

Visiting Parents from China:  
Their Conversion Experiences in America and  
Contributions to Christianity at Home

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# Contents

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Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Chapter 1 Who are the Visiting Parents?	6
Chapter 2 How are the Visiting Parents Doing?	15
Chapter 3 What Lead Visiting Parents to Receive the Gospel?	28
Chapter 4 How Do the Visiting Parents Contribute to the Christian Development in China?	50
Conclusion	76
Bibliography	78
Appendix A	81
Appendix B	82

## Abstract

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This study focuses on elderly parents from Mainland China who visit their adult immigrant children in the United States. Since the 1990s when Chinese economy was well into its take-off period and restrictions on travel have eased for Chinese citizens, a great many elderly Chinese have visited their offerings in the United States in increasing numbers. Most of the information regarding this population is anecdotal: there is no in-depth study devoted to this group. This study does not claim to be that, in that it does not examine the Chinese seniors at a national level nor use a rigorous statistical analysis. It does, however, seek to move the conversation beyond the anecdotal by examining the visiting Chinese seniors in the context of the Chinese-American immigration history, the history of Christianity in China, and China's tumultuous modern history; and by employing a case study method. The study focuses on a group of visiting Chinese elderly who has worshiped at First Chinese Christian Church in Plano, Texas, where I serve as senior minister. Partly on the basis of the interviews conducted with these seniors, the study makes the argument that American Christian Churches—especially those with Chinese background—should provide ministry to visiting Chinese seniors because such ministry is needed by the seniors, because the seniors are receptive to the Gospel ,and because upon returning to China, the seniors—whether as converts or those favorably disposed to the faith—can make positive contributions to the development of Christianity in China.

## Introduction

The past twenty years from the mid 1980s to 2005 have witnessed the rapid growth of Christianity both in China and among Chinese communities abroad. The phenomenon is sometimes described as “church growth explosion” or “Christianity fever.”<sup>1</sup> In China, Christianity has flourished mainly among the rural population, while among Chinese diasporic communities it thrived among the well educated. Some scholars predict the twenty-first century will be a “Chinese Century” of Christian mission, one that parallels China’s economic growth.<sup>2</sup> For Christianity to take roots in China and to have a global impact, it must win acceptance among both the rural and educated segments of the population. In this vein, the conversion and influence of overseas Chinese, especially of highly educated and outspoken Chinese, have caught the attention of Christians outside China. However, it is the younger of these overseas converts that are given attention; the more senior ones tend to be neglected. This study focuses on a particular group of senior Chinese converts, or senior Chinese who are receptive to the Gospel: the senior Chinese nationals who visit their children in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions: the Costly Revival* (Michigan: Monarch Books, 1999), 21, 46.

<sup>2</sup> See Fenggang Yang’s *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999), 174-175, Tony Lambert’s *China’s Christian Millions: the Costly Revival* (Michigan: Monarch Books, 1999), 179-183, and David Aikman’s *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003), 11-16 & 290-292. There are also countless articles on the topic in such Chinese Christian periodicals as *Ambassadors* by Ambassadors for Christ, Inc., *Chinese Christian Living Quarterly* by Chinese Center For Christian Living, *Herald Monthly* by Chinese Christian Herald Crusades, Inc., *Overseas Campus* by Campus Evangelical Fellowship, *Renewal* by Christian Renewal Ministries, and *Hua Chuan* by Gospel Operation International for Christians, Inc.

<sup>3</sup> I have searched all the major Chinese Christian periodicals and magazines published in North America since 1990 and found not a single article that really deals with the subject. The year 1990, I believe, marks the

As more and more Chinese parents have been able to visit their children in the United States frequently,<sup>4</sup> they have gradually become a strong presence in the United States and growing force back in China. According to numerous anecdotal observations, this parent group has been highly receptive to the Christian Gospel in the United States.<sup>5</sup> However, they have not received adequate scholarly treatment. This study seeks to begin to address this neglect. A caveat is in order here though. This study does not examine this phenomenon on a nation-wide basis, whether in the United States or China, nor does it use a rigorous quantitative analysis. But it does provide a more substantive discussion than the anecdotal by employing a case-study method. The study examines a cohort of senior Chinese parents from China with respect to their conversion experience in the United States and the contribution they have made to the development of Christianity in China. It is argued here that American Christians—especially of the Chinese-American background—should minister to these parents because as sojourners in the United States they have special social and spiritual needs that the church is well equipped to meet, because, as converts to Christianity, these parents can contribute to the development of Christianity in China, and because seniors deserve to be honored and valued by Christians.

The cohort in this study consists of twenty-five visiting parents chosen from the

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starting point of a new major wave of immigration from China, mainly because that was the second year after the “6. 4” Incident in Beijing when the students who demonstrated against corruption and demanded democracy were cracked down by the Communist government. These Chinese Christian magazines include *Ambassadors* by Ambassadors for Christ, Inc., *Breakthrough* by Breakthrough Ltd., *Christian Life Quarterly* by Christian Life Press, Inc., *Chinese Today* by CCM Christian Mission Ltd., *Cosmic Light* by Cosmic Light Inc., *Chinese Christian Literature* by Chinese Literature Association, *Evangel Literature* by Evangel Literature, Inc., *Herald Monthly* by Chinese Christian Herald Crusades, Inc., *Overseas*, by Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, *Hua Chuan* by Gospel Operation International for Christians, Inc., *Renewal* by Christian Renewal Ministries, and *Overseas Campus* by Campus Evangelical Fellowship.

<sup>4</sup> I shall talk about the statistics and reasons in the next chapter.

<sup>5</sup> I have shared this with Rev. Yuming Zhu, pastor of a Disciples Chinese church in Atlanta, GA and Rev.

church I am pastoring, the First Chinese Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Plano, Texas. The first part of this study focuses on their conversion experience: Chapter One deals with the definition of visiting parent with a brief historical review of Chinese immigration in America; Chapter Two discusses the struggles, needs and challenges faced by the visiting parents in America; and Chapter Three discusses their conversion experiences in the changed environment, focusing on factors that contribute to their conversion. In the second part, Chapter Four, discusses how the visiting parents affect the Christian movement in China in the context of the past and contemporary Christianity in China and the United States. The conclusion rounds out the discussion with a theological reflection.

## Chapter 1: Who are the Visiting Parents?

The appearance of visiting parents as a significant phenomenon is only a recent event. And the numbers are increasing.<sup>6</sup> They have formed a special group of people with unique characteristics. This chapter defines the visiting parents first by providing a historical background and then more formally. By knowing who they are, we can identify challenges they face, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Lastly I will use data from our church to provide a more concrete discussion.

### I. Historical Background

The first Chinese immigrants came to the United States from “a different shore” in the 1840’s as contract laborers initially to Hawaii and California, working in gold mines, plantations, and later on inland railroad constructions.<sup>7</sup> They were sojourners with a dream of going back rich after accumulating enough money. In other words, they were not planning to settle down permanently in the beginning. These mostly poor and rural laborers were predominantly male singles, especially those in the mainland United State, because the U. S. government severely restricted Chinese women from immigrating to the United States.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In the city of Plano, Texas, where our church is located, the elderly from China have formed the Chinese Seniors Association. The secretary of the association has told me he had to add new members to their directory constantly.

<sup>7</sup> The term “a different shore” is used by Ronald Takaki to refer to far away immigrants from Asia in the title of his *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Boston Toronto London: Little, Brown and Company, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

The number of these Chinese laborers increased over the years. There were more than 34, 000 Chinese along the West Coast by 1860.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese population reached 105, 465 in 1880<sup>10</sup>. These Chinese immigrants were initially needed and welcomed in the new land. In 1852, in his address to the California legislature, Governor John McDougal stated the need for more Chinese and praised them as one of the most worthy classes.<sup>11</sup> Gradually however, the tide turned against the Chinese. As they became a conspicuous presence in the labor market, there arose a nativist cry by white laborers who viewed the Chinese immigrants as competitors and a threat. The ensuing racial discrimination resulted in series of anti immigrant laws. The “Chinese Exclusion Act” was passed in 1882 and the population dropped to 89, 836 in 1900, and to 61, 639 in 1920.<sup>12</sup> The “National Origins Acts” of 1924 made it all but impossible for any Asians to immigrate. Between 1882 and 1965, when the immigration law was finally revamped, for “the overwhelming majority of Chinese men, the future would not include the possibility of a family in their new land.”<sup>13</sup>

During these years, the United States prohibited the visit of the parents of these Chinese laborers. Even if they had been allowed to come, most of them could not have afforded the trip. Small numbers of Chinese students were still allowed to come to the United States and study, but records of their parents visiting the United States are hard to come by.

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<sup>9</sup> Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: the Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 111-112.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-112.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

During the Second World War, when China and America were allies, circumstances changed for the better for the Chinese. With the “Executive Order 8802” prohibiting racial discrimination in companies working under government contract and, especially, with the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1943, the environment improved for Chinese immigration. Even so, the annual quota for Chinese immigration was only 105, “and only an annual average of fifty-nine Chinese came to the United States during the first ten years of the Law’s operation.”<sup>14</sup> The “McCarran-Walter Law” passed in 1952 allowed Chinese immigrants to become naturalized citizens.<sup>15</sup> This was a significant development. Many thus chose to become settlers, not sojourners anymore.

After the Second World War, a civil war broke out in China between the ruling Nationalists and rebelling Communists and the war lasted till 1949. The Communists emerged victorious and established the People’s Republic of China. The Nationalists’ Republic of China fled to the island of Taiwan under the protection of the United States. The Nationalists in Taiwan continued to represent China in the United Nations with U. S. support until 1971. During this time no diplomatic relationship existed between the Chinese mainland and the United States. They were in fact enemies, their relationship worsened through the Korean War in the early fifties when China supported North Korea against South Korea and the United States, and the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s when China supported the Communist North Vietnam. In addition, during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 China experienced extreme political chaos domestically. The few immigrants from this period to the United States were mostly

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

refugees from political persecution fleeing through Hong Kong, or other "second point[s] of departure".<sup>16</sup> Chinese immigrants to the United States during this period were mostly from Taiwan.

The American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's ushered in a new age for immigration in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement advocated human equality and condemned racism in all forms. This in turn affected immigration policies as well. The "1965 Immigration Act" "opened the way for the second wave of Asian immigration."<sup>17</sup> Chinese Immigrants, along with other Asians, came in large numbers and from diverse backgrounds. More people came from cities. Professionals and skilled Chinese took advantage of the new immigration policy's preference for the skilled and entered high tech and service fields. They were different from the earlier Chinese, who had mostly engaged in manual labor. In 1965, Chinese population numbered 237, 000; between 1965 and 1984, it jumped to 812, 200.<sup>18</sup> However, Chinese immigrants in this period were still mostly from Taiwan, Singapore, and the Philippines, and other diasporas. Until the reform and opening initiative in China starting in 1978, immigrants from mainland China were mostly refugees who arrived through illegal channels.

A significant aspect of the 1965 immigration policy is that it allowed entire families to immigrate. Ronald Takaki gives an illustration of how a family network came into being. A student could find a job after graduation, then adjusted status under the preference category for skilled workers of the 1965 immigration law, and under the family preference

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 422.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 420.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 421.

category of the same law, could apply for their spouse and children to come. Later as US citizens they could also bring their parents and even siblings. “Thus one immigrant coming originally as a student could develop what historian David Reimers has called ‘a chain migration’.”<sup>19</sup> Again the initial wave of Chinese parents were from places other than Mainland China, which had kept its door closed to the outside world.

Significant waves of people came from the People’s Republic of China as students or immigrants in the 1980s, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China in 1979, and China’s increasing openness to the West. Government data showed that tens of thousands of students and scholars, both government-sponsored and self-initiated, poured into America.<sup>20</sup> By 1990, the U. S. census showed that the Chinese constituted the largest Asian-American population, numbering 1,654,472 in 1990.<sup>21</sup> These people include increasing numbers of people from Mainland China. In the 1990s, after the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident when the Communist government cracked down on peaceful student demonstrations for more democracy and freedom, a great many Chinese expatriated, especially the intellectuals. The “Chinese Students Protection Act” of 1992 made it possible for 52,425 mainland Chinese in the United States to adjust to permanent residency.<sup>22</sup> As these students and other arrivals from Mainland China settled down with good jobs and raised families, their parents began to visit them.

Between 1992 and 2000 with an economic boom in the United States, large

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 422.

<sup>20</sup> Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 35.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 36.

numbers of Chinese skilled in information technology made a good living in America. They could afford to sponsor their senior parents to visit more and more frequently. On the other side of the Pacific, China was also rapidly developing economically. This economic prosperity enabled many of the senior parents to pay for their travels out of their own pockets. And as new Chinese immigrants became permanent residents and naturalized citizens, many also applied for green cards for their parents, so that they would not have to apply for visas every time they visited. This phenomenon of visiting parents from China is significant. It is estimated that there are currently about 100, 000 of them in America.<sup>23</sup> This number does not include those who have returned to China and may revisit.

## II. The Definition of “Visiting Parents”

The Chinese visiting parents referred to in this paper are those parents from Mainland China who have come since about 1990 to visit their immigrant children and to travel. Chinese visitors from Taiwan are important but do not figure in this study. They deserve separate treatment.

The visiting Chinese parents tend to be elderly, and they should be distinguished from another group. This other group came to the United States from Mainland China in the 1960’s as political refugees or under other straitened circumstances. Most of them had come at relatively young ages and settled down, had families and retired. They have adapted to American culture and have made retirement plans. As senior immigrants, they share a lot of commonality with our targeted population. But they are not sojourners anymore, and have become quite Americanized. They do not belong to the category of the

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<sup>23</sup> *Asian Gazette*, a Chinese weekly newspaper published in Dallas, Jan. 20 2006.

temporary visiting parents discussed in this study. Now I shall discuss circumstances of our church as a concrete example for better understanding Chinese visiting parents.

### III. Visiting Parents in the First Chinese Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Texas

FCCC was planted in August 1998 in Dallas, Texas. The church uses the facilities of a Euro-American Disciples church. Up till mid 2006 about two hundred fifty people have visited our church. As of 2006, our church's regular members number thirty-two. Among them twenty-four form the church's core group, and they belong to the new wave of student-turned immigrants who came since the early or mid 1990's from Mainland China. Eight are visiting parents. More than half of the young or middle-aged core group had their parents visit them at least once.<sup>24</sup> Most of the parents make China their domicile and visit their children for a short term.<sup>25</sup> Some are currently in the process of applying to come or come again. About half of them have come at their own expenses.

They come for manifold purposes. I have observed the following pattern in our church. First, the first generation younger immigrants invite their parents to come over. The number one reason for inviting the parent is to meet their own need. They bring their parents to the United States so that their own children could be taken care of. The young first generation immigrants are busy working and adapting, and they have no experience of bringing up children. The tradition in China is that parents help with the upbringing of children. Some of the immigrants choose to send their children back to China to the grandparents for a number of years. However, most prefer to have their parents come as

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<sup>24</sup> Appendix A.

<sup>25</sup> Appendix B.

often as they can and to see their children grow up before their own eyes. At this point, parents come at the expense of their immigrant children. This could be categorized as visitation for reason of the adult-children's need.

The next reason has to do with filial duty. The immigrant children feel they should let their parents visit them to see what they have accomplished and to enjoy themselves. Such feeling arises from their sense of filial piety. They aim to make their parents happy. And having visiting parents could even become a competition among the younger Chinese immigrants; for it can be a sign of personal achievement and financial ability. The parents assume a passive mode. Their Children ask them to come and pay for the trip. It is basically the children that are the initiators and sponsors.

In other instance however, the parents themselves take the initiative. They are the ones who offer to help. Such generosity has been made possible by the economic prosperity China has enjoyed lately. A survey shows that in 2006, in major Chinese cities and regions, the average salary has increased to 7.7 percent, with the yearly increase of 0.3 percent.<sup>26</sup> Many of the parents were beneficiaries of the economic boom. Parents now can afford to come at their own expense to help raise their grandchildren—or just relax and have an enjoyable time. Of course, the parents' and children's sense of longing for each other is a big factor in itself.

For this study, I have picked twenty-five of the visiting parents from among forty-five who visited our church because I know them well and still keep in touch with them. Among them, fourteen are couples. They are all between the ages of 56 and 70. Except for one, all of them retired from good jobs. These include positions in education,

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<sup>26</sup> The survey was conducted by Watson Wyatt, a global consulting firm specializing in human capital and

government, engineering, and health care. Their level of education and social status are fairly high, which partly explains why their children have achieved much. The fact that they can come and visit shows that they are all on legal visas because of their children's immigration status, unlike illegal immigrants who could not provide legal documents for their parents. A majority of the children have been in the education field. Among them are academic deans, school principals, university professors, and public school teachers. About half of them come to our church because their children attended it, and they come together. The other half either come themselves, including those who can drive or get transportation from church members, or are dropped off and picked up by their children who either go to other churches or not at all.

## Chapter 2: How are the Visiting Parents Doing?

The twenty-five visiting parents in this study are between the ages of 56 and 70. In China women usually retire at 55 and men at 60. The job market simply cannot meet the demand of China's overwhelming population, and countless younger people are waiting to be employed. The visiting parents in my studies have all retired from their employment except for one who did not have a permanent job. As the aged and retired, they share traits that are common to all the elderly, regardless of ethnicity and domicile. At the same time, as aged and retired visitors temporarily staying with their children in a foreign country, they also have special needs and challenges. In this chapter we shall first look at the common characteristics of the aged and retired in general. And then we shall deal with unique challenges faced by the visiting parents.

### I. General Researches on aging and retirement

Much research has been done on the aged and retired in the West. I have found that the following points also apply to the Chinese visiting parents.

#### A. Stages of the life cycle

Erik Erikson's theory on stages of the life cycle sheds much light to our studies. It is very helpful in understanding the different stages of one's life, including old age.

"Erickson's theory indicates eight psychosocial states in human development, the last two of which are of central importance in working with aging populations."<sup>27</sup> For Erikson, each

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<sup>27</sup> James P. Jones, "A Life-Cycle Approach to Ministry with the Aging," *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 53(Fall 1999): 329.

phase of life consists of various developmental challenges that one has to overcome in order to successfully grow into personal maturity.<sup>28</sup> These eight developmental stages which involve human maturation through developmental crises include trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus self-absorption/isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and integrity versus despair. The last stage should be the fulfillment of the preceding seven stages. “The final stage of growth is achieved when an individual makes identification with humankind and comes to grips with the contribution she or he has made to society.”<sup>29</sup> Erikson believes that if one fails to face the challenges of the eighth stage of living into old age, one may end his or her days with a tremendous sense of loss and disappointment.<sup>30</sup> An unsuccessful eighth stage is often identified by unhappiness, regret, undressed anger, isolation, fear, and/or hopelessness. Life can run the danger of ending with little joy and much despair. It would be a pity if many get lost in the process without living more fully human and satisfying lives.<sup>31</sup> “According to Erikson, a person who has achieved a healthy degree of self-worth is one who has successfully accomplished ego integrity or maturity on the psychological level.”<sup>32</sup> Albert L. Meiburg understands Erikson as considering the essential task of later life to be the achievement of ego-integrity as against a sense of despair. And failure to

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<sup>28</sup> Avis Clendernen, “Unfinished Business Among the Aging and Those Who Love Them,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, 54(2000): 126.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 126-127.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 127

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Natale, *Pastoral Counseling: Reflections and Concerns* (New York/RamseyTorronto: Paulist Press, 1977), 107.

accomplish this task causes the fear of death which leads to despair.<sup>33</sup>

The styles of adjustment to aging are important. “Older people’s satisfaction with life and with marriage depends not only on how well they manage to readjust to each other after the various changes in the life cycle but also on how well they cope with the changes as individuals.”<sup>34</sup> Inability to adjust to aging can lead to depression. Older people had the highest rate of suicide because of depression.<sup>35</sup> Health is another important aspect of adjustment. It is another major factor in determining an elderly person’s satisfaction with life.

## B. Retirement

Retirement certainly turns over a new page in a person’s life. It brings with it a big transition that one has to cope with. It marks the end of one life style and the beginning of another. This stage in life presents itself with new challenges, needs, and perhaps new tasks. Adjustments are necessary.

To be sure, retirement means a developmental transition; it affects retirees and their families. Researchers believe that changes follow in family and personal goals, roles, and values. For instance the retiree suddenly faces a large amount of unscheduled time, and needs another way of using time. They also question their self worth. They easily feel useless and unneeded by the society. They may have felt productive before and suddenly

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<sup>33</sup> Albert L. Meiburg, “Senior Adulthood: Twilight or Dawn?” in *Caring for People from Birth to Death*, ed. James E. Hightower (New York: the Haworth Pastoral Press, 1999), 151.

<sup>34</sup> Gilbert D. Nass, and Gerald W. McDonald, *Marriage and the Family*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1982), 379.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

now feel completely different. He or she no longer feels like sharing the same concerns, goals, and interests with their colleagues. These people can feel very isolated.<sup>36</sup>

Some researchers hold that work indeed brings joy and fulfillment to many. Therefore, retirement from job means a great loss, loss in achievement, and loss of relationships. Work provides the major source of meaning in their lives, without which life could appear hollow and without challenge.<sup>37</sup> If one holds that the occupational role provides a central source of identity and the loss of this role is a sign of inadequacy, then one will see retirement mainly as crisis.

At retirement, most people are already grandparents. They are generally happy with their role as grandparents. “They savored the feelings of continuity and feel valued as a resource for the youngest generation.”<sup>38</sup> They gain a sense of purpose from this relationship. Many even find it more enjoyable than raising their own children. The grandchildren, on the other hand, have not grown up yet. They appear to have strong affection for their grandparents. These two generations enjoy doing things together until kids grow older and have less interest in the grandparents.

### III. Marriage

The marriage relationship is an important factor in an adult’s life, and not the least in his or her latter years. Jack Dominian believes that the relationship of marriage depends

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew J. Wearver, Linda A. Revilla, and Harold G. Koenig, *Counseling Families Across the Stages of Life* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 145-9.

<sup>37</sup> Richard A Kalish, *Late Adulthood: Perspectives on Human Development* (California: BrooksCole Publishing Company, 1975): 110.

<sup>38</sup> Nass and McDonald, *Marriage and the Family*, 384.

on five dimensions of marriage and varies in the phases the marriage is in.<sup>39</sup> The five dimensions of marriage are social, emotional, sexual, intellectual and spiritual. For a marriage to survive, it must cover at least one of these dimensions and usually more than one. The social dimension has to do with dwelling, finances, roles, relationship, and so on. A good deal of marital conflict is associated with all these social factors. The emotional dimension involves physical closeness, time together, affirmation, and communication. In the intellectual dimension, we see different gifts, talents, hobbies, etc. in husbands and wives. These differences may mean an enrichment of the relationship when harmonious. When not so, they complain that they have nothing in common.

The sexual dimension is a central element of the marriage relationship. And its significance is increasing. The quality of sexual life is vital and represents a powerful expression of love. The spiritual dimension has to do with faith systems and values standards. I will come back to this last dimension when I talk about how spirituality played a role in joining the visiting couples together. Jack Dominian also points out three phases in marriage. The first phase covers the early years. This phase is crucial. Some 30-40 per cent of all marital breakdowns occur in this stage; and 50 per cent of the causes of break ups arise in this phase. The second phase refers to the middle years. Men and women experience great changes, which can be smooth and dramatic. "Much conflict during these years springs from the gradual changes in the personality of the spouses and the need for renewed adaptation at fresh levels of interaction."<sup>40</sup> He calls the third phase the later years, the age from fifty to the death of one spouse. In this period, the children leave home or

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<sup>39</sup> Jack Dominian, *Make or Break, An Introduction to Marriage Counseling* (London: SPCK, 1984), 85ff.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

marry, grandchildren arrive and the couple returns to a one-to-one relationship. Mostly this is a period of relative tranquility. It can also be a period of fulfillment. However, marriages can break down as well. At this stage, marriages may show any of the features of the first stage or aspects of change and maturation which have been delayed. Some of the features often overlap with events in the late stages of the second phase.

Theorists offer different descriptions of marriage right after retirement. Some describe a brighter picture; some darker. Gilbert D. Nass and Gerald McDonald believe that the increased time older couples have spent enjoying each other's companionship contributes to high level of satisfaction. Among senior citizens after retirement, marital satisfaction is directly related to their satisfaction with life. Their relationship is characterized less by emotion than by a calm, objective attitude. They note Feldman findings in his researches that when all children are gone and wife is over 65, "marital interaction is low, but that the couple's relationship is marked by peacefulness and absence of stress"<sup>41</sup>.

Other researchers think otherwise. Jack Dominian posits that even though couples have lived together for many years through children and/or their respective work, they discover that in their later years they have nothing in common with each other and see in each other as emotional stranger. Some may decide to split up.<sup>42</sup> Richard A. Kalish believes that the marital relationship is the most important in adult years. The couples spend more time at home. There comes a dynamic shift. Before they were busy and could avoid encountering each other. Now the relationship becomes stressful when they see each other

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<sup>41</sup> Nass and McDonald, *Marriage and the Family*, 375.

<sup>42</sup> Dominian, *Make or Break*, 121.

more often. If they can not handle the new challenges well, divorce happens.<sup>43</sup>

Paul Brown argues that the lessening of family responsibilities and the lifting of financial obligations do not necessarily make a happy marital life. As a matter of fact, discord and disharmony are common. For many retired people, retirement means loss of self worth and social status. Physical ailments and increased togetherness can become threats to marital stability among them.<sup>44</sup>

## II. Special Challenges faced by Visiting Parents

### A. They suffer problems of aging and retirement more intensely.

The twenty-five visiting parents in my study share some or all of the above traits shared by seniors in general, and they experience the negative side of aging and retirement to a greater degree. Most of them have not achieved a smooth adjustment, at least not yet. The first time I saw them, they showed signs of anxiety and uncertainty. Quite a few of them were seriously sad, and depressed.

These elderly persons, except for one, had very good jobs and enjoyed respectable social statuses. They all had strong work ethic. They found self worth in their accomplishments. I found them struggling with retirement and lamenting the good old days. Parent Wang, a retired government officer, said, “Before I was a dragon, and now I am just a worm.” This statement is fairly representative of their sentiments. They have accomplished a lot themselves and in their children. Now they are just retired professionals. Many held different levels of leadership. Those who used to be government

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<sup>43</sup> Kalish, *Late Adulthood*, 82.

<sup>44</sup> J. Paul Brown, *Counseling With Senior Citizens* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.:Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), 81.

officials, in particular, felt discarded. There is a great contrast between their past and present life, and this contrast distresses them. They have been very busy; now facing a lot of time makes them nervous. As they lose contact with the rhythm of professional society, they feel marginalized and at a loss as to what to do. They are still relatively young but had to retire given the Chinese context. Most of them did not have a clear goal for the rest of their lives. They often talked about how to keep bodily fit, and engaged in various kinds of physical exercise. What is worse, they are now in a foreign land, where nobody knows about their “glorious” past. They see a huge deficit between where they were and where they are now. They feel they are nobody in the United States, without the respect and dignity they once enjoyed.

The role of grandparents gives them some degrees of satisfaction and self worth. The majority of them came partly to take care of grandchildren. Because their children are busy in the new culture and because of the Chinese tradition, parents help their children to take care of their children as a matter of course. This could be of great help for their children in focusing on their task of adapting to the new culture. But this also creates problems. Disagreement over educating the third generation between parents and children is frequent. The adult children want to add some Western flavor to the upbringing of their own children, while the visiting parents seek to inculcate as much Chinese tradition in the young as possible.

Some of these twenty-five people also experienced problems in their marriage life. They suffer different degrees of marital problems typical to the seniors described by the above researchers. Again it only has intensified as China has embraced modernization.

China has seen an increase in divorce rates in recent years. It is reported that 800,000 Chinese couples were divorced in 1990, 1.05 million in 1995, and 1.2 million in 1999.<sup>45</sup> China's divorce rate will continue to rise, with some 2 million couples expected to be divorced every year.<sup>46</sup> Statistics from the Ministry of Civil Affairs state that the divorce rate in China raised from 0.07 per cent in 1980 to 0.21 per cent in 2003.<sup>47</sup> Chinese couples are more and more comfortable expressing their differences than before. Three of the sample population in this study have recently divorced. One had a husband who had an extramarital affair, and two complained of increasing and unbearable differences in personality and opinions between them. Another couple was at the brink of separation. Some of the elderly are still physically healthy, but others are beginning to show the effects of aging. When they are not feeling well, they are scared. They worry constantly, especially when they do not have medical insurance.

#### B. Special challenges are encountered by visiting parents in the United States.

Visiting parents from China not only face general problems of seniors more intensely, they also encounter additional challenges. While visiting the United States they encounter a new culture. They feel even more at a loss than would be the case if they had stayed in China. As noted above, they help with bringing up grandchildren and doing family chores. At the same time, they do not want to become a burden to their children. They speak very limited English or none at all. This means they cannot enjoy regular TV

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<sup>45</sup> Eastday.com 04/23/2001(cited by China.org.cn on 10/16/2006).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 4/21/2002.

<sup>47</sup> Chinadaily.com 10/16/2006 citing article by Wang Jiaquan Updated: 2004-11-30 11:28, www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-11/30/content\_396006.htm - 29k - .

programs, which is an important source of entertainment. Ten of our sample population came to our church's ESL(English as a Second Language) class to learn English. Their children would drop them off and come back to pick them. Visiting elderly cannot drive. In a city like Dallas, without a car, one basically stays at home. This means they can't go wherever they like to go; their activities are greatly limited, and they are dependent upon their children.

An article titled "Chinese Seniors in America," published in *Asian Gazette*, a local newspaper in Dallas on January 20, 2006, discusses the hardship faced by these parents. They stay with their children's families, cleaning the rooms, cooking meals, taking care of grandchildren. Life quickly gets boring for them. Living together with their children does not go without struggles. The way of living, habits, thinking, and bringing up the little ones are different. One of them complained about her conflicts with her son-in-law. Many are weary and express their wish to go back to China. But when they do go back, they tend to think of some good things they had found in the United States and want to come back again.

There is a whole issue of *Ambassadors* focusing on senior Chinese in America.<sup>48</sup> But the visiting parents as defined here are not singled out for separate discussions. The issue discusses aged Chinese in general. Representative is an article by Yijia Zhang titled "Investigation on the Mental Adjustment of Chinese Seniors." It calls for attention to Chinese elderly on the part of Chinese churches in the United States. But the seniors he

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<sup>48</sup> *Ambassadors*, 1990, 9/10. This is a Chinese periodical published every three months by a Chinese Christian organization, Ambassadors for Christ, Inc., based in Paradise, Pennsylvania.

focuses on are the immigrants who have settled already or at least have decided to settle down and made adjustment accordingly. The future for them is clear. But for the visiting parents, that is not the case. Among the twenty-five in my studies, some say they will not stay, but others are not yet decided. Nonetheless, some might end up staying permanently.

### C. They are the truly marginalized.

In general, the visiting Chinese seniors are truly marginal people. If seniors in general are marginalized and an ethnic minority is marginalized in the United States, then these Chinese seniors are the marginalized of the marginalized. According to Jung Young Lee, race, gender, economic status, politics, education, occupation, age and religion can be factors of marginality.<sup>49</sup> All “cultural or ethnic differences” are “determinants” of the marginal experiences of rejection, alienation, and discrimination. He focuses on Asian Americans who have been through a great deal of sufferings because of racial discrimination. Now these people are not really immigrants. They are visitors or sojourners at best. They are aged and retired. They have experienced a loss of status. They share all the feelings of rejection, alienation and sometimes discrimination in different forms. They are truly the margins of margins.

Lee presents two definitions of marginality: the classic and the contemporary. The classic understanding of marginality is one of feeling “In-between.” “In defining marginality or a marginal person, Robert E. Park and Everett Stonequist borrowed insights from George Simmel and Werner Sombert and employed them to describe the individual

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<sup>49</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 33.

who lives in two societies or two cultures and is a member of neither.”<sup>50</sup> For this definition, the marginal person is rejected by both cultures. That is not the case for visiting parents. They might be rejected by American culture but not by their home culture. They just temporarily live in between two cultures.

Lee proposes the second, contemporary definition of marginality: it is the feeling of “in both.” For him, Asian Americans should have the self-affirming claim of being “both Americans and Asians at the same time”.<sup>51</sup> However, visiting parents do not have the urgent need to be assimilated into the new culture. They are not thinking of settling down permanently. They may not be considered as Asian Americans at all. The rejection from the society doesn’t bother them very much. Why do I still call these people marginalized if they do not fit in either of these definitions? Jung Young Lee mentions the concept of “edge” several times.<sup>52</sup> If marginality has to do with an edge, then anybody that feels pushed to the edge of a society is a marginal person. The senior parents feel out of place—on the edge—in American culture. But what worries them more is how they will be treated by their children and their families, whether they will be accepted or rejected by them. One parent complained that they are like nobody in their children’s family in the United States: they are neither a host, a guest, nor a servant. Though they do not necessarily want to stay for long, they want to come back when they miss their children. So these seniors feel on the edge all the time, and under the fear of rejection, alienation, and discrimination from a strange culture, but especially from their own children’s families. In

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 30.

the United States, they feel out of place and need a place of solace.

### **Chapter 3: What Lead Visiting Parents to Receive the Gospel?**

Many visiting parents from China become Christians during their short stay in the United States. This chapter looks at factors involved in their conversion based on data from our church. It is argued here that the visiting parents are highly receptive to the Gospel given their circumstances and needs.

In 2000, about 30, 000 Chinese lived in the Dallas metropolitan area,<sup>53</sup> including those who had settled down as immigrants and those who were studying, working and visiting temporarily. As of 2006, there are about 27 Chinese churches and fellowship groups in the area, altogether claiming about 2, 500 members.<sup>54</sup> Even when we compare the present figure of Christians with the 2000 census record of total Chinese population, church members occupy only about 8. 3 percent of the total. The percentage of those who came to our church and believed is a little higher, about 10 percent. When it comes to the visiting parents, the situation is different. Even if they themselves do not go to church, children of these seniors tend to send their parents to churches, or encourage their parents to go to a church. Their children understand the importance of fellowship for their parents' well-being. About forty-five visiting parents have visited our church since 1998, and at least 14 have accepted the Gospel, or about 30 percent of the total.

More specifically, among the 25 visiting parents in my studies, 14 were converted or have been led seriously to consider converting while visiting the United States within 6

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<sup>53</sup> U. S. Census 2000, [areacnect.com](http://areacnect.com).

<sup>54</sup> The data are obtained by asking the pastors directly and calling the churches listed in Chinese yellow pages.

months of their visit. Among them 10 underwent baptism in the United States; 4 received baptism shortly after they returned to China and joined a local church; and the remaining 11 became serious seekers or friends of the Gospel. We can say with a great deal of confidence that this cohort of visiting parents is highly receptive to the Gospel. Why is this the case? What are the factors that make them conducive to believe? This chapter will focus on these questions. But before we turn our attention to their conversion or change of views, it would profit us to examine their religious background: what they used to believe or not believe.

A great majority of the twenty-five people in this study are well educated. Seven of them were teachers at universities and public schools. Among them, Parent Che used to be university vice president and dean of a philosophy department in Tianjin Municipality, and Parent Mao was the vice president of a community college in Northern China. Six held various leadership positions in the government and private firms. Five were in the technology field. Three were in health services.<sup>55</sup> Most of them were born right before the Communists founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. They have been raised under Communist rule. The Chinese Communists advocated atheism and materialism. During politically chaotic years, religious believers were persecuted. Children were indoctrinated from early on to believe in no supernatural presence. Religion was taught as a superstition, the spiritual opiate to numb one's mind. Young people striving for achievement and success were discouraged from subscribing to any religion. Marxism, science, evolution, and enlightenment were the norms.

None of these twenty-five people were born to Christian families. A Chinese being

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<sup>55</sup> Appendix B.

born into a Christian family in China is rare in any case. Even though more and more Chinese are becoming Christians, Christian presence is not obvious in Chinese society as a whole. The twenty-five seniors had never or had very rarely visited a church. Their knowledge of Christian faith was limited, full of misunderstandings and prejudices. They had believed that Christians were uneducated and uncouth.

This attitude toward Christianity soon changes when they arrived in the United States and saw quite a different picture. In the United States, a highly advanced society, churches are everywhere to be seen. Worshipers are far from ignorant and uncouth. Believers include people from all circles. The visitors begin to ponder and entertain a second thought. After some exposure to Christian faith in churches, they begin to like the moral teachings in the Bible, and agree that the Christian values should be very helpful for modern China, which is experiencing transformations on all fronts. However, they are not ready to convert to the new faith just yet. I often heard them say, “We are old. Our mindset has been formed. It’s hard to change.” Parent Zhang, the professor, often said, “I can be a Gospel friend forever. But I would not get baptized. Young people and children should come and learn in church. China needs Christianity.” One factor is their pride or fear. They are being challenged in a fundamental way, and the challenge is scary to a lot of them. Also these seniors take pride in the long history of Chinese civilization. The thought of converting to a different tradition may strike them as traitorous.

What then changed their minds? In the following sections I shall explore the main factors that play a part in their conversion. First, I shall discuss the spiritual needs of seniors in general and visiting parents in particular. Second, I shall describe how the

visiting parents engage in intellectual reflection. Third, I shall examine the role of the Bible in their reflection. Fourth, I shall discuss the visiting parents' personal experiences. And lastly, I shall suggest how ethnic Chinese churches may play a role in the conversion of visiting parents from China.

#### I. The need for religion and fellowship by seniors and especially by visiting Chinese parents.

Researchers agree that religious and community life are very important for seniors. Richard Kalish believes that retired people find more relevance in religious life. They like to talk more about their spiritual experiences. Church space provides them with recreation and continuing education opportunities.<sup>56</sup> Andrew Weaver, Linda Revilla, and Harold Koenig agree that religious life becomes an important part for seniors. They attend church frequently, and, compared to the other age groups, tend to be more involved in volunteer activities in church, community, and family.<sup>57</sup> Paul Brown believes that church support groups and fellowships offer strength and meaningfulness to people in their later years. Individual and group prayers provide important spiritual channels that guide seniors through hard times. He quotes Geneva Mathiasen as saying "We believe that religion is the key to a happy life in old age as it is in all ages. The church or synagogue working with and making use of its own spiritual and social resources and other social resources of the community can be the most effective instrument in helping people live out their lives with

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<sup>56</sup> Kalish, *Late Adulthood*, 106-106.

<sup>57</sup> Weaver and Koenig, *Counseling Families*, 147.

maximum fulfillment and grace.”<sup>58</sup>

The church is well poised to serve visiting Chinese parents, who find themselves in an unfamiliar culture, where they feel much more vulnerable than in China. In China, they are almost always affiliated with some organization or group. In the United States, such affiliations are hard to come by. Of course in a large Chinese-American community such as the one in Dallas, there are a variety of organizations, such as *tongxianghui* (same originality associations) and alumni associations, but they are not comparable to churches. For instance, these numerous, diverse associations and organizations are unrelated to each other and divided by political, cultural, and socioeconomic factors. On the other hand, as Fenggang Yang States, “Christianity has evidently become the most practiced institutional religion among the ethnic Chinese in the United States.”<sup>59</sup> For Yang, the Christian church has unique structures and functions with its emphasis on fellowship through weekly meetings of frequent and intimate interactions.<sup>60</sup> He further observes,

The proclaimed teachings help to create a loving and harmonious Community where new immigrants can find spiritual peace and psychological ease; church activities and youth programs help to foster a moral environment for nurturing the growing second generation. No other ethnic Chinese organization of association serves these functions in the way that ethnic Christian churches do.<sup>61</sup>

For such multifarious reasons, a great many visiting parents from China head to the churches, often with the blessings of their U. S. based children, who may not be interested

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<sup>58</sup> Brown, *Counseling With Senior Citizens*, 21.

<sup>59</sup> Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

in the faith themselves.

## II. Intellectual Reflection:

In the beginning, most of the elderly Chinese claim that their mindsets have been formed and cannot easily be changed. They have their own way of making sense of what happens around them with a mixture of belief systems. But if the foundations or roots of their worldview are shaken, their hearts are usually touched and fundamental changes occur in their lives.

### A. America's Christian Foundation

Some of these seniors have been to other Chinese churches before coming to FCCC. They also have access to religious materials. Most Chinese churches and publications are theologically conservative. In these publications and sometimes in sermons, they were often told that America's advances are rooted in a cultural foundation, and that at the base of this foundation is Christianity. One of the reasons Chinese immigrate to the United States is the conviction that the United States is the best country in the world, a place where they can realize their dreams. Most Chinese churches preach that the reason why the United States is so blessed is because that American culture, including its political system and economic structure, is based on the Gospel. The Chinese accept that there is a Christian core to the United States.<sup>62</sup> A typical Chinese church "promotes certain 'American' values and proclaims the conservative Christian version of American civil religion."<sup>63</sup> And this

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 122-123.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 16.

makes a lot of sense to them. Gary DeMar's "The Christian Foundation of America," translated into Chinese has been influential. This article summarizes Christian influence in American society and culture. He points out that the early immigrants were those who escaped from religious and political persecution, and hoped to establish a Christian country, a city on the hill. He also points out that Christian symbols and signs can be seen in many aspects of American life, including educational institutions, the U. S. currency, the American national seal, many monumental places, practices such as the laying of hands on the Bible in inaugural ceremonies.<sup>64</sup> They have heard such preachment and accept readily that America has been greatly blessed for all this.

They have also read and heard of Christian values and beliefs being reflected in the cultural and political life of America and in the Western civilization as a whole. For instance, the Western democratic and legal system is believed to have been established on the concept of original sin or human depravity. That is why human power should be restrained through systems of check and balance, for people with too much power will abuse that power. The seniors notice that this is quite different from Chinese culture, which assumes that human beings are originally good and which prizes Confucius' teaching that "Every child born, has innate goodness."<sup>65</sup> Rulers in China are expected to model virtuous lives and are given enormous power and respect.

## B. Salvation of China by Christianity

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<sup>64</sup> Gary DeMar, "On American Christian Foundation" (Mo, Zhuoyijuan, translated) in *Great Commission Bi-monthly*, 60( Feb. 2006): 2-7.

<sup>65</sup> Confucius, Three Word Chant, Line 1.

The visiting parents believe that China is being plagued by corruption. Many begin to think that a reason for China's backwardness lies in its lack of strong religious faith. A good system, they believe, should be backed up by a sound faith tradition that keeps human mistakes in check. Many of the educated seniors feel duty-bound to find a path for China's revival. Many changes have taken place in China. Reform and open policy have taken effect especially in the economy. On the other hand, political reform has been very slow. A lot of social problems have appeared. Corruption and abuse of power are widespread. They are disillusioned with so many theories, "isms," and ideologies. The seniors find teachings in Christianity salvific, and they "hope evangelism of their ancestral homelands would bring national salvation and modernization."<sup>66</sup>

Another problem is the decline in moral standards caused by the pursuit of money. With the collapse of the Communist moral system, many have turned to Chinese traditions such as Confucianism for solutions. The visiting parents with new insights gained from Christianity believe that problems in China are attributable to the lack of Christian faith. This view is held by even those who were not converted to Christianity. They believe more Christian influence would be good for China. Such positive attitude toward Christianity has arisen in their minds as a result of the care and hospitality they experienced in the churches they frequented while they visited the United States. They then project that positive image of the church to the rest of the American society. More than one of them has said, "Before people believed that science and democracy could save China. Later, people believed that education could save China. Now we have finally found the real

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<sup>66</sup> Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 51.

salvation of China in Christianity.”

### C. Cultural Comparisons

These seniors have a stronger sense of being Chinese than the younger Chinese. In order for them to accept the Gospel, they would have to be persuaded of points of contact between Christianity and Chinese culture. It also helps if they are persuaded of particular contributions the faith has made to the larger society.

#### 1. Confucianism and Christianity

The visiting Chinese seniors still see Confucianism as essential to Chinese culture. Confucianism has been orthodox in China for thousands of years before the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement in 1919 when the Chinese reformers blamed Confucianism as a factor in China’s backwardness. During the Communist rule between 1949 and the total end of the Cultural Revolution in 1979, the traditional culture was decimated and “Confucianism has become a history belonging to the distant past.”<sup>67</sup> However, the residue of Confucianism as a system of ethics continues to influence people’s everyday life.<sup>68</sup> Recently, “Confucianism began to show its resiliency and tenacity in the 1990s, as witnessed in the growing interest among Chinese in their search for cultural roots,”<sup>69</sup> as the ideals of Communism begins to lose its grip among the Chinese populace. Parent Che used to be the dean of the philosophy department of a prestigious university.<sup>70</sup> As he became interested in

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<sup>67</sup> Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 51.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> See Appendix B for Che’s background. Unless noted otherwise, backgrounds of other interviewees are also available in the appendix.

Christian tradition, he conducted studies comparing Confucianism with Christianity, and Confucius with Jesus. He observes that Confucianism emphasizes *ren* which means kindness or love, because it goes together with *ai*—love. He believes that this is very close to love in Christianity. He also claims that Christian love is more lofty: the unconditional and boundless love of Christianity includes loving one’s enemies. Such a notion is unheard of in traditional Chinese thought. Also Confucian *ren* is more like a suggestion. It has no binding force. Christian love is more of a divine command. He likens Confucianism with Old Testament that waits to be fulfilled by Jesus. This resonates with Fenggang Yang, who says, “Loving others can be sustained by the love of God. In this sense, only through Christianity can Confucian moral ideals be fulfilled.”<sup>71</sup>

He further observes that Confucius and Jesus both talk about love. But for Confucius, he claims, *ren* (love) is more of an instrument for the ruling class to better govern the subjects. Loving people promotes social stability so that ruling authority is not threatened. Confucius was keen to preserve social boundaries; he did not advocate social equality. Parent Che argues that Confucius himself did not want to make friends with those in classes lower than his. On the other hand, the love of Christ knows no boundaries. It cuts through all barriers. His love reaches to the low, the poor, and the marginalized. If Confucius supported the status quo, Parent Che claims, Jesus was a revolutionary. He was a critic of traditions. And this fact has enabled Jesus’s followers to transform their societies more effectively, and has enabled the West to trump China in modernization.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 153.

<sup>72</sup> These are the main points made by Professor Che during several conversations between the two of us during his stay in late 2005.

Parent Wu, a retired middle school teacher, makes a comment on the golden rule. The equivalent of the golden rule for Confucius goes: “Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you.”<sup>73</sup> She says that compared to Jesus’ golden rule, it is a passive one, like the “Do nots” in the Old Testament. And that explains a great deal about Chinese traditions. The Golden Rule of Christ, on the other hand, advocates taking the initiatives to do the good to others. She thinks whereas Confucius was didactic and uninspiring, Jesus was divine and holy. One result of embracing Christ’s holy love is hating evil, hating sin. Such emphasis on the disavowal of evil and sin, she feels, is lacking in Confucianism.

## 2. Logos/Word and *Dao*

Most of the Chinese seniors I interviewed especially liked the Gospel of John. The main reason is the cultural resonance they perceived when Logos is translated into *Dao* in Chinese. *Dao* is the same as *Dao* in the Chinese classic *Dao De Jing* by Lao Zi, usually regarded as the founder of Daoism. The concept of *Dao* is part of Chinese culture. As a matter of fact, *Dao* is “the pervasive notion in Far East philosophy.”<sup>74</sup> *Dao*, to East Asians, seems to have richer meaning than Logos has meant to the Romans and Greeks. It means the “Ultimate Way or Dynamic Principle of the universe,” and “the Direction, Process, Purpose, Source, and Destiny.”<sup>75</sup> What is more, “the *T[Dao]* is the source of all being and nonbeing, producing the universe.”<sup>76</sup>

Zhiming Yuan and Jingzhi Wang are two prominent Chinese Christian scholars

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<sup>73</sup> Confucius, *Analects* 15. 23.

<sup>74</sup> Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar Fernandez, ed, *Realizing The America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>75</sup> Jeung, *Faithful Generations*, 44-45.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

who have sought to help Chinese understand Christian message in Chinese context. They have done a lot of work on *Dao* in Lao Zi's thoughts, which is influential among the Chinese Christian community. In other words, their way of reading *Dao* from the Christian perspective is well regarded. The Daoist principle of humans, he argues, follows the principle of the earth, the principle of the earth follows the principle of heaven, the principle of heaven follow the principle of *Dao*, and the principle of *Dao* follows the principle of naturalness. Zhiming Yuan posits that *Dao* sets up a principle for itself; thus it is the highest Principle and hence the real meaning of Yahweh: "I am who I am."<sup>77</sup> He contends that for Lao Zi, *Dao* is the creator of all things.<sup>78</sup> *Dao* is also the life giver: there is life in *Dao*.<sup>79</sup> He even believes that the main theme of Lao Zi's *Dao* is about salvation. "Chapter Sixteen of *Lao Zi* fully expresses the principle of salvation in the *Dao*."<sup>80</sup> What is even more interesting, he observes that *Dao* achieves its salvific work through the Holy One, the Incarnation of *Dao*.<sup>81</sup> Lao Zi is not the One himself; he is only a prophet for the Holy One. According to Yuan there are many verses in Chapter 81 of *Lao Zi* that describe this Holy One.<sup>82</sup> He concludes that this Holy One prophesied by Lao Zi carries the characteristics of—and is no other than—Jesus Christ.<sup>83</sup> He contends that this Holy One shares the same personality as *Dao* as shown in Chapters 5, 35, and 60 of *Lao Zi*. He is the

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<sup>77</sup> Zhiming Yuan, *Confession of China* (Hong Kong: Hanguang Corp., 2000), 73.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 73-74.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

mediator between Heaven and humanity as shown in Chapters 12, 22, 27, and 47. The Holy One saves human beings as seen in chapters 64, 49, and 79. He humbles and empties Himself as seen in chapters 28, 58, 63, 70, 66, and 72. And He died to the King as seen in chapters 7, 13, 78, and 81.<sup>84</sup>

For Jingzhi Wang, Confucius and Mencius were prophets preparing the way of the Holy One.<sup>85</sup> He does a more detailed comparison of the Bible and Chinese classics by Confucius and especially Lao Zi's *Daodejing*, seeking to prove that Jesus is the culmination of their expectations.<sup>86</sup> The Chinese seniors are excited upon learning about such connections. Parent Chang said, "I am so glad that there were ancient prophets like Lao Zi in China."

### 3. Christianity and Science

Many of the elderly are convinced that Christianity has played a positive and progressive role in human civilization. Parent Mao, a retired high school teacher, claimed that Christian faith has promoted the advance of science and technology in the West. A strong interest in a power beyond the natural world and the basic assumption that there is a set law in nature has been driving forces behind scientific pursuit. The belief in creation by God is important. For someone like Mao, the fact that Isaac Newton, the great British scientist, among other outstanding Christian scientists, was a devout believer in God is a corroborative piece of evidence in favor of Christianity.

### 4. Christianity and law

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 79-84.

<sup>85</sup> Jingzhi Wang, *God and Chinese Ancients* (Whitwell, TN: Sinim Bible Institute, 1999).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

Parent Li, a former government officer, now believes that political and legal systems also have a lot to do with faith traditions. The emphasis on law and democracy, he believes, is based on the belief in original sin, that humans are sinners and thus cannot be trusted, their powers needing to be limited and contained. Confucius holds that humans are basically good in nature.<sup>87</sup> So people have great faith in themselves. The thousands of years of Chinese government have been fundamentally ruler-oriented instead of being system-oriented. This, according to Li, is one of the reasons why there have been so many human-made tragedies in Chinese history.

#### D. Comparing Chinese with Jews

Comparing Chinese and Jews and finding commonalities between them has often drawn many Chinese elderly toward the Gospel. Because of these perceived commonalities, they enjoy exploring the Jewish scriptures. The most common parallels have to do with patriotism and diasporic experiences.

##### 1. Patriotism and suffering

The Hebrew Bible frequently mentions the Jews' losing their kingdom to invaders. The Jewish kingdom was divided many times. Even kings became captives. During the rule of the Roman Empire they were exploited as colonized subjects. Chinese had similar experiences. Ever since China became a unified empire from Qin Dynasty in 221 B. C., neighboring powers posed a constant threat. For better protection, the first Qin emperor Yin Zheng started the construction of the famous Great Wall, which was frequently augmented in the succeeding dynasties. A traumatic invasion occurred in the Song

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<sup>87</sup> See note 65.

Dynasty when a northern nomadic people occupied northern China and captured Song emperors. The country was divided with the invaders controlling Northern Song and Chinese controlling Southern Song from 1127-1279 AD. Then a powerful Mongolian empire took over all of China and established the Yuan Dynasty with the capital in Beijing in 1271 AD.

In the modern period, China's humiliation began with the Opium War in 1839 when Qing China was defeated by the British colonialists. Afterward, other colonialists encroached one after another, and China fell into the period known as "Semi-Colonial and Semi-Feudal Society". Foreign invasions in the past and modern Chinese history, division of the country, and sufferings under imperialist colonialists all have added to the sad memories for Chinese people. During the Second World War, millions of Jews suffered collective slaughter by the Nazis. The Chinese people suffered organized massacres by the Japanese fascists. During the Rape of Nanjing, after the fall of Nanjing to the Japanese invaders in December, 1937, as many as 300, 000 people were ruthlessly killed. Chinese people can easily sympathize with the Jewish people.

Both peoples are characterized by strong patriotism. The concept of the motherland is important and holy to them both. The psalm 137 especially resonates with the Chinese people. It expresses the feelings of Jews in captivity. There is a song "By the River of Babylon" written to this theme and it has become very popular in China. I preached on the topic a couple of times and everybody became emotional. Some Christian songs have been written in Chinese about the same feeling about the past national hardships and a longing of a future of Christianized China. The first line of one of the songs goes, "At five o'clock

in the morning the sound of prayers ring over China.”

## 2. Diaspora

As a result of their experiences of suppression, Jewish people had to leave their home country and scattered all over the world. Since about one hundred years ago, Chinese also migrated as escapees or refugees all over the world. The early immigrants to America were part of this larger picture. Turmoil from within and invasion from outside made countless Chinese to disperse to every corner of the world. Because similar emphasis on community, patriotism, and education, and because of their talents in commerce, Chinese have often been called “the Jews in the East”.

## III. The Power of the Bible

Teachings of the Bible have often been powerful in China. Chinese are used to moral teachings, and they are proud of moral teachings of their saints. Even the Communists have shouted lofty and moralizing slogans. But when Chinese first hear that they should love their enemies also, many of them get stunned. For they think love has to have a limit. Chinese have been taught to differentiate foes from friends. They have been taught to be severe with their enemies. Parent Liu speaks for them all by saying, “The one who can say this [love one’s enemies] is not human, or more than human. Humans can never utter such words. He must be God!” The biblical teaching on “God is love” makes great sense to them.

Prophecies are another part of the Bible the elders love to read and hear preached. The prophetic sayings and their coming to fruition are very attractive to them. Prophecies

and their realizations concerning individuals and nations intrigue them. They accept that the birth, the ministry, and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ have been prophesied and realized. The realization of the prophecies convince them that the Bible is the word and revelation of God, and that Jesus Christ is the incarnated Word of God.

#### IV. Personal Experience

Personal experiences, past and present, play a role in how the visiting elders respond to the Gospel. For some, they are decisive in conversion.

##### A. Bitter memories of past political events in China

The Cultural Revolution, which occurred between 1966 and 1976, was a traumatic experience for most Chinese. The elderly I interviewed were in their twenties or thirties at that time. They have seen vividly with their own eyes how evil human beings could be. Some say they have seen evil in its extreme. Many of my interviewees' parents were intellectuals. In those crazed years, knowledge and education were despised and trampled on. A slogan at the time shouted, "the more knowledge one has, the more counter-reactionary one is." Some of the interviewees' parents were severely and constantly humiliated, which made the interviewees themselves feel ashamed beyond measures.

Parent Zhu, an electronic technician, was born into a rich businessman's family in Old China. After the communists took power, they confiscated the family's properties. During all subsequent political movements, her tainted family background was exposed again and again to her disfavor. Her boyfriend was scared off. She did not get married until 38 years old, which was rare in China, especially in those years. She could not enroll in

college because of it. She was constantly harassed since elementary school years. Those negative memories made her to be rebellious toward the Communist regime. Long ago, she said, she had lost hope in Communist ideals.

During the Cultural Revolution, Parent Chang merely voiced different opinions on some governmental policies. As a result, he was labeled as a “counter-revolutionary” and imprisoned without trial for many years. To these senior parents, the idea of original sin was not a difficult concept to grasp, and they readily agreed that humans are sinners in need of redemption.

#### B. Being without home or uprooted

The visiting elderly have a strong sense of homelessness in the United States. They feel uncomfortable in their children’s home, but when they are back in China they miss their children. They don’t feel they completely belong in either place. Consequently, the idea of a permanent home in eternal heaven promised by Christianity appeals to them.<sup>88</sup> They also like the Christian message that favors the poor, the low, and the marginalized, and the atmosphere in church where they feel at home. In this vein, Jung Young Lee’s theology of marginality is instructive: “Jesus became a friend of marginalized people: outcasts, tax collectors, Gentiles, women, the poor, and the oppressed.”<sup>89</sup> “Jesus Christ [himself] was a new marginal person par excellence.”<sup>90</sup> His incarnation is the very marginalization of divinity. He was rejected by the dominant groups of the day. He emptied himself and lost

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<sup>88</sup> Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 79.

<sup>89</sup> Lee, *Marginality*, 71.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid

his selfness. The visiting parents easily identify with such a marginalized Jesus. A marginalized person like a visiting Chinese parent is lonely, just as Jesus was lonely.<sup>91</sup> Once I preached on the topic of Jesus' loneliness, and I could almost see the seniors' tears.

### C. Physical weakness

Four of the elderly had experienced serious illness and felt fatigued and despondent. They received the support of the whole church. There were a husband and wife, the Zhangs. Mr. Zhang was university professor of Chinese in Shanghai. Mrs. Zhang was the principal of an actors' training school. They are very prideful persons. Husband is a scholar, but he is very arbitrary and hardly changes his mind once it is set. They were very friendly when they first came mainly to learn English and socialize. Later we became personal friends. One time, the husband bluntly said that he and his wife were just friends of the Gospel-no more than that. Their world-view had firmly been formed. They said they will not be baptized; they just wanted to come and listen to good teachings, and make friends with good people. About four months passed like this. Then gradually the wife was not feeling well. I noticed that she began to pray and became emotional when worshipping and praying. Her husband became more humble. Then one day they came to me in sad and tearful tone and said that she was diagnosed with intestinal cancer. We prayed for them, provided as much support as we could. Before they went back to China for treatment, they decided to be baptized and accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and savior.

### D. Marital Problems

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 90-96.

Marital problems occurred among some senior couples. One couple, noted earlier, was on the brink of separation. The two complained that they were feeling more and more estranged from each other, sharing fewer and fewer interests. However, since they came to our church, they found something in common: in the Gospel. They have come closer to each other both in faith-seeking and marital relationship.

#### V. Chinese churches in America.

How effective are the ethnic Chinese churches in the United States (and my church in particular) in ministering to these visiting parents? Since the 1960s, the majority of Chinese churches in North America have been established by people from Taiwan and Hong Kong.<sup>92</sup> By 1979, there were already 66 Chinese churches in America, and by 1984, 523.<sup>93</sup> By 2000, the Chinese churches numbered more than 1, 000.<sup>94</sup> Lately, however, more and more churches are being populated by immigrants from Mainland China.

It is safe to say most of the 1, 000 ethnic Chinese churches in the United States subscribe to the evangelical tradition. Such is the case with twenty-seven or so Chinese churches in the Dallas area. They share most of the traits of the evangelical tradition as outlined by Russell Jeung. Chinese evangelical ministers in general see human culture “as fallen in comparison with biblical standards. Valuing one’s ethnic background is only

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<sup>92</sup> Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, Preface.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>94</sup> Chen, Zongqing, “Challenges and Responses: on Chinese Churches in North America,” *Ambassadors*, 9/10(1997): <http://noah.ccim.org/htdocs/afcmgz.nsf/95953142b1bd8df985256ae9001ad6cb/d4ac435b4b4cbb0585256bc300607882!OpenDocument.12/4/2006>.

helpful in understanding what one needs to redeem.”<sup>95</sup> Jeung points out that there are more moderate evangelicals who may not take an exclusive view on the world or human culture, but who would “agree that the Bible should provide transcendent answers to questions of truth and faith.”<sup>96</sup> Another trait is the emphasis on Jesus as one’s personal savior. These churches “emphasize more the personal benefits of Christianity.”<sup>97</sup> Generally speaking, Taiwanese ministers are more conservative, and Chinese Mainland ministers are more moderate or liberal. The number of the latter is small compared with that of the former. Take the Dallas area as an example. Among the more than 100 Chinese ministers in the area, only 6 are of Mainland background. I am one of them. Our church is somewhere in between evangelical and liberal. We value ethnic cultures like most Mainline Christian churches do. Like them, we try to “reconstruct their [our] identity with Asian traditions and cultural resources.”<sup>98</sup> We seek to reclaim our roots and heritage as blessings and unique ways of knowing God. We also value the communal aspect of salvation. We pay due attention to social justice, not just matters of individual salvation. This mixture of the personal and the communal is agreeable to the visiting parents who stay in our church.

In Chinese churches one may see conflicts or tensions between the first generation immigrants and the American-Raised or American-Born Chinese. Most of the churches are started by the first generation immigrants. They tend to maintain a strong flavor of their original culture. The next generation, when they come of age, complain about the power

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<sup>95</sup> Jeung, *Faithful Generations*, 65.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 83.

and control of their parents. They are more comfortable with the English language and American culture. They feel they are forever treated as adolescents by the older generation. Some ABCs complain that the church is more concerned with preserving Chinese culture than preaching the Gospel. Many seek to form their own ministry within the larger immigrant church, or simply start a new church of their own. Some such churches grow into pan-Asian or pan ethnic churches. Members of such churches cannot be expected to harbor a strong sense of filial piety toward their parents or their grandparents visiting from China. So it falls to the churches of the first-generation Chinese Americans to take care of the visiting parents from China.

In this chapter, I have discussed factors that contribute to the conversion of visiting parents from China. What then is the significance of their conversion with regard to the Christian movement in China? This is the topic to which we now turn.

## Chapter 4. How Do the Visiting Parents Contribute to the Christian Development in China?

Christianity has not grown rapidly in China until the late twentieth century when China opened itself to the rest of the world, the Communist government became more tolerant of religious practices, and China's economy began to take off. Since the 1980s, the growth of Christianity has been phenomenal. As of 2006, according to the official figures, there are 21 million Christians in China, among whom 16 millions are Protestants and 5 millions are Catholics.<sup>99</sup> However, according to other sources, there had been as many as 12 million Catholics by 2004 as against 3 million in 1949, and the number of Protestants could have reached at least 30 million and may have been even higher as against less than 1 million.<sup>100</sup> Phenomenal as this growth is, the growth does not seem to have reached its peak, and this assessment has excited many Christians, Chinese and others. Some Christians believe that China has a special mission for the global church in the near future.<sup>101</sup> In carrying out such a mission, Chinese Christians from all walks of life must play a role. All kinds of resources in China must be brought to bear. It is argued in this chapter that the group of people I have

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<sup>99</sup> <http://www.chineseprotestantchurch.org.cn/other/gaikuang.htm> (official website of China Christian Council), 11/30/2006 and [http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-06/23/content\\_8890.htm](http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-06/23/content_8890.htm) (official website of Chinese government), 12/1/2006.

<sup>100</sup> Jason Kindopp, "Policy Dilemmas in China's Church-State Relations: An Introduction," in *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, ed. Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 1-2. I shall talk more about this in Section II, Part B.

<sup>101</sup> Read "Gospel out of China," *Hua Chuan*, 57(2005): <http://gointl.org/?q=gointl/magazine/56/node/155>, 12/4/2006 by Anguo Lin, the president of Gospel Operation International for Christians, and "21<sup>st</sup> Century: Evangelism and Mission for the Chinese," *Hua Chuan*, 53(2004): <http://gointl.org/?q=gointl/magazine/56/node/243>, 12/4/2006 by Changji Zhang, vice president of Gospel Operation International for Christians. Also read Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* and Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*.

been calling visiting parents from China constitutes one such resource, an often neglected resource.

This chapter comprises five sections. Section one examines historical reasons why Christianity has not flourished in China before the late twentieth century. Section two examines the situation of Christianity in China in the first half decade of the twenty-first century, using a sociological analysis. Sections three and four discuss Chinese Christianity from the perspective of world Christianity. Finally Section five resumes our discussion of the visiting parents, examining contributions they have already made—and can potentially make—to Christian developments in China.

## I. Historical Overview

A brief historical review of how Christianity has interacted with Chinese society in the past may be helpful as a background to our discussion.

### A. Nestorians

The first missionaries to China were from the Church of the East or the “Nestorian Church.” They arrived in 635 AD. The new religion gained favor with Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty. “Nestorian Christianity may have been at its apogee” by the year 781.<sup>102</sup> However because of Islamic expansion and loss of favor at the Tang court in 845, a great setback ensued. The Nestorians had been successful largely among the people who were not ethnically Chinese. As a result, theirs had been viewed as a foreign religion by the Chinese. Catholic missionaries also arrived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century but they fared no better.

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<sup>102</sup> David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, 23.

“By the end of the fourteenth century, Christianity had all but disappeared from China.”<sup>103</sup>

## B. Jesuits

No Christian missionaries came to China in the next two and a half century. Then in the late sixteenth century, Jesuit missionaries arrived.<sup>104</sup> Among them, the Italian Matteo Ricci must be given the credit as “one of the most intellectually talented missionaries in all of Christian history.”<sup>105</sup> With his rich scientific knowledge and the strategy of doing as the Romans do when in Rome—known as the accommodationist policy of missions—Ricci soon gained favor with the Imperial court of the Ming Dynasty. In 1601, he was allowed to establish residence in Beijing, and “By 1605 Ricci claimed that there were more than one thousand Chinese who had been baptized as Catholics.”<sup>106</sup> Five years later the figure reached to more than five thousand.<sup>107</sup> After his death in 1610, other Jesuits continued Ricci’s policy and even established close personal relations with Kangxi (1654-1722), the second emperor of the Manchurian Qing Dynasty, regarded as “one of the most gifted Chinese imperial rulers in two millennia.”<sup>108</sup> Kangxi was hospitable to Christianity as it was defined by the Jesuits, and, according to David Aikman, may even have considered becoming Christian himself.<sup>109</sup> Then came missionaries who were of the Franciscan,

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid. 30.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 34.

Dominican, and Augustinian orders—who quickly found themselves in disagreement with the accommodationist policy. In time, a controversy broke out over the practice of rites to ancestors and Confucius, the controversy known to historians as the “rites controversy.” In 1715, Pope Clement XI issued a papal decree that deemed the rites to be idolatrous and prohibited Catholics from participating in them. This offended Kangxi, who expelled all the missionaries except those who adhered to Ricci’s accommodationist policy. His successors took a more hostile stance toward Christianity, persecuting the church. As a result, Christianity “was once again in danger of withering away to the point of vanishing.”<sup>110</sup>

### C. Protestants in China

The Protestant mission to China began in the early nineteenth century, in 1809, with the arrival of Robert Morrison as a missionary of the London Missionary Society. His ministry did not lead to many converts in China; there were only ten during a period of twenty-seven years.<sup>111</sup> One of the reasons for this meager result was that Protestant missionaries were often identified with Western imperialists. This was the case especially since China suffered defeat in the Opium War of 1839-42. The missionaries were often associated with the “unequal treaties” forced upon China. Though Morrison and other Protestant missionaries were genuinely devoted to the Chinese people, founding many schools, hospitals, and orphanage, their religion was seen as alien and harmful to China.

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

#### D. The Rebellion of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom

From 1850 to 1864 there appeared in China a short lived theocratic regime established by a peasant uprising which nearly toppled the weakening Qing Dynasty. The leader believed in a heterodox or “adulterated version” of Christianity.<sup>112</sup> This new religious movement was seen as Christian by Chinese, and since it inflicted a great deal of suffering on the land, Christianity was further blemished.

#### E. The Republic of China

The Qing dynasty was overthrown in 1911. In its place, a modern democratic government, the Republic of China, was founded. The founder of this republic was Dr. Sun Yat-sen, who was a Christian. Chiang Kai-shek, his successor, became a Christian convert, at least nominally, due to the influence of his devout Christian wife. Neither Dr. Sun nor Generalissimo Chiang supported the idea of a Christian China, however. By 1949 when the Communists took power after emerging victorious in the civil war, “Chinese Christians were numbered at approximately 3 million Roman Catholics and three-quarters of a million Protestants.”<sup>113</sup>

#### F. The People’s Republic of China

In 1949, Communists overthrew the Nationalist Republic of China and founded the People’s Republic of China. Chinese Communists have been staunch atheists, believing that religion is the opiate of the people. Soon after they took power, motivated in part by

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 44.

the worsening relationship with the West, the Communists began to put pressure on the foreign missionaries in China. By 1952 all foreign missionaries had to leave China.<sup>114</sup> They have never been permitted to enter China officially as missionaries ever since. One political movement after another forced Chinese Christians to go underground. The worst years were the years of the Cultural Revolution, when all religions, including Christianity, suffered persecution.

Throughout the history of China, Chinese Christianity rose or fell depending on how it was regarded by rulers. It has never succeeded in taking roots in Chinese culture as it has in Roman-Greco cultures. The majority of educated Chinese have been slow in accepting the Christian faith. Thus Christianity has always been seen as a foreign religion in China, a perception strengthened by China's recent history of humiliation at the hands of the West. The unfortunate association of missionaries with the colonialists makes it hard for Christianity to be accepted by the general public. Moreover, this association has been exploited by the ruling Communists who sought total loyalty from the people.

## II. Christianity in China Today

### A. China in Transition

The year 1978, one year after the official end of the Cultural Revolution, marked the beginning of a new era for China. Realizing the backwardness caused by exclusionist policies, the Communist government decided to embark on a massive reform in the process opening its doors to the outside world. Economic reforms took the lead. Political reform followed, though at a much slower pace. More tolerant approaches were adopted on all

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<sup>114</sup> Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, 16.

fronts. Major religions benefited from this drive for modernization and international contacts. One year later in 1979, churches gradually began to re-open with government permission.<sup>115</sup> The following two decades witnessed what was often described as “Church growth explosion,”<sup>116</sup> or “Christianity fever.”<sup>117</sup>

In the beginning, the growth occurred mainly in the rural areas where religious traditions have always been strong. But in time, even among the urban and more educated population, Christianity received renewed attention—especially as more and more people became disillusioned with the Communist ideology and searched for new interpretations of life. This was the case especially after the Tian’anmen Incident of 1989. The Christian faith emerged as an attractive alternative worldview. Converts appeared in all walks of life. Two important groups deserve special attention. One was Christian converts among Party members, though there are no good statistics on them, in part because “many [of these Party members] prefer to remain secret believers.”<sup>118</sup> Intellectuals also showed great interest in Christianity, and some have been converted. For them “the collapse of Maoism as a world view has left them in a spiritual and ideological vacuum.”<sup>119</sup> The fact that intellectuals are involved is significant because China’s history shows that no great social changes can occur without the involvement of intellectuals. However, it should be kept in mind that the Christian intellectuals are still small in number.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 21-26.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>118</sup> Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, 142.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 151.

## B. Toward an Understanding of Contemporary Chinese Church

We may start this section by asking how many Christians there are in China today. It is hard to tell. According to official figures released by the China Christian Council, there are 55, 000 churches and 16 million Protestant Christians in China.<sup>120</sup> These figures, however, do not include those gathering in unregistered churches or meeting points. It should be kept in mind that in China there are two kinds of Christian churches. One consists of those churches that are registered with the China Christian Council and the Three Self Patriotic Movement Committee (TSPM), which oversee the Protestant affairs for the government.<sup>121</sup> These churches are non-denominational and under the umbrella of the Council and Committee. The other kind consist of those churches or meeting points that refuse to register with the government-recognized official church. They accuse the TSPM churches of compromising their faith by placing themselves under government supervision; they themselves are accused of being superstitious and heretical. If we add up both these groups, Protestant Christians<sup>122</sup> would have numbered 80 million by the end of 90s.<sup>123</sup> In absolute terms, this is a large number, but not in terms relative to the population

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<sup>120</sup> I joined a delegation of Disciples ministers visiting China in September, 2006, and interviewed the official church leadership in their Shanghai headquarters. Elder Ji Jianhong, chairman of Three Self Patriotic Movement shared the information with us.

<sup>121</sup> Mickey Spiegel, "Control and Containment in the Reform Era" in *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, ed. Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamarin (Washington D. C.: Brookings Institution Press 2004), 43.

<sup>122</sup> In what follows, we shall deal with Protestant Christians. In China, Christians, *jidujiao*, refer to Protestants. Catholicism, *tianzhujiao*, is often taken as a different religion.

<sup>123</sup> Li xinyuan, "The Significance of the Conversion Movement among the Overseas Chinese Intellectuals," *Christian Life Quarterly*, 4(2000): <http://www.cclife.org/htdocs/cclife.nsf/e68dc19e63a9f71985256b42005d2dae/d044f16c7eb4fb5d852568c10079e44b?OpenDocument>, 12/4/2006.

of China, which has about 1.3 billion people.

Given China's size and the diversity of its population, it would be fallacious to regard Chinese Christianity in any monolithic terms. Chinese Christians can be characterized as being from "four majorities" of the population: peasants, under educated people, elderly, and women.<sup>124</sup>

1. The majority are peasants.

Rural Chinese comprise about eighty percent of the entire population. Since ancient times, China has always been an agricultural country. And ruling classes have enforced strict population control through registration system. Consequently the population flow between city and countryside was rare. Beginning in the 1990s, rural people poured into the cities in large numbers to meet labor demands. They are known as the "floating peasant laborers," who are estimated to number about a hundred million or so.<sup>125</sup> Christians come from both the rural population and the floating peasant laborers. The Henan Province has the largest number of Christians, with about 3, 500, 000, 85 percent of whom are of rural origin.<sup>126</sup> The province with the next largest numbers of Christians is Zhejiang. It has about 1, 400, 000 Christians, among whom 82.46 percent are rural.<sup>127</sup> The next largest is Jiangsu, which has about 1, 200,000, of whom 87. 79 percent are rural.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ying, Fuk-tsang summaries this phenomenon in his "The Development of Christianity in Contemporary China as Revealed from its Social Composition," *Jian Dao: A Journal Bible and Theology*, 15(January 2001): 286. Though he mainly talks about the TSPM churches, it should be the case with unregistered churches as well.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

2. The majority are under educated.

People's level of education can be correlated with their origin. Literacy tends to be lower in rural areas than in urban ones. According to statistics from the United Nations, China is one of nine countries that need special attention on eliminating illiteracy.<sup>129</sup> The illiteracy rate was 15.88 percent in 1990, 12.01 percent in 1995, 16.36 percent in 1997, and 15.78 percent in 1998.<sup>130</sup> The illiteracy rate has not improved over time, as the majority of illiterate people have lived in rural areas.

3. The majority are elderly.

According to a Chinese national census, people aged 65 and above comprised 7.4 percent of the entire population in China by 1998.<sup>131</sup> An international standard deems a country to be "aged" if people aged 65 and above exceed 7 percent. China has thus officially become an aged society.<sup>132</sup> This is also reflected in Chinese churches. In Shanghai, for example, of the 12,000 newly baptized Christians between 1980 and 1990, those over 60 years old constituted 63 percent, and those 40 years and under constituted only 17 percent.<sup>133</sup>

4. The majority are women.

On my recent trip to China, leaders of Jiangsu Christian Council told us that in the Province of Jiangsu, as many as 75 percent of Christian believers are women. And it was more or less the case with all the other churches I visited in Shanghai, Nanjing, Hefei, Chengdu,

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 291.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. 295.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 296.

Xi'an and Beijing.

Why aren't there younger and better educated members in the Chinese church? At this point, lacking thorough research and studies, one can only speculate. One reason sometimes adduced is that Christianity has lacked appeal at least to the educated because it has failed to integrate with Chinese culture, especially Confucianism, which is the orthodoxy in China.<sup>134</sup> Christianity's association with imperialism rendered it off-putting to conscientious Chinese. Moreover, youthful or educated Chinese have been steeped in Western scientism and rationalism, making them scornful of all religions. And under Communist rule, the youth have been indoctrinated in Marxist Materialist philosophy and atheism. Furthermore, the Chinese government prohibits people under 18 from being proselytized.<sup>135</sup>

Professor Xinping Zhuo, senior researcher at the Institute of Religious Studies of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, agrees that in China, intellectuals wield considerable clout in how a foreign culture is regarded.<sup>136</sup> The intellectuals would turn to Western culture and even Christianity if they saw a crisis and found no remedy in traditional Chinese culture. After China initiated reforms in 1978, the intellectuals perceived a large gap between China and the West, and since Christianity was deemed to be at the root of Western culture, they began to re-evaluate the role of Christianity as a religious tradition.

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<sup>134</sup> Gao, Xiaobo, "Cultural Factors for the Difficulty of Christianity in China," *Nanjing Theological Review*, 12(1993): 19-22.

<sup>135</sup> Spiegel, "Control and Containment," 45.

<sup>136</sup> Zhuo, Xinping, "Chinese Intellectuals and Christianity," *Jian Dao: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 15( January 2001): 130.

However, their evaluation has mainly dealt with Christianity as a cultural system or its significance for Western socio-political structure. They are not very much interested in accepting Christianity as their personal faith. Professor Gao Dongxu, a scholar in comparative literature in Beijing Languages University, differentiates the “glorious achievement” born of Christian culture from Christian faith itself. He advocates that China should learn from Christian culture but discard Christian faith. He states he can never believe in the Bible with its many “fairy tales.”<sup>137</sup>

On the other hand, it should also be stated that Chinese churches are not doing a good job of reaching out to the better educated. In my study tour to China in 2006, I mainly visited the “above-ground” churches. A great many Chinese churches had been founded in a short time—at a rate of three churches in two days—and I sought to learn how this growth occurred. I was curious about the strategies that may have been used by the churches. To my surprise, there was no strategy to speak of. The churches just opened their doors, and people came and fill them. At first hearing it sounded exciting. But on a second thought, it was clear to me that the churches were content with the members they have and have made little effort to reach out to other elements of the society, such as intellectuals. Moreover, given that most of the members were not highly educated, the sermons preached in the churches lacked theological depth, thus disappointing the more educated Chinese who occasionally visit the churches.<sup>138</sup>

We have briefly surveyed the distant past and more contemporary history of

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<sup>137</sup> Gao, Xudong, *Chinese and Western Literature Vs. Philosophical Religion* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2004), 335-338.

<sup>138</sup> Li, Xingyuan, “The Significance”, <http://www.cclife.org/htdocs/cclife.nsf/e68dc19e63a9f71985256b42005d2dae/d044f16c7eb4fb5d852568c10079e44b?OpenDocument>, 12/4/2006.

Christianity in China. We have discussed its growth in recent times and its problems. At this point, we may entertain questions such as “What is the role of Chinese Christians in world Christianity?” And “What contributions can overseas Chinese Christians make?” It is with respect to these questions that I will finally discuss the significance of the role the special group of visiting parents might play in the development of Chinese Christianity. Before focusing on these seniors, we would profit by discussing some of the larger questions raised earlier.

### III. China in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Chinese Century

Rapid developments have been seen in China in all fronts. Economically, China has led the world in growth in the past twenty years, the Gross Domestic Product for the first half of 2006 increased 10.7 percent.<sup>139</sup> It is predicted that Chinese GDP will grow fourfold in the next twenty years, and will surpass the United States.<sup>140</sup>

Tony Lambert claims, “It would be very surprising, there, if the twenty-first century (already called by some the ‘Chinese century’ as they analyze China’s rapid economic and political advancement) should not also see Mainland Chinese Christians at the forefront of world evangelism.”<sup>141</sup> He wrote: in 1999, “if present rates of growth continue, then in the next decade or two China will overtake the States to become the country with the largest number of Bible-believing Christians.”<sup>142</sup> He even likens the

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<sup>139</sup> CCTV-4, 60-Minute News, 10/19/2006.

<sup>140</sup> Zhang, “21st Century,” <http://gointl.org/?q=gointl/magazine/56/node/243>, 12/4/2006.

<sup>141</sup> Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions*, 177.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

present China with the Roman Empire in the time of Apostles.<sup>143</sup>

Many Chinese Christians put it more bluntly. They believe that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will witness worldwide mission by the Chinese.<sup>144</sup> Fenggang Yang points out that in overseas Chinese churches there has been much talk about Chinese Diasporas. Chinese Christian leaders believe that “the spread of Chinese people must have the purpose of God.”<sup>145</sup> They believe that “the Chinese must have a special position in God’s salvation plan.”<sup>146</sup> They believe that there are many similarities between the Jews and the Chinese which must not be coincidental. “About two thousand years ago the spread of Jews in the Roman Empire prepared for the spread of Christianity. Similarly, the spread of the Chinese in today’s world must be a preparation for the completion of spreading the gospel to all peoples.”<sup>147</sup> The popular slogan reads: “Reaching the Chinese to reach the world.”<sup>148</sup> It seems to many Chinese Christians that the Chinese are like “an almost-elected people.”<sup>149</sup>

As early as 1940s, many Chinese Christians began to catch the vision of taking the Gospel “Back to Jerusalem,” the Gospel having gone across Europe, over America, now through China and via the Silk Road penetrating Islamic communities, and finally back to the Holy Land. They believe that it was the responsibility of the Chinese Church to take the

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>144</sup> Read Lin, “Gospel out of China,” <http://gointl.org/?q=gointl/magazine/56/node/155> and Zhang, “21<sup>st</sup> Century,” <http://gointl.org/?q=gointl/magazine/56/node/243>, 12/4/2006.

<sup>145</sup> Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 174.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 175.

Gospel westward to Jerusalem and make the circle complete.<sup>150</sup> This vision is being widely shared by contemporary evangelical Chinese Christians as well.<sup>151</sup> To accomplish the call for the Christian movement in China, more resources are needed. In particular, more educated people have to be involved. If such people are lacking inside China, more of them can be found outside China, among overseas Chinese.

#### IV. Christianity among the Overseas Chinese

##### A. The conversion of overseas Chinese

A promising phenomenon has been noted among overseas Chinese, especially the Chinese in the United States. Since the early 1990s, there appeared a “Conversion Movement” among the educated overseas Chinese.<sup>152</sup> “According to official statistics, as many as 5.8 million people came abroad as students between 1978 and 2002.”<sup>153</sup>

According to new statistics released by UNESCO, the overseas students from Mainland China rank the first in the whole world, numbering 343,000, occupying 14 percent of all overseas students in the whole world, far surpassing India that ranks number two with 123,000.<sup>154</sup> Among these overseas students from China, it is estimated that at least a hundred

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<sup>150</sup> Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, 173.

<sup>151</sup> Zhang, “21<sup>st</sup> Century,” <http://gointl.org/?q=gointl/magazine/56/node/243>, 12/4/2006

<sup>152</sup> Li, “The Significance,” <http://www.cclife.org/htdocs/cclife.nsf/e68dc19e63a9f71985256b42005d2dae/d044f16c7eb4fb5d852568c10079e44b?OpenDocument>, 12/4/2006.

<sup>153</sup> Liang, Peisheng, “Receiving Vision with Long Commitment--Discussion on Evangelism and Mission,” *Ambassadors*, 1/2(2004)(translation mine): <http://noah.ccim.org/htdocs/afcmgz.nsf/95953142b1bd8df985256ae9001ad6cb/8eada605f22b113985256ecf005723d4!OpenDocument>, 12/4/2006.

<sup>154</sup> United News Network, 06/01/06 15:30:18, sina.com.

thousand students and their family members converted to Christianity in North America in the past twenty to thirty years.<sup>155</sup>

Though the Conversion movement of Chinese Overseas is significant, there is a problem. Many of the new converts lose their enthusiasm for the faith soon after receiving baptism. Some are not deeply committed. They are “Sunday Christians”.<sup>156</sup> One often hears that the baptized are many, but the gone away are also many. Their spiritual growth is slow after conversion experience. One obstacle to their spiritual growth has been identified as the “middle class mindset.”<sup>157</sup> This mindset expresses itself in a strong desire for comfort and self gratification. Such new converts are not interested in promoting evangelism.

#### B. The *Haigui* Group—the Returning Group from overseas

As China’s economy develops rapidly and produces more opportunities, many overseas Chinese choose to return to China. They are either sent back by foreign agencies for business reasons or they return on their own to find better opportunities. They are collectively called *haigui*, literally the returned overseas.<sup>158</sup> From the 1950s to the 1980s, similar trends occurred among overseas Taiwanese, Hongkongers, and Singaporeans.

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<sup>155</sup> Liang, Peisheng, “All have the Duties-On the Duties of Intellectuals to the Kingdom,” *Ambassadors*, 11/12(2004): <http://noah.ccim.org/htdocs/afcmgz.nsf/95953142b1bd8df985256ae9001ad6cb/ee5cc237b1f002cd85256f47005b596e!OpenDocument>, 12/4/2006.

<sup>156</sup> Li “The Significance,” <http://www.cclife.org/htdocs/cclife.nsf/e68dc19e63a9f71985256b42005d2dae/d044f16c7eb4fb5d852568c10079e44b?OpenDocument>, 12/4/2006.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ning An, “Where Do Haigui Go?” *Ambassador*, 11/12(2004): <http://noah.ccim.org/htdocs/afcmgz.nsf/95953142b1bd8df985256ae9001ad6cb/91e933e799b7363085256f470058f6f3!OpenDocument>, 12/4/2006.

Since Beijing has won the bid to host the 2008 Olympics, home has become especially appealing to a great many overseas Chinese. Among these *haigui* are Christians—even those with a burden to share and spread the Gospel.

But they too have their limitations. These returnees were at first sought after. But recently, the demand for them has declined. One reason is that there are now so many of them; another is that China is now producing enough of native workers who are just as skilled as the *haigui* and are willing to work for less pay. This means that the *haigui* have to work very hard to find and keep a job. The Christian *haiguis* are no exception. And those Christian *haiguis* who had desired to engage in evangelism now find it difficult to do so. Evangelism gets put on the backburner and eventually gets forgotten. As a concerned writer noted, “many of these [Christian] intellectuals fade into obscurity after they return to China. This is a very sad situation for us, the Christians.”<sup>159</sup> Does the dream of upgrading the quality of Christianity in China have to be given up? Is there other hope? Is there another group of Chinese who could be counted on for this task? The answer is, fortunately, Yes. A valuable and ready resource has been neglected. This group of Chinese has overseas experiences but are not considered as overseas Chinese because their domicile is in China. They are the visiting parents, to whom we once again turn our attention.

## V. Contributions of the Visiting Parents

Why have these visiting parents been ignored anyway? Their conversion has not been widely noticed and their contribution not recognized. Are they generally seen as old,

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<sup>159</sup> *Ambassadors Communiqué*, Volume 39, No. 3 (Winter 2004).

retired, and thus useless? Or do they not have much influence and power in the communities, thus are not worth considering? Peisheng Liang, a contributor to the influential Chinese Christian magazine *Ambassadors*, is the only author I have found to be discussing this group of people, even if only in passing.<sup>160</sup> In one of his articles, he mentions very briefly the part senior Christians play, and by senior Christians he means those who had immigrated earlier and retired in America. He urges them to commit themselves to the Lord in their later years and participate especially in campus ministry in the United States.<sup>161</sup> These are not what we mean by visiting parents. And Liang is concerned about ministry here in the United States, not in China. In another article, he does mention parents. He lists five target groups of people and their needs, in view of the role played by returning overseas Chinese. First in his list are students and scholars, and then their families and parents.<sup>162</sup> And that's all; he does not elaborate. He just mentions parents of students in passing, not discussing what role they might play in promoting the faith.

When we discuss seniors in churches, they are often discussed in terms of being recipients of pastoral care. When people talk about retired people, they first think about their needs. Yes, they do need attention and care. But they can also grow and contribute to churches. We need to celebrate their wisdom and experiences, and encourage them to discover ways to keep on living and growing. “Encouraging the elderly to continue to find ways to give and feel a contributing part of church or synagogue and society is a center

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<sup>160</sup> Refer to Note 2.

<sup>161</sup> Liang, “All have the Duties,” <http://noah.ccim.org/htdocs/afcmgz.nsf/95953142b1bd8df985256ae9001ad6cb/ee5cc237b1f002cd85256f47005b596e!OpenDocument>, 12/4/2006.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

piece of caring ministry.”<sup>163</sup> Samuel Natale believes that growing old is a continuation of the life cycle—another stage in the life process with its own developmental tasks and goals, that offers great possibilities for personal growth and advancement.<sup>164</sup> Not only can seniors still accomplish personal growth and self fulfillment, they can also give a lot to their churches and communities.

The visiting parents who had visited FCCC have been active in evangelical work in China. In the following sections of this chapter, I shall discuss what they have done by way of Christian ministry in China. Then I shall propose that visiting parents as a special group of people could be potential evangelists who can contribute significantly to the Christian movement in China.

A. What have the visiting seniors been doing back in China?

1. They are actively involved in local churches.

All the fourteen baptized Christians from our church now belong to a local church in China. Even those who have not yet converted attend a church occasionally. They feel comfortable in local churches. They are highly educated believers, which makes them a minority in the churches, but they are seniors, which puts them among the majority. Four of them are so involved in the church’s ministry that they were elected as lay leaders. Parent Mao sits on a Sunday school committee in Xi’an. Parent Li is on a local outreach team. Parent Chi is taking care of a church’s library.

They are not the only ones who have joined a local church after returning to China.

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<sup>163</sup> Jones, “A Life-Cycle Approach,” 330.

<sup>164</sup> Natale, *Pastoral Counseling*, 98.

When I visited a local church in Nanjing on Christmas, 2004, I talked with some people around me and found out that three of them had just come back from visiting their children in the United States. On my 2006 China trip, I asked all the churches I visited if there were parents who had visited their adult children overseas, and the answers I got was usually in the affirmative.

2. The visiting parents' presence in Chinese churches enhances the quality of worship.

Where these parents worship, the pastors are aware of them. Parent Li said that his pastor told him that when he preached now, he had to be intentionally more "intellectual." Preaching has become a little harder than before. Liu said their pastor at home told her that he spent more time preparing sermons than before. We may expect that worship services and pulpit messages in those churches would attract more educated people.

3. They are more active in bringing people to church.

They target their family members and friends first. One of the many things these newly baptized Christians say they will do when they go back home is to bring their family members and friends to church. And this they did. Parents Chi and Wu reported that they brought their daughters to church, and soon afterwards their daughters believed and were baptized. And they, in turn, brought their friends and neighbors to churches.

4. They influence their grandchildren.

One of the responsibilities of grandparents in China is helping to bring up their grandchildren. And the seniors told me that they began to tell biblical stories to their grandchildren, starting at their early ages, thus influencing future generation. They

typically began by changing traditional bedtime stories with Bible stories.

5. They are enthusiastic about sharing their faith.

Here is one example. Parent Li went back to China and shared as much as he knows about the Gospel. He went to many cities including Shanghai, Beijing, and Chengdu. First he looked for his former classmates. He even evangelized in restaurants. He said he once talked to people about the Bible in a restaurant, and the waitresses there got so absorbed that they forgot to bring their courses. He went to a university professor, who confessed that he had never heard of what was told to him about Jesus. He also talked to the president of a university in Shanghai. He said that the president neither accepted or refused the Gospel. He guessed that perhaps he did not want to express his view because of his position. However, his wife was converted. She sent a Christmas card and wrote Emanuel on it. He also approached a ministerial officer. That official paused many times and admitted that there were a lot of things he did not understand and he needed to study further.

6. They are influencing public opinion about Christianity in different ways.

Some have taken advantage of various conversations or public situations to speak favorably about Christianity. They are using their influence to affect public opinion toward Christianity, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, which resulted in general interest in Christianity.

Professor Zhang played his part through writing. The retired professor of Chinese literature is one of the few experts on the Classic ancient work *Shan Hai Jing*—the Scriptures of Mountains and Seas. This book has recently garnered a great deal of interest from Chinese scholars and the general public, mainly because of its mysterious content. It

contains accounts of ancient geography, history, mystery accounts, astronomy, calendars, meteorology, zoology, plants, minerals, medicine, religion, archeology, anthropology, ethnicity, seas, science, and technology. “It is really an encyclopedia of ancient social life, and serves as bird’s eye view of ancient world.”<sup>165</sup> Professor Zhang is a foremost expert in this field. He has written numerous articles on *Shan Hai Jing*. He is entertaining new thoughts now with his new faith. He is pondering on the connection between *Shan Hai Jing* and Sheng Jing (the Bible). He has just finished writing an article, titled “New Explanation of Chaos.” According him, there is a mysterious god in *Shan Hai Jing* by the name of “Dijiang”. This god is depicted as shapeless. He proposes that the state of shapeless chaos was the primitive stage of our universe. He believes that it shows the sprouts of an ancient Chinese world view. He shows further that science could be chaotic also. He further posits that even fairy tales or mythologies could contain hints of philosophical and scientific truths. However, this “Di” evolved into a vague heavenly figure, and Di really means God or Lord. He concludes with a rhetorical question: “Where then did the shapeless chaos come from?” He responds by saying, “we cannot ask any further, otherwise, one would come to theism.” This is a very good evangelical thesis with an intellectual flavor.

#### 7. Some play the role of a “Cultural Christian.”

Those who went back without clearly making a profession of faith in Christ at least became very sympathetic and friendly to Christianity, and have even advocated the goodness of Christianity for China. These people are often grouped into “cultural Christians” in China. Who is a “cultural Christian” anyway? Let me clarify the definition

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<sup>165</sup> Xuanpeng Hu, “About the Research of Chinese *Shan Hai Jing*,” (translation, mine) *Journal of Fuqing Branch of Fujian Normal University*, 3(2006): 1.

first. For there has always been some debate over who they are and what role they play in China. There is a difference between how the term is used in the West and what it means in China. Consider the following quote:

This approach acknowledges that people often do retain a lingering cultural loyalty to church label, even when actual religious involvement is nonexistent. The fact of living under the hegemony of a particular tradition inevitably tends to shape one's consciousness, so that even a not very enthusiastic believer can appropriately be seen as a cultural Christian, or a cultural Muslim, or whatever the tradition in question.<sup>166</sup>

As used here in the context of Western culture, a "cultural Christian" means a person influenced by a basically Christian culture. In other words, he or she is culturally a Christian in a predominantly Christian environment. Maybe their parents are church members and they have gone to church since childhood. As grown-ups, they are not necessarily active in churches.

In China, the term means something different. Some use the term to refer to those scholars and intellectuals in Chinese universities and research institutions who engage in Christian cultural and historical studies.<sup>167</sup> For some it means well educated people who profess a faith.<sup>168</sup> Many also tend to expand the scope of the term. They include those who do not necessarily profess faith in Christianity but are nevertheless sympathetic to the Christian faith. Take me as an example. Before I applied for theological studies in the United States, I was not baptized, and I was not even a professed Christian. I simply

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<sup>166</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 88.

<sup>167</sup> Zhang, Xianyong, "On Cultural Christians and Christian Intellectuals," *Nanjing Theological Review*, no. 3(Aug., 1999): 111.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

engaged in promoting cross-cultural and religious awareness. However, in his recommendation letter on my behalf, Professor Chen Zemin, then the Vice president of Nanjing Theological Seminary, categorizes me as a cultural Christian. Bishop K. H. Ting, former Chairman of China Christian Council and the Three Self Patriotic Movement, also wrote a recommendation letter for me, in which he has described me as one who was “not a church member but sympathetic to Christian ideals and ethics.” He continues to say, “In China, while the number of Christians is small, we are seeing in recent years a growing number of intellectuals who adopt a friendly attitude towards Christian art, literature and faith.”<sup>169</sup>

So cultural Christians in China can be defined broadly as those who are not necessarily affiliated with a local church or members of a particular congregation, who do not profess the faith, but are open and friendly to Christianity. Their attitude and opinions can augment public awareness of Christianity in China. They are doing what Jesus comments, “whoever is not against us is for us”(Mark 9: 40).

Some returned visiting parents, as cultural Christians, often advocate that Christianity is good to China; it might solve the problems that attend China’s semi-capitalistic development. They speak favorably about Christianity when they can. Here is an example. Parent Xu went back to China last Spring Festival or Lunar New Year. She is one of those who was not baptized but became very close to me personally. When she went back to China, she did not go to church regularly, but kept on reading the Bible and reflecting. She took part in a family gathering. There were 20 of them, all relatives in Xian. None of them was Christians. Among them was one of her nephews who was ill with

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<sup>169</sup> Both of their recommendation letters were written in 1992.

lung cancer. His girl friend happens to be a Christian. She and her mother, also a devout Christian, gave him great care and love, which let him feel great comfort. They prayed for him at bedside and gave him a Bible which he has come to read regularly. At the family gathering, when he saw Madam Xu and learned that she had attended church frequently in America, he asked her many questions. And for a while, the entire family became involved in discussion on Christian faith. Almost all showed interests. She defended Christian faith, and said a great deal about how Christianity has contributed to the United States. She strongly encouraged her nephew to read the Bible diligently. She said to him, “This should be your main task the rest of your life.” This is just one example of how people like her could readily defend Christian faith, even if they themselves do not belong in a church or have undergone baptism.

B. The visiting parents’ unique characteristics enable them to become potential evangelists and contributors to the future of Chinese Christianity.

1. The visiting parent could help to change the make-up of Chinese Christianity. I have talked about the “four majorities” of Christians in China. The numbers of educated Christians are few. The visiting seniors are mostly well educated, so their presence in churches can help to change the composition of Chinese Christians by raising the educational level of the churches.

2. The visiting parents attract less attention and suspicion from the government.

The Chinese government is more tolerant and open-minded to Christianity nowadays than they used to be. Even so, they are still very suspicious of the churches and

always keep an eye on them. The returnees from overseas could be a group they scrutinize. But they focus mainly on the younger people, who are more energetic and restless for change. The seniors are not thought to be politically threatening. Thus the aging population could easily operate under the government radar. None of our seniors are known to have been arrested though some younger Christians have suffered arrest in China for engaging in evangelism.

3. They are bolder because they have little care about their political future. They are free from worries over promotions. Though they are exposed to danger for promoting a religion, they are less intimidated. Chang said, “What do I care? I do not need to worry about future promotion. I am not thinking about any political future anymore.”

4. They have more time at their disposal after retirement. Some of them have said to me after embracing the Gospel that they are happy that have found a very meaningful thing to do in the remainder of their lives. They may adjust their retired life so that they could effectively give witness to the Gospel. Parent Wang said, “My days are numbered. I have to grasp time, spending one day as two or three days.”

5. In Chinese society, old age is respected. Old age indicates maturity and wisdom. What the senior parents say therefore carries more authority than if it was said by young persons. Moreover, in China the tradition of filial piety is still strong. This affords the senior parents more opportunity to give witness to the Gospel.

## Conclusion

In this study, we have discussed the needs of senior parents from China, in particular those parents who have visited our church in Plano, Texas, and have accepted the Gospel or have at least become receptive to it. We have also discussed how the visiting seniors from China can contribute to the Christian development in China, even though the resources they represent have not been fully tapped by Chinese churches. It is my hope that this study will encourage churches in the United States and China to be attentive to these seniors—so that the seniors could be properly cared for, so that their God-given talents and abilities may be fully utilized for the Christianization of China and beyond.

Enabling seniors to fully realize their potential is a way to value and honor them. And we must honor and value our seniors. The Bible teaches us to do so by valorizing seniors. Abraham, for example, was called to leave his home town and used by God to be a blessing for all nations when he was 70 years old. Moses was chosen when he was 80. Stories abound in the Hebrew Scripture as to why the younger should seek advice from the older. There, for example, is the story of King Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. When he became king, his people asked him to lighten their yoke. Not knowing how to respond, he consulted the elders for advice. They wisely counseled him to treat the people kindly, but Rehoboam would not listen to them. Instead he listened to the bad advice of his young friends and responded harshly to the people, thus initiating a series of events that ended in his downfall. Finally, Christians must realize Jesus himself was the filial son par excellence. Throughout his ministry, Jesus reiterated he was merely honoring the will of

his Father, God. By honoring our elderly parents—by caring for them and helping them to become contributing members of society—we are following in the footsteps of Christ himself.

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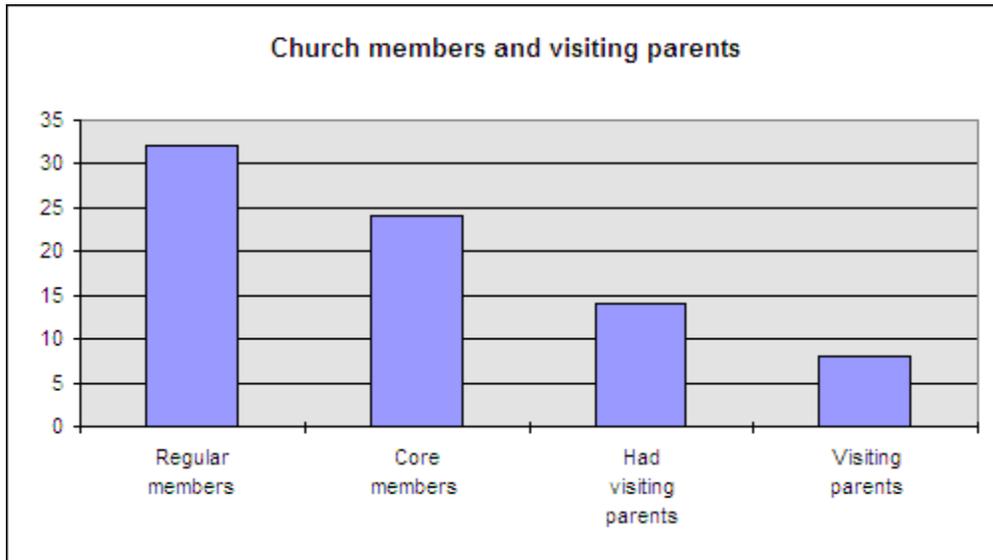
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## Appendix A



### Notes:

1. Column one shows the current regular adult members in First Chinese Christian Church of Texas, at 32.
2. Core members in column two refers to younger first generation immigrants, at 24.
3. Column three shows the number of those core members who had parents visit them at least once, at 14.
4. Column four shows the number of visiting parents who are themselves current members of this church, at 8.

## Appendix B

**Data of Visiting Parents in First Chinese Christian Church, TX, for the last five years**

Name	Former Job	Children are church members	Christian before coming	Converted in the United States	Right now In China	Go to a church regularly in China
1. Mr. Zhang(M)	Professor of literature	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
2. Mrs. Zhang(F)	Principal	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
3. Wang(M)	Physician	No	No	Yes(Baptized in China)	Yes	Yes
4. Yao(F)	Engineer	Yes	No	Yes(Baptized in China)	Yes	Yes
5. Wu(F)	Middle school Teacher	No	No	Yes(Baptized in China)	Yes	Yes
6. Liu(F)	Accountant	No	No	Yes(Baptized in China)	Yes	Yes
7. Zhu(F)	Technician	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
8. Chang(M)	Management	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
9. Chi(F)	Librarian	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
10. Mr. Mao(M)	Vice president, a community college	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
11. Mrs. Mao(F)	High school Teacher	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
12. Li(M)	Government	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
13. Mr. Che(M)	Dean, dept. of philosophy	Yes	No	Professed	Yes	No
14. Mrs. Che(F)	Home	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
15. Mr. Wang(M)	Government	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
16. Mrs. Wang(F)	Professor of Science	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
17. Xu(F)	engineer	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
18. Mr. You(M)	Army officer	No	No	No	Yes	No
19. Mrs. You(F)	Engineer	No	No	Professed	Yes	No
20. Tang(F)	Nurse	No	No	No	No	No
21. Mr. Ma(M)	Technician	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
22. Mrs. Ma(F)	Administration	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
23. Xiao(M)	Government	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
24. Mr. Guan(M)	Management	No	No	No	No	No
25. Mrs. Guan(F)	Nurse	No	No	No	No	No

Note: Shaded names are couples.

**Lian Jiang** Was born in Beijing, China. He received his Bachelor's degree in English language and literature in Nanjing University, Nanjing, China, and MA in Theological Studies and M. Div. both in Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA. He served as interim pastor of the First Atlanta Chinese Christian Church in 1997, moved to Dallas, TX in 1998, and planted the First Chinese Christian Church of Texas where he has served as the senior pastor to the present.