the present time. Certainly it is possible for me to find something I cannot agree with after I learn more about Christianity. Nevertheless, I thought I was a sinner before I believed in God. It is true that everyone has sinned because it is impossible for a person not to make mistakes from childhood. I know it more or less. (Levi)

### Reducing Doubt

Most respondents read the Bible and interacted with Christians to reduce their doubt. They also emphasized that it was important to open their minds to accept Christianity without denial, and they recognized their previous perspectives were inadequate for understanding Christianity. Converts tended to define Christianity as difficult to understand. Their belief in the Bible preceded their understanding of it. Because they gave up understanding it with their former perspectives, taking the perspective of the Bible taught by the church was their only choice. Gray and Greg had doubts about the Bible. As Gray stated, "I read the Bible and learned about the facts in it. I suspect I do not understand. But, after you have learned, you are able to understand." Bruce agreed, "God is the truth. I did not think so before I knew God and made confession and the decision to believe in God because I did not know Him.... Through

churches and Gospel camps, I have known God.” Russell had doubts about the Bible and denied it, but he did not doubt after his baptism.

There is nothing unbelievable in the Bible for me. There are only words that were incomprehensible for me in the beginning and became understandable later. Like ordinary study, I may not understand in spite of reading and learning many times, especially when I have my own opinion in my mind. If I persist in my own opinion, I will fail to understand no matter how I study it. I am able to understand Him only when I am close to God and abandon my own opinion and listen to His teaching modestly. I cannot learn by myself after reading it many times. The Bible is rather difficult to learn. (Russell)

Kurda agreed with Russell:

After I made confession to Christ and the decision to believe in Christianity, I started to believe in Christianity little by little. In the beginning something in Christianity was obscure for me, and I did not know how to understand it. But, gradually my experience with God increased, and I began to believe in Him. This is a process. It does not mean I could understand once I made confession to Christ. I did not. I made quite a few mistakes after my confession. I still did something contrary to the doctrines of the Bible.

Confession and baptism are the turning points for male recruits to believe in Christianity. That is not the case for women although both adapted to the perspective of the Bible gradually. Odilia had scorned Christianity and did not believe in it. After she arrived in the USA and was taken to the church by her mother, she gradually came to believe in Christianity. Shawnee added:

I should believe all content in the Bible. I only doubt why people behaved as they did. Some people’s behaviors may be strange for me, unlike modern people. I think it has no problem if I just believe in it and I accept them as early stories that may not fit modern perspectives. Some words of God are useful for me even now. Thus, I believe all content of the Bible. Even before my baptism and before I became a Christian, I preferred to believe it was Truth.

Converts’ attitudes come from their reference group, namely Christians close to them.

Their affective commitment to the religious group precedes replacement of their former perspective. Shawnee added the reason why she believed in the Bible before her baptism

and conversion.

[I believe in the Bible] because I was moved. I saw every Christian learned the word of God through the Bible and studied together with brothers and sisters in the church. Thus, the Bible told them a lot of things and those Christians close to me were so smart and confident. I felt both came from the Bible. Therefore, I felt it was a credible and approved and believable book. (Shawnee)

In addition, rewards can diminish recruits' doubts about Christianity. As a new convert, Levi struggled between his former atheistic perspective and a Christian perspective. "I have different opinions on some viewpoints [of Christianity] opposite to the theory of evolution. I think maybe the theory of evolution is God and is arranged by God. It is in His plan." Levi chose to believe in God because of rewards he got. As Levi stated, "I had doubted Christianity and the existence of God before. Now I do not doubt because God has guaranteed my prayers. Thus, I believe in His existence."

#### Adaptation of Value in Conversion

As noted before, religious conversion happens progressively. Seven male respondents and four female respondents out of fourteen respondents stated that they converted gradually after confession or baptism. Confession is more important than baptism for converts to make their decision to believe in God and recognize their roles as believers. Recruits will develop a concept of the generalized other through interaction with Christians. They will yield to the values and norms of Christianity. Odilia stated that she was changing gradually because she made confession and a decision to believe in Christianity.

It cannot be regarded as a change I am pursuing. You will know what a Christian should do after you have learned the principles of the Bible. Then you will be shamed into behaving according to your own will. I felt like yielding to it, and I must act in this way, or I will feel uncomfortable. (Odilia)

In a similar way, Russ said that he changed considerably after his conversion. He became

conscientious and aware of behaving morally. Levi also said that he tended to behave morally according to the Bible after he made his confession and his decision to believe in God. Bruce said that he became more aware of his words and behaviors after confession and baptism because he did not want to be an obstacle to others. Gray also stated that he began to define the value of Christianity as authentic after his confession. Odilia said she became more tolerant and considerate of her husband and willing to help others. Russell said he became less ambitious and selfish and more considerate. He intended to transfer the love of God to others. Russ and Roxy also became more considerate after baptism. Russ stated, “I became kinder and more considerate, and it was easier to interact with others and be accepted, not only in the church.” Roxy also said that she became humble and less proud than before and knew how to understand and care about others. She emphasized that she was more considerate after baptism, which she understood as a witness and symbol of becoming a Christian. She also thought other members felt her moral change.

I did not know how to care about others before. I did understand the mutual help between people. I thought it was also a matter of the exchange of benefits when I was in China. I did not imagine that people could help you unselfishly. After I became a church member, I found the relationship between people was so simple—help just for help, not for benefit or exchange. (Roxy)

In addition, recruits are guided by the expectation of their reference group as to how to behave. Roxy stated that members of her church told her that she was still a baby in faith and there was a long way to go and that she had a lot to learn in the future. She understood that she must learn more about Christianity. Shawnee also said that, as she continued to invite Chinese students to her church, Christians in her church could feel her growing up. She said happily that her intimate friend in the church also found her

understanding of God and His words improved. Shawnee noticed people in her church praised her for her leading of hymns and understanding of sentences in the Bible. As Levi commented, the personality and viewpoints and worldview of recruits adapt to Christianity gradually after they make a confession and a decision to believe in God.

Dena said that the change after her confession was greater than the change after baptism. She felt more peaceful after her confession. She said she suddenly knew the meaning of life at the moment of confession. Confession is a decisive point for most converts to assure their Christian perspective. Mary agreed:

I feel that I understand some things from a different perspective, not from previous perspectives. Besides, I will believe that God will arrange some things for me. I will not be depressed or be sad. Rather, I will be peaceful.

Gray also agreed, "I have different values after conversion. My perspective has become different. I can understand difficulties more after I encountered and overcome them." On the contrary, Kurda denied that he changed after baptism. However, he stated he had been changing since he made confession to Christ and the decision to believe in Christianity.

My change initiated when I made confession and the decision to believe in Christianity. This is a very long process. I improved after I was frustrated continually in life and had more experience. This feeling became stronger with the passage of time. When I experienced difficulties and frustration, I connected them with theology. I tried to find the expectations of God. When I had handled my problem, I found I succeeded with the help of God, principles in the Bible, and the Word of God. Then I solved my inadequacy with these problems. (Kurda)

The process of conversion is a process of the application of Christianity to life.

The understanding of Christianity progresses along with learning the perspective of Christians. Kurda stated:

I felt I was uncertain for a long time after I made a confession to Christ and the decision to believe in Christianity. I did not know whether I was a Christian; in particular, my comprehension of God was very obscure. I had to come to understand God little by little. I learned the principles in the Bible, the definition

of God, and the definition of the Trinity little by little after I was baptized. I did not understand those rituals immediately after I was baptized. It is a very long process. I believe that everyone or every Christian experiences this process differently. It may take thirty or forty years for some. Maybe he or she cannot understand the real meaning of God until the moment of his or her death.

He also agreed that he was baptized so as to understand God. “When I accepted Him (through baptism), I meant to understand Him. But, I do not understand totally now because He is God, and I am human. I cannot understand His words completely. I grasp some words and study hard little by little.” Shawnee also emphasized that her confidence in God became stronger after her baptism. She added, “I think I want to learn more words of God and Biblical stories.”

“God is difficult to understand,” was frequently mentioned by my respondents. I noticed that my respondents felt guilty when Christianity did not make sense to them. The feeling of guilt prompted them to learn about Christianity from a Christian’s perspective. All of my respondents confessed that learning was essential for them once they recognized themselves as believers. They adapted their understanding of the Bible from their own perspectives to the perspectives of the church. As Gray said:

Before I believed in the Lord, I judged and guessed about Christianity from my previous experience. After I believed in God, I began to learn. Although I am naïve and have always made mistakes, I feel that I have grown in spirit. This growth comes from my pursuit of faith.

Gray added that his understanding of Christianity changed with the help of the church.

Shawnee and Odilia agreed:

God is difficult to understand. When you study the Bible, you do not understand the action of God because it is difficult to understand through the perspective of humans. This is the intention of God. You cannot understand the intention of God until you have learned some chapters of the Bible. (Shawnee)

I became more aware that every word in the Bible is true. For my comprehension, I still doubt some words. Sometimes I do not understand, but I have come to

understand more; namely, I do not feel I cannot believe anything suddenly anymore, or I tend to deviate from faith. I think comprehension is a slow process. The pastor is important. I have heard teaching of many pastors. Their teachings are most helpful to me. Brothers and sisters in the church are most helpful to show me how to behave according to the Bible rather than help me understand the Bible. I need to imitate them in some aspects. (Odilia)

In addition, although Russ denied his adoption of faith in Christianity, he stated:

I felt war in the Old Testament was cruel because I made confession and a decision to believe in God. Many novices felt God was too cruel when they read the Old Testament, totally different from kind Jesus. I also sort of doubted at that time. However, this question needs to be understood little by little. It is very difficult, and many people also fail to understand. But faith does not need to be totally understood before you believe in Christianity. Second, you cannot understand thoroughly. For me, I understand that, comparatively, Bodhisattva is too clement to kill insects while God killed many people. Strictly I tell you that everyone is killed by God because God has the justice to judge us.

Russ added that his opinions came from some Christian books. Recruits'

comprehension of Christianity comes from their reference groups and through continual interaction with these groups. In addition, recruits apply their knowledge about Christianity to their lives. Kurda shaped his life according to the Bible little by little. After his conversion to Christianity, his definition of the situation transformed. Kurda stated he would pursue wealth, long life, a beautiful wife, and a good family before he came to the USA. However, after his conversion, he defined his previous pursuits as superficial things.

When I encountered Christianity, according to the doctrine of Christianity, the opinion of God, I thought what I had pursued previously was quite simple and superficial. (Kurda)

It is quite understandable that converts need to replace their previous viewpoints with Christian viewpoints by learning the perspective from the church or another Christian reference group. They doubted before because Christianity cannot be understood through their previous viewpoints. It is not surprising that they misunderstood

Christianity before taking the perspective of Christians. The change to the viewpoint of the Christian perspective is a long process. Continual interaction with the reference group strengthens this process. I asked Shawnee whether she had changed her understanding of Christianity. She replied that she continued to believe in the existence of God, and she was wracked with guilt for not being a good Christian if she failed to read the Bible for several days. Converts will feel their understanding of God improve if they practice their faith continually. As Bruce said, his comprehension of faith improved gradually, from superficial understanding before to extensive understanding now, with the help of brothers and sisters in his church as well as the Bible and Christian references. Despite the fact that Levi did not know very much about Christianity, he said he needed to believe in God and listen to His words. There was only one God, and he needed to learn about His words and at least merge His words into his life. He got to know about the Trinity and two characteristics of God including justice and love. Similar to these respondents, Russell sensed his gradual confirmation of the faith:

My faith became firmer gradually. In the beginning, I merely felt that I was imperfect and sinful. God helped me. After I have experienced more, I am more confident about my faith. The confidence comes from my experience, my personal experience with God. (Russell)

Greg understood Christianity as first to love God wholeheartedly and second, to love people as yourself. He had also changed his understanding of faith like Russell,

For a novice believer, you may read more about the New Testament in the beginning. You maybe have trouble understanding the Old Testament, which is hard for you to accept logically, emotionally, and rationally. You will be impressed by the love of God in the New Testament because God is love. I met these problems at first, but I knew about God thoroughly after I studied the Old Testament, namely the justice of God. There are two characteristics of God, love and justice. (Greg)

However, Roxy's understanding of Christianity continued to focus on love of God

and morality.

God's love exists through love between people. I was guided by stories in the Bible and the teaching of Jesus Christ, namely many moral things for me to do. It is very reasonable. Many things. It provides me with guidance to behave.... Although I have different ideas every time I read it, it will be forever the stories of God. (Roxy)

Nonetheless, Roxy's understanding of Christianity was stable and she changed her behavior according to the Bible, which was defined as guidance by her.

Conflict between a nonreligious perspective and a Christian perspective exists among converts. Dena did not change her faith in basic doctrines of Christianity, but she said her confidence fluctuated. In a similar way, Odilia said:

I have not deviated from God terribly, but there are low points and climaxes in faith. Sometimes I did understand why God did not answer my wishes or why I was in trouble. But, I have actually more comprehension that miseries are lessons given by God.

Three out of the eight male respondents confessed that they had doubted their faith in the process of learning Christianity. Gray also said he had doubted his faith. He admitted that he was lazy and said the Bible will inform him of the right action to take.

Laziness comes from insatiable desires. You want too many things. You do not understand. You may say "I could do like this." But you find later that it is not good to do so. You will modify previous choices. You will not want to give up some freedom or hobbies. That will be uncomfortable. (Gray)

I should say I am an agnostic in some part of Christianity because I think some things are unknowable. I do not think the Bible is 100% truth. (Greg)

I have always wondered whether there was a God and whether I was willing to say He was more powerful than I. But I surrender to Him and admit that I am created by Him after I communicate more with God. (Levi)

### Struggle between Theism and Atheism

Thirteen respondents said they believed in the theory of evolution absolutely before they became part of the church. Only one female respondent, Shawnee, stated that

she struggled between theism and evolutionary theory before her conversion. All respondents like natural science. After they became Christians, their understanding of evolutionary theory changed. Eleven respondents definitely deny the theory of evolution now. They were told by the church that the theory of evolution failed to explain many things. As Mary said, "Darwin cannot explain many things. I learned from church." Roxy agreed, "I found the theory of evolution cannot explain many things." Roxy stated that she found the theory of evolution cannot explain many phenomena after she encountered Christianity in the USA. She had no idea about the relation between science and religion. Interaction with Christians is necessary for converts to object to the theory of evolution. In addition, several respondents added that the theory of evolution was flawed.

It's flawed seriously and cannot explain the world observed by us. (Russ)

I used to believe it because it was often presented in the school textbook and I had not done any inquiry and exploration. It made sense to me before, but after I knew the theism of Christianity, I felt the theory of evolution flawed. (Dena)

Like Dena, Some of them described their former belief in Darwin's theory as passive acceptance. Russell said that he used to believe in the theory of evolution because he did not know that theory in detail. After he became part of the church, he reconsidered and doubted the speculation and evidence of that theory because he began to understand the theory as a hypothesis. Also, Gray emphasized that it was a theory, which he inferred was below the truth that he recognized as Christianity. Odilia made the decision to believe in God. She said that, "I disbelieved in the theory of evolution by Darwin because I chose God, not because I found flaws in the theory of evolution." On the other side, Olivia and Levi stated they still believed in a little of evolutionary theory. Olivia said, "I felt it seemed a little reasonable." And Levi said, "Now I believe a little."

Meanwhile, their understanding of science and religion changed, too. They tended to understand science as an explanation of religion. Olivia said Christians explained with religion when science failed to explain. Odilia described science as a gift of God to understand the world created by Him. She had not considered the relationship between religion and science until she made her confession and the decision to believe in God. Levi also stated that science was the law of God in religion and created by God. Russ had a similar opinion. He agreed that science and religion were not contradictory, but he stressed that science was extremely limited in the things it had discovered. Science cannot help him to establish a worldview and meaning of life. Some phenomena, such as the origin of life, cannot be explained by science. Christianity can provide him with a reasonable explanation beyond the test of science, which is unable to study God. Russell said that science was below religion and God—God who created the world which can be observed with science. But science cannot create anything. In a similar manner, Shawnee stated, “Science and religion are compatible and noncontradictory because science cannot provide answer beyond its limit.” Dena also believed that science was the evidence of theism because many natural scientists explored the laws of nature with faith in God. She also admitted that she knew it after she entered church and read materials from church. Thus, they put religion beyond science once they converted to Christianity.

Yet, their understanding of the relationship between science and religion changed after their conversion. Bruce thought that science and religion supported each other and that Christianity could be supported by the perspective of science. Luther, who replied he still believed in the theory of evolution, agreed that religion and science could be compatible and sometimes contradictory. However, Luther believed in the theory of

evolution even though he believed in Christianity. Mary agreed with Luther, but she did not believe science and religion are contradictory. Gray believed science and religion were compatible, too, and science was part of truth. Greg also agreed that the theory of evolution and creationism could be compatible. He thought science and religion were independent, uncontradictory, and unrelated. In spite of the change in their meaning system, they left space for their previous meaning system in their new beliefs. Except for Luther and Olivia, respondents shared a similar pattern of change in their opinions about the theory of evolution.

Most American Chinese churches are evangelical and heavily criticize atheism and the theory of evolution taught in China. When recruits embrace the Chinese church, they cannot avoid being taught about the so-called fault in atheism. Once recruits' interaction with Chinese Christians intensifies, their previous views on science and religion will be replaced with the evangelical viewpoint. Moreover, communication with another reference group is confining because of the limited interaction with people outside the church. In addition, four female respondents and five male respondents out of the fourteen respondents knew very little about controversies between Christians and atheists. As Kurda said, "I heard some, but I do not know in detail at all." Another two respondents, Olivia and Luther, cannot explain it in detail. Luther only stated that atheists and theists disagree on issues of destiny and faith. Shawnee also said she knew a little, and she misunderstood the theory of evolution.

Russ knew more about controversies between Christians and atheists, and he focused on the flaw of the theory of evolution. But, he accepted the theory of evolution at the micro level but at the macro level only as a hypothesis. He admitted that he knew

about and explored the theory of evolution after he entered church. Bruce also admitted that he knew about some of the controversies after he decided to believe in God. Russell described the controversy between Christianity and atheism with a Christian perspective, and he blamed the pride of atheists. In sum, interaction with Christians is necessary for atheists to change their former beliefs. It may even gradually influence their views on death.

Eleven out of the fourteen respondents possess the conservative Christian death views. It is a process to take the perspective of Christians. As Shawnee stated:

I thought it was worthless for a person to die and become extinct before. After I studied the Bible, I knew our death was death of the flesh and we will have eternal life. I do not mean I believe in God for the eternity of my spirit. I really feel He brings me peace and help and makes me help others and saves me from indulging in daydreams.

Gray also regarded death as returning home after he believed in the Lord. However, a new convert, Greg, said that he did not believe in Heaven and had an atheistic perspective toward death because he cannot experience it.

### Opinion on Atheists

When I asked them about their opinions of atheists and believers of other religions, respondents seemed hesitant to accept a Christian doctrine that everyone not believing in God, especially conscientious atheists, goes to hell. Some of them struggled with the status of righteous people because of the conflict between their previous standard and the standard of Christianity. As they were worried, they had trouble balancing between their previous viewpoints and the new belief.

I cannot say they are immoral. Because I always asked my church members before, such as Nicholas, whether some atheists who did right things all their lives and did better than a Christian went to hell after death? But, their answers are yes because their biggest fault is disbelief of God. Personally I feel regret for them.

Some people may not have the chance to hear the gospel. For example, they live in a faraway place, and they are atheists all along. Some people may never want to be religious even though they have not acted wrongly, rather acted rightly. It is a dilemma for me. I cannot comment on it. (Shawnee)

In a similar manner, Roxy clearly stated that she was in a dilemma. She insisted that everyone was a sinner, but she stressed that she could not judge others. Gray, Greg, Russell, Levi and Dena denied that atheists were immoral. As Greg explained,

I still prefer the universal judgment or universal value, not Christian value. I think a Christian is not supposed to say atheists are immoral because we hate the sin, not the sinner. We should despise sin rather than a person who has sinned because he may be influenced by Satan. We cannot say he is immoral. (Greg)

Gray, Russ, Levi, Kurda, Greg, Shawnee, Odilia and Dena agreed that Buddhists or believers of other religions were sinners because everyone was a sinner according to the Bible. Bruce added that atheists were stray lambs, and they were temporarily straying. He said that disbelief in God was sin. Russell thought atheists were a group of people who needed love. But, Russell and Russ refused to judge Buddhists and believers of other religions according to the Bible.

Contrary to the position of Shawnee and Roxy, Luther expected everyone went to Heaven if Heaven existed, excluding those who committed many crimes. Luther seemed not to be influenced by the doctrine of Christianity and he retained his own opinion of other people that he had held before his conversion. He did not think Buddhists or believers of other religions were sinners. He commented that various persons had different ideas. Although Olivia did not think atheists were immoral, she explained that other people have their own opinions. Nonetheless, converts' opinions of atheists fortified the plausibility structure of meaning.

### Adaptation to Proper Attitude to God

After my respondents converted to Christianity, they were learning to ascribe everything to God, but the extent varied. The new converts, such as Greg and Levi, preferred not to ascribe everything to God. Also, Olivia stated that she had not reached the point of attributing happiness to God. As Shawnee said:

Perhaps I cannot attribute anything to God because I am not a mature Christian yet. I really want to and I continue to make efforts.

Likewise, Gray did not ascribe anything to God. He wished he could ascribe everything to God because he said he should recognize that everything is done by God and eternal happiness was with God. Luther said he sometimes attributed things to God. Odilia did not ascribe her happiness to God until she knew God. She did not think about reasons for her happiness before.

I tended to ascribe everything to God since my baptism. This tendency becomes stronger. Other brothers and sisters will say so and the pastor also says so. I also think so because the Bible says everything comes from God; and, if I believe in Christianity, naturally I should ascribe everything to God. (Odilia)

But other respondents, like Bruce, Mary, and Roxy, ascribed their happiness and everything to God after they made their confessions and their decisions to believe in the Lord. Russ attributed his happiness and everything to God after his baptism. As Russell said,

It is a gradual process. Sometimes you may feel lucky. After my experiences have accumulated and I made confession, I reflect that it is not luck but help and the pleasure of God. (Russell)

However, Dena did not ascribe anything to God, but she believed that God has a plan for her that she did not yet know. She also denied that random occurrences without meaning or intention were arranged by God.

### Comment on God's Behavior

Many respondents admitted they had previously commented negatively on the actions of God. However, after they converted to Christianity, they regretted their former comments and preferred to accept everything God had done for them. As Roxy said, "In the beginning, when I still doubted or did not believe in God, I had always judged God. After I heard teacher Morty's lesson and read the Bible, I thought I should not complain."

Shawnee agreed:

I think Christians should believe in God's plan and intention in God's every action. We will say God is justice and clement and authoritative. We will compliment Him with these words. However, we do not have authority to comment on misconduct of God. We are taught during the Bible study that this action of God is righteous and that action of God is clement. We shall speak accordingly.

Odilia also stated that she cannot make comments about God. She also said the Bible said His words will never pass away. According to Kurda, they are taught by the church to establish the omnipotence in their minds.

I do not have power to comment on the action or work of God. I do not have power to do so. I commented before I believed in Him. I thought He was unfair to me. Through every day and every moment of my life, I learn of the guidance of God according to the Bible and learn the guidance and words of God behind misery when I experience difficulties. After my understanding of God accumulates, I will find the love of God and the justice of God. I cannot measure them with my language and my wisdom and my logic. I find He is beyond my cognition, comprehension, and everything I know. I cannot or dare not to comment on the behavior of God. I know only the love of God. I need the grace of God to live. (Kurda)

Russ and Bruce said people should not comment on God's actions so they never did. Mary also agreed that she could not comment on God's action. Gray did not think he could comment on God's action, but he had commented before he began to discover he was trivial and believed in God. Luther thought it was possible to comment on God's

actions, but it may not be correct, and the correctness may depend on doctrines. Dena thought comments on God's behavior seemed improper. Russell said that we could comment but it was vain. It is interesting to note that a new convert, Greg, thought he could make comments on God's action.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSIONS

My observations and interviews show that the conversion of Chinese atheist students is greatly influenced by their interactions with American Chinese Christians. My respondents' affective commitment was chronologically prior to their moral and ideological commitment. My respondents converted to Christianity gradually through five stages.

First, Chinese recruits make friends with Christians and develop affective commitment to Christians close to them. They find a sense of belonging in the church after they arrive in the United States, a foreign country. As they continually interact with Chinese Christians, recruits want to understand Christians and, thus, take the perspective of Christians and later regard them as their new reference group.

Second, through the teachings of the Bible, symbolic language in Christianity, and interactions with Chinese Christians, the converts develop an emergent generalized other among recruits, which makes them sensitive to the definition of sin and makes them care about the attitudes of Chinese Christians toward them. The conception of God becomes real for them as they continue partaking in the church worship and the Bible study. Not only do they accept God as reality, but also they obey the words of God and experience God's presence. By interacting with Christians, recruits strengthen the meanings of symbols in Christianity and apply them to their lives so as to respond to the change in their environment.

Third, through social participation in the Bible study or Sunday worship, recruits internalize the perspective shared among Christians. They feel guilty about their sin because the Bible defines their sin as guilt and something in need of forgiveness. They also learn from the church about their inability to understand the Bible and the necessity of confession to understand God's words.

Fourth, as the socially defined reality reinforces and the affective bonds develop, recruits confess their sins and decide to believe in God. Finally, recruits strengthen their understanding of Christianity by intensifying interactions with Chinese Christians. Thus, recruits gradually change their definition of the situation to match the perspective of Christians. Also, they redefine their previous experience in line with the perspective of Christians.

Through these stages social exchange and plausibility structures of meaning intensify as interactions between recruits and Christians continue. Recruits will be rewarded or punished by Christians for learning Christianity. Christians will be rewarded by playing the role of teachers and wise people who know the truth. Also, recruits will find rewards in friendship with Christians and in application of the perspective of Christians to their own lives. In addition, a cultural factor is observed—the education of Chinese student recruits to Christianity is teacher-centered, and recruits are unwilling to challenge the authority of the evangelists. I can conclude that a Chinese atheist student may convert to Christianity when he or she develops affective bonds with Christians and continually interacts with them in a particular plausibility structure of meaning.

Moreover, I can provide evidence supporting symbolic interactionism with conclusions from my observations and interviews. In many aspects my observations

match the statements of my respondents. For example, hymn singing really worked to influence recruits' ideas even before their conversion. Furthermore, some respondents repeated the contents of Bible studies in their statements, such as distrusting their own understanding and opening their hearts or being less proud and more humble. My study supports the notion that "affective commitment usually precedes full acceptance of a belief system" (Roberts 2004:120). By synthesizing symbolic interactionism and social exchange theory, I find that rewards and meaning of symbols reinforce each other in the process of conversion, and spiritual rewards are more meaningful for converts. I also discover that replacement of beliefs happens quite slowly through interaction, and conversion occurs among converts during a period between one month and nine years. Therefore, I am confident in the applicability of the social-psychological approach to religious conversion. In short, my research contributes to existing sociological literature on religious conversion.

### Suggestions for Future Research

The only thing with which I feel dissatisfied is that more than five people declined to be interviewed by me because they said they were busy. It would also be interesting to ask a question about why other busy Chinese students left the church and halted the opportunity for the religious socialization. Knowing the reason would be helpful in constructing a more nearly complete explanation of religious conversion. I suggest that it is necessary to interview nonreligious Chinese students who keep their distance from the church after their first visit. Moreover, my research depends heavily on the number of new nonreligious Chinese students and the time periods between their participation in Bible studies and their conversion. The number of the nonreligious who attend the Bible

study is not sufficient, as I expected. Thus, my sample is limited. Therefore, an extensive observation is essential to detect the process of conversion. In addition, I noticed that my respondents tended to forget their former experiences and redefined their experiences before conversion. Their answers were influenced by their recent memories. For example, I interviewed a person in the church after worship, and he answered my questions with the sermon given by the pastor. In addition, material rewards were much less prevalent than I had anticipated. So, I suggest conducting a longitudinal study and a more multidimensional approach to observations of Chinese students to determine their reasons for conversion.

Some of my observations still remain unexplained. Although Chinese students have the chance to find other reference groups in the libraries or on the Internet, which should decrease the influence of their surroundings, it occurs to me that they never considered it and never checked the viewpoints of Christians. On the other hand, I noticed that less than 10 percent of Chinese students came back every semester to the Bible study or church worship for a second session unless they were invited to the welcoming party. Still, I hesitate to conclude that the extension of plausible structure of meaning is influenced by culture and ecology. The reason needs to be explored. My observations and interviews tell me that Chinese student converts are free to search for meaning systems in Christianity. I suggest that the reason is, maybe, the recession and destruction of the Chinese value system. So, exploration into factors at the institutional level is needed. I also wonder why only a small part of the nonreligious students who were introduced to Christianity failed to convert to Christianity.

Because my respondents attended conservative churches, it remains unclear

whether or not the conversion pattern of converts in liberal churches is the same as in conservative churches. It may be interesting, too, to explore the relation between conversion and social status. What makes converts authoritarian and conservative? Perhaps a comparative study would be helpful. I also find that verbal discourse is another important factor in religious conversion. Novice Christians lack verbal discourse in the perspective of Christianity. Thus, a scientific measurement of the patterns of the verbal discourse is required for future research.

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