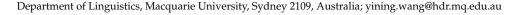*religions*

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Article

"Cross Is Fix": Christianity and Christian Community as Vehicles for Overcoming Settlement Crises of Chinese Immigrant Families

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Abstract: Mainland Chinese grow up in a nation with Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism as their cultural heritage, and are educated with atheism, materialism, and scientism in contemporary China. However, the high rate of conversion to Christianity among Chinese immigrants in Anglo-Saxon countries constitutes a distinctive feature in studies of migration. This paper aims to investigate the reasons for becoming Christian and the development of spirituality of a group of first-generation Chinese Australians from mainland China. All the seven participants are highly educated women who migrated to Australia as adults and had young children at the time of conversion. Data were collected mainly through open-ended in-depth interviews, and triangulated with private conversations, observations, and WeChat messaging. This ethnographic qualitative research found that these immigrants' Christian attempts were prominently triggered by settlement crisis as new immigrants and as immigrant parents. They see Christianity and church community as a strong vehicle to resolve integration difficulties in a new society, such as economic and career insecurities, social isolation, language barriers, marital crises, and parenting dilemmas. Their Christian movement is facilitated by identified ideological congruence but hindered by cultural conflicts between their newly acquired Christian doctrines and their previously instructed values. The findings have implications for immigrant families, secular institutions, and religious organizations, as to the psychosocial well-being of new migrants.

Keywords: Christianity; conversion; Christian converts; migration; parenting; social integration

1. Introduction

Mainland Chinese grow up in a nation with Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism as their cultural heritage, and are educated with atheism, materialism, and scientism in contemporary China. However, there emerges a significant rate of conversion to Christianity among mainland Chinese immigrants in Anglo-Saxon countries. The conversion rate of mainland Chinese immigrants in the U.S. was reported to be as high as 30 percent (Wan 2011). In Chinese Australian diaspora, Christians accounted for around 20 percent (267,000 out of a total of 1,214,000) (Tao and Stapleton 2018). The increasing Christian movement among Chinese immigrants makes Christianity the most practiced religion in Chinese diaspora outside the territory of China. A body of literature stressed the importance of pre-migration traumas of Chinese immigrants when explaining religious conversion (e.g., Chuang 1995; Yang 1998; Wang and Yang 2006), but the current research identified post-migration crises as the crucial factor to Chinese immigrants' faith seeking.

Regardless of the relative extent of pre- or post-migration influences on conversion, the spiritual transformation has dramatically changed immigrants' own religious and cultural profiles as ethnic Chinese and restructured dynamics of the religious landscape of the host country. Previous studies in relation to Chinese immigrants' conversion principally examined religious experiences of Chinese converts in general (see Lu et al. 2011; Ng 2002; Zhang 2006) in the context of North America (see Chen 2006; Han 2014; Lu 2012). In studies

of Australia, the conversion of new Chinese immigrants, particularly Chinese women, and the faith development of these new female Christians, have remained underexplored. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this gap by examining factors leading to religious transformation and by exploring spiritual intricacies of a group of Chinese immigrant women in Australia. Specifically, the study, using in-depth open-ended interviews, private conversations, and observations, addresses the following three central questions: (1) What are the main manifestations of belief transformation among these new immigrant Chinese women? (2) What factors have driven these new immigrants' religious seeking and encouraged their Christian becoming? (3) What cultural and ideological consonances and conflicts have they experienced in the process of becoming Christian?

In what follows, this study first reviews the literature in relation to Chinese immigrant's pre-migration religious and cultural background as well as post-migration motivations for conversion, followed by the methodological introduction to this qualitative ethnography. It then presents research findings related to these immigrants' ideological transformation, religion motivation, and spiritual development. It concludes with a discussion of research findings, and offers implications for immigrant families, secular institutions, and religious organizations.

2. Religious and Cultural Landscape of China

Religion and spirituality have been deeply embedded in Chinese culture and identity for thousands of years (Cook 2017). In the history of China, Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism), and Buddhism are broadly recognized as the three major cultural and/or religious traditions (Ching 1993). Confucianism is the Chinese traditional orthodoxy and Confucian values are seen as essential to define the nature of Chinese culture. Buddhism and Daoism, as the two major heterodoxies, complement Confucianism and have profound influences on traditional Chinese values (Yang 1999). China's religious landscape, in the modern era, has experienced significant fluctuations due to changes of religious policies. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Marxism prevails and has become the new orthodoxy in mainland China, and thus atheism, materialism, and scientism are taught through the entire education system (Yang 1999). Under Mao's leadership and particularly during the Cultural revolution (1966–1976), religious beliefs were proclaimed as 'feudal superstition', religious organisations were banned, and religious activities were widely prohibited (Yang 2018). Owing to China's opening and reform in 1980s, religious freedom was written into the Chinese constitution with an aim to promote spiritual revival and development and regulate faith practices (The Law Library of Congress 2018). Based on Chinese government statement, the following five major religions are officially recognized in China: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Daoism and Islam (The Law Library of Congress 2018). Over the past three decades, Chinese Buddhism and Taoism have experienced significant revival. With an estimated 185 to 250 million believers, Chinese Buddhism becomes the largest institutionalized religion in China (Cook 2017).

Though Christianity entered in Chinas as early as in Tang Dynasty (Bays 2012), it has been a minority religion and was not regarded as a part of Chinese culture (China Highlights 2021). In the 1980s, Christianity in China, also owing to China's economic reform, reached a golden age of growth in the 1980s (Leung 2003) and has since become the country's fastest growing faith today (Albert and Maizland 2020). In 2018, the number of Christians in China, based on governments' report, had exceeded 44 million (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2018). Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the rise of 'Cultural Christians' in China emerged as a significant social phenomenon which witnessed a fast development of protestant Christianity in the mainstream of elite culture (Xi 2013). The term 'cultural Christians', as opposed to 'Church Christians', mainly refer to Chinese intellectuals or scholars who have (partly) accepted Christian beliefs, but who, for personal or practical concerns, were not baptized or had not joined a particular Christian congregation (Hui 2001; Leung 2003). For them, religious faith may become their personal life views and values, which creates no conflict with mainstream

political ideology, or they only conduct religious studies as a profession and accept certain parts of Christian philosophy (Leung 2003). They may internalize Chinese culture into Christian faith or attempt to de-link Christianity from Western culture (Tan 2021).

In face of the expansion of faith practices, Chinese government, in the past decade, seemed to have increased religious controls to accommodate its political regime and economic interests, or harnessed aspects of religion and tacitly promoted certain religions such as Buddhism and Daoism (Cook 2017). The religious dynamics and evolution in recent decades have exerted a deep impact on China's overall social, cultural, and political environment.

3. Religious Beliefs of Mainland Chinese Immigrants

Though religious faiths expanded rapidly, the population belonging to the state-sanctioned religions still constitutes the country's minority group nowadays. For example, the proportion of Christians in China's adult population, based on national social surveys (CGSS and CFPS), is roughly between 1.9 percent and 2.2 percent in 2010 (Lu and Zhang 2016). In contemporary context of China, Marxist materialism continues to be mainstreamed in public discourses such as in school education and mass media. Under atheist and Marxist education, religion is taught as superstitious and non-scientific (Wang and Yang 2006) while academic achievement and materialistic pursuit is largely encouraged (Wong 2006). Having been immersed in such an atheistic and materialistic culture, Chinese immigrants are not able to believe easily the supernatural teachings of the Bible, such as God's creation of the world, the resurrection of Jesus, or the existence of Heaven and Hell, nor do they have any eagerness to know Jesus (Chuang 1995; Vavrosky 2014; Wong 2006). This is particularly true for many Chinese intellectuals and scholars, since their scientific mindset requires evidence, experiment, and rational reasoning to prove unknown religious doctrines that they feel sceptical (Wong 2006). Wong (2006) identified the following three themes reflecting the Chinese immigrant intellectuals' pre-conversion attitudes about religion: "Lack of knowledge and Interest, Suspicion and Rejection, Uncertainty but Openness" (p. 89). Most of these Chinese intellectuals did not have much interest in knowing more about religion or belittled religion when they were in China. Some judged religion from their scientific perspective and considered it superstitious or mystical without rational evidence. Others were more open to this unknown religion. They read the Bible though still regarded it only as a storybook; they attended church activities though they might see any religion as merely a cultural phenomenon. In general, most Chinese scholars and intellectuals tend to hold critical or indifferent sentiments toward religion (Wang and Yang 2006).

4. Conversion Motivation of Chinese Immigrants

Chinese immigrants' conversion is a result from cumulative forces, among which contextual and institutional factors have been considered as the most influential driving force (see Chuang 1995; Min and Jung 2002; Wong 2006; Yang 1998, 1999).

The contextual factor, particularly pre-migration traumas and discontentment, and post-migration hardships, is widely acknowledged as the principal reason for their becoming religious seekers (Han 2007; Wong 2006; Yang 1998). The pre-migration traumas largely result from earlier immigrants' "faith crisis" and disillusionment with China's political regime (Chuang 1995, p. 61), as most of them experienced some socio-political changes in China's modern history widely documented as the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the Tiananmen Square Incident (1989) (Chuang 1995; Wong 2006; Yang 1998). While the discontented sentiment mostly arises from newer immigrants' "moral crisis" in the "money-seeking milieu" (Wang and Yang 2006, p. 185) since they are more identified as "New Economy generation" in China's economic boom (Han 2007, p. 71). The hardships of settling down in a new society are characterised by the pressure to survive and succeed (Yang 1999), family separation and discontinuity of social network (Wong 2006), language barriers and cultural conflicts (Han 2007; Ng 2002), marriage problems and family issues (Lu 2012; Lu et al. 2011; Lu et al. 2013), and lack of resources to support children's moral

education (Yang 1998; Zhang 2006). The settlement stresses and life uncertainties are often accompanied with a sense of powerlessness, loss, and alienation in a foreign environment (Han 2007; Wong 2006). Both pre-migration sufferings and post-migration hardships have prompted Chinese immigrants to seek answers in religion for comfort in spirit, for meaning of life, and for direction in future (Chuang 1995; Han 2007; Wong 2006).

Besides pre-migration experiences and settlement difficulties, the religious institution plays a vital role in facilitating immigrants' conversion processes (Chuang 1995; Vavrosky 2014; Yang 1998; Zhang 2006). For mainland Chinese intellectuals, the attractive features and functions of church mainly lie in its loving community and supportive fellowship (Chuang 1995; Wong 2006; Yang 1998, 1999), the compatibility between Christian teachings and Confucius or ethnic traditions (Cao 2005; Min and Jung 2002; Ng 2002), and moral teachings in children and youth programs (Chen 2006; Wong 2006; Zhang 2006). In particular, with love, support and intimacy, church provides new immigrants with a sense of social belonging, spiritual peace and psychological ease (Chuang 1995; Coelho et al. 1980), as well as helping them handle practical problems such as financial struggles and career predicaments (Han 2007; Wong 2006). Meanwhile, the connection between Confucius and Christian values enables immigrants to define their Chineseness in their new faith community (Yang 1998, p. 252) or agentively interpret Christianity with reference to Confucius theories and sensibilities (Ng 2002). In children's moral education, the Western Christian world presents a new form of authority on which, in USA for example, immigrants desire to rely to safeguard their traditional morals "in an otherwise immoral American society" (Chen 2006, p. 584). Thus, church functions as "(a) surrogate family" as Cao (2005) terms it, to compensate for immigrants' loss of immediate family support, discontinuity of social network, and deprivation of ethnic culture teaching.

For Mainland Chinese, accepting Christianity has brought them dramatic changes of ideology, which was often accompanied with various challenges, typically the atheist and science education they received in China, 'old self' (e.g., pride and prejudice), as well as 'the world's lure' (e.g., materialism and individualism) (Lu et al. 2013). Despite the challenges in the faith journey, immigration often leads to increased religiosity (Han 2007; Yang 1998, 1999) and many Chinese immigrants settled their religious spirit in conservative Christianity (Wang and Yang 2006; Wong 2006; Yang 1998).

5. Methods

The present study extends the following two previous research projects: an investigation of heritage language maintenance among Chinese families in Sydney (Wang's (2020)), and research (led by Piller) of home-schooling experiences of migrant families during COVID-19 school closures (Language on the Move 2020). In total, 41 Chinese parents with school-aged children participated in both studies. Those ethnographies were designed to investigate education and language experiences with no purposeful exploration on religious beliefs, but issues of religion, did, in fact, loom large in the research. In both studies, ten out of the 41 Chinese parents (around 25 percent) had spontaneously claimed their Christian identity and revealed their devotion to the new religion. Seven of these (all women) accepted a further interview which focused on their religious beliefs and spiritual experiences.

These seven women were born between 1961 and 1981. Except for the oldest, Sai Na, they started school around the time of China's economic reforms in the late 1970s and grew to adulthood as China's economy expanded rapidly. Their migration to Australia took place between 2000 and 2015 when they were in their late 20s to late 40s. All participants had young children at the time of conversion. They were all highly educated, three with a bachelor's degree, three a master's degree, and one a Doctoral degree. These educated women experienced downward occupational mobility after migration. They had worked as professionals in the fields of engineering, finance, IT, medicine, or academia. By the time of the interviews, which took place in 2020, between five and twenty years after

migration, only two had re-established themselves in professional salaried positions, three were self-employed, and two were housewives.

In the research, the seven women are considered as spokespersons of their individual families in terms of religious experiences. This given role is based on their marriage status, parenting role and religious identity. Five out of seven reported taking the main childcaring job as they were either single mothers, or housewives with their husbands as breadwinners either in China or in Australia. All of them were the only or the main parent who involved their children into Christian environment.

These women had been raised with atheist culture in Mainland China and were baptised within five years after arriving in Australia. By the time of interview, the average time as baptised Christian was eleven years. In 2020, they were affiliated with four different churches of protestant, evangelical, and Pentecostal persuasions. Five of them attended English-language congregations with people from mixed ethnic background. Additionally, two attended Mandarin congregations predominately comprising mainland Chinese immigrants.

This study consists of a small group of new Chinese immigrants who were well-educated and well-incomed in China and who became highly religious or devoted evangelical and Pentecostal Christians in Australia. With reference to the definition of "highly religious" in Lu et al. (2011, 2013), highly religious Christians in this study are based on both participants' identification and my own knowledge of their faith-related activities and beliefs, as follows: (1) They define themselves as 'true' Christians in comparison with many others and report themselves as having undergone conversion. (2) They regard Christian faith "as a central priority" (Lu 2012, p. 120) and God's words or the Bible as the sole or principal standard in their lives. (3) They are actively involved in various faith practices such as Sunday worship, discipleship training, Bible study, online sermons, and Bible reading at home. Three of them (Sai Na, Bai Rong, and Yao Lan) served for their affiliated churches as leader or coordinator of bible groups and children's programs. (4) They are desirous to share narratives or testimonials of their encounters with God and the associated goodness, to disseminate Christian teachings or ideology, and to evangelize other Chinese immigrants including myself.

Data in the study was collected between June and November 2020 through online interviews, private conversations, observations and WeChat messaging. Semi-structured and open-ended in-depth interviews constituted the main part of data collection. This involved asking participants about their pre-migration religious beliefs, the triggers of their religious interest, and their post-migration religious movements. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin, audio-recorded, transcribed and checked for accuracy. Besides interviews, private conversations and observations were also employed as a supplementary tool of data collection. Such conversations and observations mainly took place between the researcher and three participants (Yao Lan, Sai Na and Bai Rong) with whom the researcher had regular interaction. In these naturally occurring interactions, bits and pieces related to participants' faith-related activities and ideologies were noted down into fieldnotes. In addition, WeChat messaging with all participants, either text or voice, was employed to clarify some ambiguous information. The voice messages were transcribed and kept together with text messages in fieldnotes. Only the transcripts and fieldnotes selected for analysis were translated into English, so all direct quotes used in the research are translations. All of the participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms.

Following previous ethnographies as models (Han and Varghese 2019; Yu and Moskal 2019b), the present study used inductive thematic analysis as the major analytical method. The transcript and fieldnote data were initially categorized into main segments of pre-migration beliefs, conversion reasons, and spiritual experiences. Then, these segments were further coded with salient themes such as "rejection to Christianity", "curiosity about Christianity", "economic difficulties", "support from church", "ideological consonance", "cultural conflicts" and so on.

In presenting the following analysis, I acknowledge that I write as an outsider to the faith espoused by these women.

6. From Being an Atheist/Non-Christian to Becoming a Christian

The belief transformation is well represented in participants' expressed contrast between pre- and post-migration religious beliefs. They all described themselves as atheists or non-Christians prior to and at the start of their migration. These participants had no or limited knowledge of Christianity or Christian experiences in China. Five out of seven participants reported that they had never interacted with any Christians or churches in China, two others (Sai Na and Cai Da) reported limited visits to Christian churches in China. When asked about the prior-migration attitudes towards Christianity, participants often used "fairy tales" and "ridiculous" to describe bible stories, "superstitious" and "unscientific" for Christian teachings, "crazy" and "irrelevant" for the talk of 'God', and "incorrect" for Christian faith or any other religion, as shown from the following typical comments:

Excerpt 1. When I read story that tells about a Christian who let people slam his right face after his left face was slammed, I thought how absurd and ridiculous it is. I took it as a fairy tale. (Bai Rong)

Excerpt 2. I never thought of religion because I only believed scientism. (Tan Xi)

Excerpt 3. Jesus was foreigners' Jesus and had no connection with us. (Yao Lan)

Excerpt 4. I had no feeling about any religion, whether it was Christianity, Buddhism or Taoism. All were incorrect. (Li Sha)

Excerpt 5. When I heard the word 'God', it sounded crazy. It was out of sight and out of touch. How could I believe that! (Sai Na)

Despite the common negative sentiments about Christianity, the participants seem to have a good impression of behaviours of Christians, as Cai Da commented: "Those Christians, though superstitious, are kind and nice!" These non-religious participants in general had no eagerness for Christian exploration, but some showed more willingness to explore the 'fiction-based' religious culture as expressed by Ma Li: "I was curious about Christianity and any religion. Though reading Bible stories such as Noah's Ark was like reading fairy tales, I was not really resistant, because these stories are as interesting as our Chinese tales such as Monkey King."

As mentioned above, these participants had been sceptical about Christian philosophy and resisted to believing in the existence of God. However, after conversion, they firmly believed that the newfound faith offers solution to any predicament and displayed a pride in their new Christian identity at the time of interview, as they revealed:

Excerpt 6. Cross is fix. (Bai Rong)

Excerpt 7. The Bible is full of wisdom. (Tan Xi)

Excerpt 8. Whenever I talk about Jesus, I am thrilled, feeling happy and secure. I want to evangelize more Chinese. (Yao Lan)

Excerpt 9. Only Believing Jesus is the correct path. (Li Sha)

Excerpt 10. Before I came to Jesus and accepted him as my Saviour, my life was empty, meaningless, and dark, and I was living towards death. After I accepted Jesus as my Saviour, every day is bright, full of happiness and hope. I am living a better and more meaningful life, a life to eternity. (Sai Na)

All these participants experienced a significant ideological and spiritual transformation, which is manifested from the rigid dichotomy of atheist belief and Christian faith. For them, Christianity, once seen absurd and superstitious, becomes the source of truth and wisdom; and Christian God, once a mere fantasy, becomes the ultimate Saviour. The dramatic change of belief systems leads to two questions: What triggered their initial interest and what caused their belief transformation? What spirituality did they experience during their conversion process?

7. Settlement Crises as the Trigger for Religious Interest

When asked about the turning point or juncture leading to their religious seeking, all except one (Sai Na) associated their initial motives with specific traumas or hardships they had encountered in settlement. Instead, Sai Na attributed her religious interest to pre-migration bitterness she had suffered in China's cultural revolution, as well as to her hope to develop social connections. For the other participants, their religious interests, were mostly triggered by settlement crises such as language barriers, career or economic uncertainties, and family crisis or misfortunes.

Language barrier is a prominent factor which may not only negatively affect immigrants' physical life but contribute to the loss of social status—a direct cause of the sense of incompetency and insecurity. Yao Lan was a medical professional from an upper-middle class family in China. She had enjoyed certain privileges prior to migration, as follows: her good economic returns relieved her of all housework and care duties, and her superior social resources provided her with easy access to selecting favourable schools for her daughter. However, the sense of established self-accomplishment was soon replaced by a strong feeling of incompetence in career and even in routine tasks. For example, she discovered that her English level was far from being sufficient to pass the certification examination necessary to re-enter her profession, and that even communicating her daily needs became a problem such as calling a plumber for house repair. These multi-faceted obstacles, mostly associated with language problems, led to the loss of social status and increased psychological gap. Yao Lan's sense of loss and anxiety seemed to reach a peak when she perceived a gap between her expectancy for being a parent and her current inadequacy in performing the role:

Excerpt 11. I hoped that I could select a good school for my daughter as we did in China, but I had not any idea of Australian school system and all the information was in English [...] After my daughter settled in [the name of a school], I didn't know what she had learned in school nor was I able to communicate with her teachers [...] When she was sick, I did not even know how to message her teacher in English for sick leave [...] I was in a great panic (Yao Lan) (adapted from Wang and Piller 2022).

Education constitutes a core value in Chinese society whether traditionally or contemporarily, and Chinese parents often act as active agent in navigating their children's education (Mok 2015; Wang 2020). For these highly educated mothers, the transition from an established professional to a full-time child-carer is not an easy task. Further, the perceived inability of engaging into children's schooling and fulfilling daily routines came as a deep shock and increased parental anxiety, as Yao Lan commented that she had "underestimated the difficulties of living in another country". However, she felt fortunate that her friend Sai Na (another participant) took her to a Christian church where she felt free from obsessions. The sense of relief became a strong attraction for her continuous church attendance, as she revealed, "I found peace and felt relieved there [in church], so I stuck with it."

These new Chinese immigrants, though identified as part of an elite class, have encountered significant difficulties in maintaining their previous professional or economic status in migration contexts. For them, career reestablishment or transition, financial maintenance or even survival, may become formidable and stressful in the new country. The existential crises for settlement, related to economic insecurity, presents as another important trigger for their seek for spiritual protection and security. As a professor in a medical university of high reputation in south China, Li Sha had a stable career prior to immigration. Unable to find employment at her professional level in Australia, she started a business, but then was obsessed by a significant fear of the economic uncertainty of her business. The stressful transition and sense of insecurity prompted her to seek supernatural forces for protection or as a comfort to ease stress and fear:

Excerpt 12. I was full of fear because I didn't know whether I could make money, or how much I could make. In that situation, I wanted to find a supernatural force to protect

me because we normally thought this divine spirit has power to predict the future. Right? That's the start of my religion-seeking. (Li Sha)

The existential pressure was noticeably compounded by parenting duties, and family breakdowns or misfortunes if occur. As these immigrant mothers often find hard to balance difficulties of performing the duty of parenting and childcare and of achieving economic survival or success. Deprived from assistance from extended families due to geographic distance, they may see children's programs offered in church as a good remedy, as Bai Rong experienced:

Excerpt 13. We [Bai Rong and her husband] worked six or seven days straight per week and had no time to look after our child. We didn't know other people in the city. She was really poor and too lonely! Then we started taking her to attend children's activity in church. (Bai Rong)

Besides economic pressure and parenting struggles, marital problems and family misfortunes that occurred in a migration context could exacerbate immigrants' settlement environment and then intensify their anxiety. Cai Da reported that she had experienced "extreme pressure" when faced with being a working mother, taking care of children, and dealing with marital crisis. Stuck in such a plight, both her and her husband "felt broken, both emotionally and physically" (adapted from Wang and Piller 2022).

Excerpt 14. My first child had already had lots of problems [...] My second child was born then, but both my husband and I worked, and our parents couldn't come to Australia to help us [...] And our marriage was at the risk of ending. (Cai Da)

In the seemingly darkest period of Cai Da's lifetime, a church lecture on marriage that was offered to her family, started their religious seeking on a serious basis, though previously they had occasionally attended some church activities for socialization. The absence of support from extended families is deeply unsettling. For Tan Xi, her initial interaction with church is prompted by seeking relief from sadness at the death of her grandparents in China and from the deep sense of guilt of her inability to perform filial piety due to geographic distance.

The environmental transition arising from migration not only interrupts the immigrants' lifestyle but also breaks established social networks and discontinues familial support, both of which were crucial for them to get through life stresses and misfortunes. The above subjects felt overwhelmingly stressed when handling on their own childcare duties, marital crises, or sadness from the loss of family members, even though these family issues may not be the direct result of migration. When the previous social support and immediate family assistance are no longer accessible, the fellowship and support offered by church is easily accepted and valued 'as a beam of light' along their unpredictable migration future. Six out of seven participants regarded their settlement traumas or life misfortunes in the host country as the start of their faith journey, as Bai Rong, Ma Li and Sai Na repeatedly stated, "Ultimate hopelessness is the start of divinity" (adapted from Wang and Piller 2022).

For these participants, what prepared them for religious seeking is mainly the hardships and traumas in settling into Australia. However, the start of their Christian faith is not always the result of a sheer trauma-support mode. It is at times facilitated by other factors such as their wish to socialize with desired members or to learn Western culture, both of which are considered as relevant and meaningful for their social integration. For example, Sai Na visited church for the purpose of "I went to church not for seeking God, but for looking for a group of people who are well-behaved, insightful, romantic, and noble-minded". From the perspective of some educated Chinese, Christian church seems to represent an imagined community associated with desired social class and moral values. These presumed attributes make the membership of Christian community appealing to middle-class Chinese. At the same time, participants' Christian seeking is also based on their understanding of Christianity as the essence and embodiment of Western culture. Cai Da and Bai Rong expressed their aspirations for getting more involved into Australian life through biblical learning because "Christianity is the foundation of western civilization"

as they stressed. Bai Rong expected that the knowledge of Bible could further bridge the cultural gap between her and local people so she could "conduct deeper communication" rather than "surface talk about weather only". Thus, Christianity is seen as both a social and a cultural tool which help attendees become members in desired networks and connect with the broad host society.

In sum, participants' religious beginnings were primarily prompted by a search for practical support of settlement crises of migration, alongside social desires, and cultural exploration. Though with little or no intention for spiritual pursuit, they all completed faith transformation with a break with their previously held atheist or non-Christian outlooks. The radical transformation attracted further exploration: What facilitated their spiritual movement towards Christian faith and led to belief transformation?

8. Christian Churches as the Facilitator of Religious Movement

In further exploration of attraction to the continuous movement towards Christianity, the following two major themes have emerged: the solid support from Christian churches, whether theoretical or instrumental; the favourable outcomes from Christian practice or the positive image of Christian role models.

The theoretical and instrumental support evident in my research is characterized by Christian teachings, continuous evangelism, practical assistance, and emotional care. Some participants (e.g., Ma Li and Bai Rong) related their initial religious interaction to their experiences of being evangelized by Christian workers in their private encounters. In Ma Li's case, when the minister's wife came to help mediate her marital conflicts, she brought with her another mainland sister to evangelize Ma Li. When Ma Li heard about the testimony given by the mainland compatriot who shared similar experiences, she felt "so easily touched". Besides, these participants were provided with various programs with Christian indoctrination. In the initial difficult time, Ma Li was arranged to attend quite a few weekly activities and studies including an intensive study using formal textbooks, in which Ma Li felt that she made exceptional progress in reaching Jesus:

Excerpt 15. Besides, church arranged another morning session for us, that was a small group training with two or three together. We used quite a few textbooks in that session. One series called 'booster' are especially helpful because that series combined Christian knowledge with our life and had some worksheets where we needed to do multiple choices and answer questions. It's like a formal class, so we learned it systematically with theoretical backup. We made rapid progress in that intensive study. (Ma Li)

As shown above, this period of intensive study boosted her religious growth from being a non-believer to an active church member and then sped up her journey towards becoming a firm believer. As a matter of fact, all the participants reported that they had a wide range of Christian practice including Sunday worship, Bible study groups, discipleship, seminars, and Bible reading daily at home.

Besides biblical studies, many churches provide instrumental assistance towards practical adjustment, such as offering language sessions, assisting daily affairs, and mediating family conflicts. For Yao Lan, the church community seems to be highly involved into her initial life in Australia, such as being her language broker, offering advice about her daughter's school selection, helping her set up an English email, calling people to repair her house, accompanying her with house inspection, etc. This multifaceted mundane support to a large extent assisted Yan Lan with pressing needs in a new environment, as she said with a full sense of gratitude, "I couldn't imagine, without my church brothers and sisters, how I could get through all these messes. I was much luckier than most new immigrants who were overwhelmed because they were completely alone with their problems."

The practical assistance (e.g., teaching English, being language brokers, being life coordinator/advisors) offered by a church community fosters a supportive and intimate relationship, which to a large degree compensates for the loss of familial and social networks in migration, as Yao Lan felt that "I have a home outside China". From this affective backup, Yao Lan obtained a strong sense of security and attachment, which encouraged

her continuous interaction with church members and continued religious practice, as she said: "My heart was gradually softened and filled with happiness in church. Whenever I had difficulties, I came to church right away and inquired about this and that and asked for help.".

For these Chinese immigrants, church seems to play an important role as the 'patriarch of the house' in navigating their new life through their migration journey, including mediating marital conflicts. Among the seven participants, three of them (Ma Li, Cai Da and Bai Rong) accepted the coordination or guidance arranged by ministers when their marriage was on the brisk of collapse. The marriage guidance was conducted through either the form of private consultations or formal programs. This intervention of private affairs seems to strengthen the bond between subjects and church and speed up their becoming Christian. Based on Ma Li's account, though her ministers' mediation was not successful, she had formed, through private interactions, emotional attachment to and even dependence on the wife of minister. The emotional needs prompted her to accept arrangement for her religious activities including baptism though "my thought was still in a muddle in that messy life".

Of course, what further strengthens the religious desire often lies in the favourable outcomes experienced by these immigrants themselves or displayed by desired others. These positive consequences were particularly evident on the improved marital relations. Bai Rong is one of those who credited her newfound belief with saving her marriage:

Excerpt 16. If we [Bai Rong and her husband] hadn't developed faith in God, we would have divorced. Both of us were intolerant like water and fire. We fight for the final say [...] But with Jesus as the head of family, no matter how much quarrel we had, we need to come back to him, seeking for wisdom. (Bai Rong)

When sharing the success of repairing worsening marital relationships, both Bai Rong and Cai Da referred to the 'iron triangle' headed by God as the golden rule in marriage management. In fact, when talking about marriage, these participants frequently stated that "marriage is established by God", "Jesus is the head or center of family", and "faith is most important'. When the participants changed their perceptions of marriage, to seeing marriage as a divine arrangement rather than a social contract that can be irresponsibly terminated, they reported to be empowered with more humility and tolerance in marriage rather than seeking to divorce as a solution. As Bai Rong concluded, "Only under the leadership of God could families achieve forever harmony".

Besides their own lived experiences, the features of admired Christian models become a solid testimony of the work of God and present a strong motivation for becoming Christian. For example, Cai Da related her willingness of becoming a believer specifically to the successful life management of her Christian friends (an elderly couple), who have "maintained happy marriage", "had decent jobs" and "raised well-educated and well-behaved children". She felt incredibly amazed that this couple, who had such an accomplished and fulfilled life, had once experienced the blow of loss of one child. She regarded these desirable achievements and incredible resilience as the impact of faith in God, as she concluded that "the faith in, and power of, God can turn the 'impossible' into 'possible'":

Excerpt 17. I was touched, felt amazed and deeply impressed. If I were them, I would live the rest of my life in shadow. So I want to be like them, having faith in God, so that I would be able to get through big blows in life. (Cai Da)

For Cai Da, the transformation of her beliefs is largely indebted to the achieved improvement in her marriage relations (as mentioned earlier) and the role model effect of particular Christians that she admired. In fact, the desirable virtues (e.g., decent jobs, well-educated children) personified in other Christians reflects Chinese immigrants' middle-class aspirations for their own career success as well as for their children's educational achievement. For these immigrants, the desirable figures in church community established the image of church as the imagined middle-class norm—an appealing attribute for well-educated Chinese who desire to achieve better social-economic status in a new culture.

In sum, the theoretical and instrumental support from church (i.e., continuous evangelism, Christian teachings, and supportive fellowship) provides a foundation to the development of Christian faith, as it not only instils attendees with Christian theory and ideology but fulfils immigrants' emotional needs (feeling loved and cared), social needs (feeling belonged), and practical needs (survival and success). In this vein, religion, represented by Christianity in the research, seems presented as a tool to ease settlement pressure, build social connectedness, and then increase social integration. Further, the favourable outcomes from Christian practice—the perceived testimony of practiced faith, and desirable Christian models—the carrier of the middle-class expectation, significantly boosted up seekers' conviction in faith and encourage their conversion. Since all these immigrants achieved conversion to become baptised evangelical or Pentecostal Christians, what ideological consonance or cultural conflicts did they experience in the conversion process?

9. Ideological Consonance or Cultural Conflicts

All the seven participants were baptized within the first few years of settlement in Australia. They considered baptism as a milestone of their religious journey, and as a symbol of 'completing conversion' and 'becoming a true Christian'. Their religious transformation was not always smooth and swift, but a process fraught with identifying ideological consonances and resolving cultural conflicts.

The establishment of Christian faith is evidently facilitated by the perceived congruence between Christian teachings and specific cultural elements they identified with or family values they felt bonded with. Cai Da, after initial exploration of Christian teachings with a few churches, found spiritual settlement in a church where "the Taiwanese principal minister's interpretation of Bible is more accurate and matched my understanding". Cai Da provided an example of the Christian theory of "getting saved", which had perplexed her on a long-term base because of her inability to understand that "Why do both a long-term Christian and a last-minute convert have the same fate, i.e., getting saved and going into heaven? It is unfair!" Cai Da thought that she was always offered some "blurred answers" in most churches, but the answer provided by her current Christian church satisfied her:

Excerpt 18. Once we believe in God, we do get saved, but it doesn't mean you are eligible to go to heaven. Only if you become perfect, will you have the chance of going to heaven. But reaching perfection may take you a whole 1000 years to polish yourself. (Cai Da)

Cai Da considered Christians' '1000-year polish' as "reincarnation in Buddhism". To explain her understanding of Christianity, Cai Da constantly linked Christian teachings to her Buddhist beliefs and added her interpretation of the commonalities between Christianity and Buddhism. In this vein, Cai Da's Buddhist background seems to facilitate her Christian conversion, and her new Christian identity reflects a syncretic form of religion, as she explained, "Though I become a Christian, but I also believe in Buddhism. I think the teachings in my church are completely compatible with Buddhism". For Cai Da, her minister's interpretation of Bible teachings not only answered her doubts, but bridged Christianity and traditional Chinese Buddhism to her satisfaction. This religious link is vital for Cai Da's spiritual development into a Christian with Buddhist thinking.

Different from Cai Da who resorted to Buddhist ideology to interpret Christian terms, Tan Xi felt drawn to the God of Christ because of the perceived echo between bible doctrines and her family values. In biblical teachings, she found strong resonance with her grandfather's instructions which require the whole family to "have three hearts: a heart of gratitude, a heart of humility, and a heart of fear." When Tan Xi further explained the congruence between Christian beliefs and Confucius or traditional Chinese culture, she quoted quite a few Chinese proverbs and sayings as evidence, including "滴水之恩，涌泉相报" ("the grace of drops is repaid by the spring"—an equivalent to gratitude), "七尺之上有神明" ("there are gods seven feet above our heads"—a warning of 'disrespect of God') and "三人行，必有我师" ("out of any three people, there is one who can be your teacher"—an exhortation to humility) (adapted from Wang and Piller 2022).

Despite the spiritual and cultural consonance which seem to facilitate these immigrants' becoming Christian, moving from being an atheist/non-believer to a baptised Christian was never an easy decision, but involved a significant transformation of ideologies and worldviews. Before achieving conversion, these Chinese immigrants experienced various types of spiritual struggles and difficulties for longer or shorter periods. For most participants, the central challenge lies in the clashes between theism and atheism, and/or contradiction between Christian doctrines and Chinese traditions. For example, when the minister spread gospel to Bai Rong and her husband, Bai Rong informed the minister straightforwardly of the impossibility of being converted, by stating her firm atheist ideology: "I told minister that I was an absolute atheist. I believed in atheism and materialism, in the big bang theory at the beginning of the universe, and in Darwin's evolution. These were the three cornerstones of my outlook on life." (adapted from Wang and Piller 2022). Similarly, Yao Lan also confessed that her previous scientific mindset requesting evidence is one big obstacle for her belief in the existence of true God. It would seem that after being immersed long term with atheism and scientism, rationalist intellectuals find it difficult to "accept supernatural interpretations of any religion" or believe "[t]he existence of God the Creator" (Yang 1999, p. 86). Besides the theism–atheism clashes, what hinders participants' religious progress rests in the tension between Christian teachings and cultural and religious traditions in which they had been immersed in China. Yao Lan revealed that in the initial two years in church, she "had lots of doubts and at times a strong sense of resistance" because she perceived that "the God of Christ seemed to oppose Chinese culture in many aspects." For example, she felt it unacceptable when the minister said that "it is impossible for people to depend on themselves to get salvation, and the transformation can only be achieved with the work of God", because she considered herself as "a traditional Chinese who was taught from childhood that one's fate is controlled by himself and only be changed through his own efforts." Yan Lan felt even more frustrated when some ministers defined the Gods worshipped by Buddhists as "false idols", as she confessed her struggles:

Excerpt 19. I thought all Buddhist instructions are good, teaching people to be kind. But why did my minister deny the whole system of Buddhism. This gave me a big shock. At times, I didn't want to listen to this and just wanted to leave. However, I could not tear myself away from the sense of security I felt in church(Yao Lan) (adapted from Wang and Piller 2022).

Becoming a Christian seems less conflictive when participants recast Christian beliefs as congruent with identified Chinese values (e.g., gratitude, humility, and fear) and religious traditions (e.g., incarnation in Buddhism). Nevertheless, for these immigrants from mainland China, achieving conversion inevitably constitutes a process of reconciling the tension and resolving clashes between Christian beliefs and Chinese traditions. Despite the varying degrees of reconciliation, all these participants repeatedly stressed that their new beliefs had led to "a complete life transformation". In the data, this radical transformation is not only incarnated from a complete break with their strong socialization into atheism and the scientific worldview, but from a transition of gender role by becoming a more obedient or less unyielding wife and a change of parenting strategy by becoming a wiser Christian mother (see Wang and Piller 2022).

10. Summary and Discussion

This study documented pre- and post-migration religious beliefs of a small group of Chinese immigrant converts, examined factors encouraging and facilitating their religious transformation, and explored aspects of their spiritual development including ideological consonance and conflict that they experienced in the process of religious movement. This concluding section will revisit the key findings with reference to existing literature, and consider the implications for immigrant families, secular institutions and religious organisations, in terms of psychosocial wellbeing of new migrants.

First, the study noted a drastic change of these immigrants' belief system—from being an atheist or non-believer to becoming an evangelical or Pentecostal Christian. As first-

generation immigrants from mainland China, these participants had critical or indifferent sentiment toward religion, including Christianity, prior to migration and at the initial stage of their Australian life. They once considered Christianity superstitious, irrelevant, non-scientific, and incorrect. However, as they developed their faith and achieved conversion, they accepted God as their saviour, regarding God as "the compass of their life" (Lu et al. 2011) and believing in 'cross is fix' (as Bai Rong said), because they found absoluteness and authority in the biblical teachings. Their pre-conversion religious perception indicates that the atheist education and environment that Chinese immigrants received and lived through in China constitutes a major barrier of their initial acceptance of God (also see Chuang 1995; Wang and Yang 2006; Wong 2006). Their post-conversion religious devotion points to a relationship between faith level and immigration—increased religiosity or belief in conservative Christianity often occurs among immigrants and is largely indebted to immigration (Min and Jung 2002; Wong 2006; Yang 1998).

Second, the study underscores settlement crises as the primary trigger for these immigrants' initial religious interest and Christian churches as the facilitator for their subsequent conversion. For these new Chinese immigrants, the start of their religious practice was predominantly associated with their settlement traumas in Australia. These traumas arose from a combination of financial difficulties, career uncertainties, social alienation, marital crises, and parenting challenges, occurring in a migration context. The migration-related disadvantages often produced uneasiness, tension, depression and anxiety, which led them to be receptive to religious interpretations of their life encounters and prompted them to look to religion for new options and meanings. Further, the Christian church and community provided these new immigrants with multi-sided support which encouraged their religious movement and led them to achieve conversion. These multi-sided supports include not only theological indoctrination such as regular Bible studies and intensive religious courses, but emotional care for and instrumental assistance with adjustment problems such as language barriers, marital conflicts, family separation, and children's education, including mundane issues (e.g., sending sick note to school, calling a plumber for house repair, and so on). The loving and intimate fellowship formed in church fosters a sense of belonging and attracts continued church attendance, which forms the base of the development of Christian ideologies. Besides, the favourable outcomes and admirable Christian models seem to provide solid evidence of Godly creation which significantly boosted these new seekers' Christian conviction. In fact, the desirable features (e.g., decent jobs, well-educated children) personified in other Christians meet Chinese immigrants' aspirations for social upward mobility and establish church as the incubator of middle-class community. Thus, Christian church and its community, act as a religious institution providing biblical education, but more importantly, become a substitute for family and friend, which compensate for the absence of extended families and the loss of social connectedness in migration (Cao 2005; Tao and Stapleton 2018). In addition, participants' religious orientation at Christianity reflects the religious landscape of Australia and cultural desires of Chinese immigrants. Though Australians in general are becoming less Christian, Christianity is still the dominant religion in Australia (52.1% in 2016) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017) and also the most practiced religion among Chinese Australians (Tao and Stapleton 2018). In the data, Christianity is widely taken as the cultural embodiment of western society into which Chinese immigrants wish to and should integrate. However, for these immigrant converts whose baptism has been completed for over ten years on average, both the crisis of settlement and the period of transformation through conversion had been well in the past. What attracts their consistent devotion may to a large extent lie in the internalised new faith and the hope for post-conversion future, such as 'obtaining eternal life' and 'directing the next generation to a fulfilled and moral life' which are participants' typical concerns but worthy of further exploration.

The religion needs demonstrated by these new immigrants and new converts resonate with the findings of existing scholarship (Chuang 1995; Min and Jung 2002; Wong 2006; Yang 1998, 1999) which assert the significance of contextual and institutional factor in

the conversion of Chinese immigrants. However, my research findings, which indicate settlement crises in a migration context as the principal force of participants' religion attempts, conflict with many other research studies (Wong 2006; Yang 1998, 1999), which highlight the importance of pre-migration crises that Chinese immigrants experienced in China, even though post-migration experiences are also included as an important reason for religious exploration. The pre-migration crises in extant studies mainly relate to earlier generation's "faith crisis" (Chuang 1995) in China's Cultural Revolution and Tiananmen Square Incidents, and/or later generation's "moral crisis" (Wang and Yang 2006) from the widespread materialism and consumerism along with China's economic boom. Different from the subjects in previous studies, all participants in this study, except Sai Na, did not see much role of the pre-migration context or experiences in their religious interest or conversion, even though they might have experienced, to varying degrees, China's social changes prior to migration. For example, Yao Lan's religious exploration seems merely prompted by her adjustment hardships in Australia rather than by the harsh experiences of her family in China's Cultural Revolution. Most participants, as 1970s generation who grew up with China's economic progress, did not see materialism and atheism pervasive in contemporary China as a 'moral crisis' which led to their religious awakening, even though after conversion they became dissatisfied with or critical of the utilitarian or material outlook that many Chinese hold or that they themselves previously held in China (see Wang and Piller 2022). The pre-migration sentiments were found to be largely shaped by individuals' life histories and their socio-economic status. Compared to earlier immigrants, most of these new immigrants grew up in a time of China's social stability and economic boom, their life is less disturbed by political movements, or they do not consider some particular events (e.g., Tiananmen Square Incident) as a disturbance to their life. All of them obtained good education and decent jobs in China. These positive experiences and obtained capital did not prepare them for religious seeking or transformation. For them, life-changing experiences, especially hardships, as the trigger of religious interest, have occurred in their migration context in Australia.

Third, the study reveals key stages in these new immigrants' spiritual development, embodying in both ideological congruence and cultural confrontations. Becoming Christian is evidently promoted by recasting newly acquired beliefs as congruent with traditional Chinese values of gratitude, humility, and fear. However, engaging in Christian practices requires frequently resolving confrontational relationship between Christian faith and Chinese culture. The central challenge lies in the perceived contradictions between theism and atheism, and between Christian beliefs and Chinese traditions. Nevertheless, understanding of Christian beliefs is also dependent on ministers' and seekers' interpretations of biblical doctrines. Yan Lan felt shocked and experienced a strong sense of withdrawal when she perceived that some Buddhist elements that she valued were rejected by her minister as false. For her, embracing the new faith constitutes a necessity to break with her previous Buddhist belief. Her conversion was achieved through a radical self-transformation of belief system by denying all elements conflicting with her currently instructed values. Different from Yan Lan, Cai Da had undergone a smooth religious transition or her religious faith is additive, as she found a complete compatibility between Buddhism and Christianity, and she internalised her established Buddhist beliefs into the new Christian faith. The perceived compatibility and achieved internalisation show the influence of her Taiwanese minister's interpretation of Bible and her own understanding of the connections. For Cai Da, her dual-religious identities were achieved when she embraced both Christian faith and Buddhist beliefs.

The research represents the religious experiences of a small group of devoted Chinese converts who successfully resolved settlement crises and found new directions in Christian faith. The findings are not generalizable to broad Chinese immigrants. In fact, most Chinese immigrants I interacted have not converted to Christian though they also encountered various settlement challenges and were more or less evangelized in Australian context. Nevertheless, the religious movement of these new Chinese immigrants has implications

for immigrant families, secular institutions, and religious organisations. First, it draws attention to the significance of spiritual care for the psychosocial well-being of immigrant families, who may experience radical transformation whether in financial status, career development, social connectedness, cultural engagement, lifestyles, or children's education. For broad immigrant populations, an understanding of post-migration contexts (e.g., what settlement problems may occur, what services are accessible, and how to obtain practical support) is important for a better navigation through their initial phase of settlement and for the subsequent integration into a host society. Second, it suggests the relatively low and unsystematic support of newcomers' social integration provided by secular institutions such as ethnic communities, migrant resource centres, and workplaces. However, the provision of culturally syncretic services, practical settlement assistance (e.g., language services, career planning) and emotional care, and re-establishment of social connectedness are of paramount importance for the success of integration, especially in the initial settlement phase (Wang and Piller 2022). Third, the research has shown that Christian church and its community has largely filled new migrants' emotional, practical, and social needs, and made up for the shortage of intercultural interactions, learning environments, and social networks (see also Yu and Moskal 2019a, 2019b). However, as some Christian beliefs are diametrically opposite to participants' cultural tradition and pre-migration education (e.g., different views on the existence of a transcendental deity and on the role of science in understanding the world), how to reconcile different belief systems and bridge cultural conflicts remains a significant challenge not only for religious seekers but for religious organisations (see also Wang and Piller 2022).

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